

Partner Homicide in Context: A Population-Based Perspective¹

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Abstract:

Interviews to develop profiles of all partner homicides that occurred in North Carolina in a single year. This methodology allowed us to investigate gender differences that might shape the context for male and female homicide perpetration and victimization. Five themes emerged: (a) The context for partner homicides is often chronic women battering, (b) leaving an abusive partner and remaining are both dangerous options, (c) protective measures for battered women are inadequate, (d) domestic violence is not necessarily private violence, and (e) alcohol and firearms often accompany homicide. These themes suggested: Partner homicides emanated almost uniformly from a history of male-perpetrated aggression; analysis of partner homicide should not be detached from the daily life created and sustained by battering; and a gender analysis of partner homicide focuses on the context of gender-based power imbalances rather than on frequency or severity of injury.

Article:

In 1994, 28.4% of the 4,739 women homicide victims were killed by their husbands or boyfriends. In fact, American women are more likely to be killed by their male partners than by anybody else (Kellermann & Mercy, 1992; Koss et al., 1994; McGuire & Pastore, 1996). Not all victims of partner homicide, however, are women: 3.3% of the 17,337 men killed in 1994 were killed by a wife or girlfriend (McGuire & Pastore, 1996).

Efforts to prevent partner homicide, the murder of men and women by their current or former intimate partners, are challenged in part by the lack of sufficient knowledge about its incidence as well as about the causes and circumstances surrounding it. Much research has been based on large data sets that provide population-based quantitative data but is limited in contextual or circumstantial data. At the other extreme is case-study research, which provides qualitative contextual data but lacks population representativeness. Although both methodologies are useful because they provide us with different snapshots of partner homicide, they leave many questions unanswered.

Research based on the FBI's Supplemental Homicide Reports provides important information on high-risk groups and certain risk factors. It indicates that African Americans are at higher risk than Whites (Mercy & Saltzman, 1989; Plass, 1993; Stout, 1991) and both men and women are victims of partner homicide (Mercy & Saltzman, 1989; Wilson & Daly, 1993). However, women's and men's risk of victimization varies considerably by race and across type of relationship (Browne & Williams, 1993). Among Whites, women are at higher risk for spousal homicide, whereas among African Americans, men and women are at similar risk (Block & Christakos, 1995; Mercy & Saltzman, 1989; Plass, 1993). Additionally, women are more likely to be killed by a spouse than by a common-law or dating partner whereas men are just as likely to be killed by a spouse as by a common-law partner (Browne & Williams, 1993; Rosenfeld, 1997; Wilson & Daly, 1993). Further, women are more likely than men to be killed by a former partner (Mercy & Saltzman, 1989). Population-based research has also provided information on weapons used in the commission of these homicides. Firearms and knives are

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typically the most common weapons, although the percentage of homicides committed with each varies across studies (Block and Christakos, 1995; Mercy & Saltzman, 1989).

Although population-based research on partner homicide suggests that both women and men are at risk, it provides less information on whether and how the circumstances that lead men and women to kill may or may not differ. It has been suggested that female-perpetrated partner homicide may frequently be a response to the male partner's actual or threatened physical assault, whereas male-perpetrated partner homicide occurs most often in the context of women attempting to leave their partners (Browne & Williams, 1993; Wilson & Daly, 1993; Wolfgang, 1958). However, Browne and Williams (1993) note that gender is often omitted from analysis in much of this research. They have argued that exclusion of gender may lead to the erroneous conclusions that "The conditions of women's lives are essentially the same as those of men" or that "Although the conditions of women's lives may sharply differ from those of men, those differences are not germane to general theories on homicide" (p. 79).

Case-study research, in contrast, has often explicitly considered the role gender plays in the lives of the men and women involved in partner homicide. This research suggests that, regardless of the sex of the perpetrator, partner homicide is rarely an isolated incident; rather, it often occurs as a result of a chronic pattern of abusive and threatening behavior by the man against his female partner (Browne, 1987; Chimbos, 1978; Jurik & Winn, 1990; Trotman, 1978). It also suggests that women frequently kill in response to threatened or actual physical assault by their partners (Browne, 1987; Goetting, 1991). However, case-study research has tended to focus on selected subgroups such as battered women charged with murdering or seriously wounding their partners (Browne, 1987, Walker, 1989); men and women charged with killing their partners undergoing pretrial psychiatric evaluation (Barnard, Vera, Vera, & Newman, 1982; Daniel & Harris, 1982); men and women convicted of killing their partners (Jurik & Winn, 1990); and women imprisoned for killing their partners (Foster, Veale, & Fogel, 1989). Case-study research thus limits generalizability and may reinforce the view that partner homicide is idiosyncratic rather than representative of an identifiable epidemiological pattern of male violence against women (Saunders and Browne, 1991).

This study was undertaken in order to explore the circumstances and context surrounding all cases of heterosexual partner homicide that occurred in 1 year in one state and thus broaden the usual case-study approach. The major purpose was to determine the proportion of all homicides that were preceded by a history of domestic violence and the circumstances that surrounded them. We were particularly interested in exploring how the prehomicide conditions of the men's and women's lives might shape the context for homicide and the role that gender might play in the use of fatal violence by men and women.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

We made use of two different conceptual frameworks to help us analyze and describe partner homicide. The first, that of victim precipitation, has often been used to analyze sex differences in the perpetration of partner homicide (Browne & Williams, 1993; Campbell, 1992; Chimbos, 1978; Saunders & Browne, 1991). Suggested by Von Hentig (1941, 1948) in the 1940s, the term was coined and used by Marvin Wolfgang in his pioneering research on homicide in Philadelphia in 1958. As defined by Wolfgang (1958),

Victim-precipitation is applied to those criminal homicides in which the victim is a direct, positive precipitator in the crime. The victim-precipitated cases are those in which the victim was the first to show and use a deadly weapon, to strike a blow in an altercation—in short, the first to commence the interplay of resort to physical violence. (p. 252)

Since then, victim precipitation and the idea that homicide victims sometimes participate in the actions leading to their deaths have played a central role in both homicide research and criminology textbooks (Block, 1993; Mann, 1996; Polk, 1997; Rasche, 1993; Savitz, Kumar, & Turner, 1993; Wolfgang, 1993). Studies have reported varying proportions of victim-precipitated homicides, ranging from 0% to more than 50%, depending on the study population, location, and operational definitions used (Goetting, 1988, 1991; Polk, 1997; Savitz et

al., 1993; Wolfgang, 1958). The concept has also been used as a framework to analyze partner homicides, particularly in cases where battered women kill their abusers (Campbell, 1992; Rasche, 1993). Because this concept directs attention to the circumstances surrounding the homicide, it is potentially useful as a framework to examine the similarities and/or differences in the context immediately surrounding men's and women's perpetration of partner homicide.

Agudelo (1992) provides the second framework we used. He defines violence as "the exercise of physical, psychological, or moral force directly or indirectly by a person or group of persons in the exercise of power" (p. 367). He argues that a precondition for violence is an "imbalance between heterogeneous entities having unequal power." This gradation of power which, according to Agudelo (1992), "is the delta through which violence flows" (p. 367), could be conceptualized as the conduit for both male- and female-perpetrated violence.

The violence that emerges from this power imbalance is of two types: antiaction and proaction. The first, antiaction, is violence that is "aimed against an existing or potential power. It is an attempt to disrupt an order that has been imposed or agreed to. It is an act of aggression against rights that are socioculturally established and regulated" (Agudelo, 1992, p. 367). In contrast, violence that is proaction is that which is "exercised to affirm and defend a right or build another order or legal system" (p. 367). It emerges, according to Latin American epidemiologist Dr. Hector Abad Gomez, from conditions of oppression, injustice, and grievous economic inequality in which violence is not a disease but rather a necessary reaction on the part of the body social—somewhat like the biological organism's response to infection. It is like fever, a mechanism for combating infection, which is the real disease. (quoted in Agudelo, 1992, p. 367-368)

Agudelo further argues that understanding violence requires analysis of the "direction of the forces that produce the effects observed, the patterns in question, and the powers in opposition" (Agudelo, 1992, p. 367). Although neither men nor women are free from the use of violence, this framework argues that men's and women's violence might have a different directionality and serve a different purpose. For example, conceptualizing batterers' violence as antiaction would suggest that the purpose behind their use of force is to contain women's potential power and/ or to destroy their legal or socially culturally agreed upon rights. The direction of the force is against those who have lesser social power. In this context, men's use of force helps to consolidate and maintain this power structure. Similarly, conceptualizing battered women's violence as proaction would suggest that their use of force emerges from their oppression as women and as victimized persons and has the purpose of trying to affirm their own rights as humans; furthermore, it may be an unavoidable if not necessary reaction. In contrast to the victim-precipitation framework that directs attention toward the circumstances incident to the homicide, Agudelo's perspective directs our attention toward differences in experience and behavior between battered women and battering men that result from unequal power.

METHOD

Data Sources

We combined data from two sources, the North Carolina Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) records of all cases of partner homicide that occurred during 1989, and semistructured telephone interviews with officers from the investigating law enforcement agencies. In North Carolina, medical examiner case files typically include the medical examiner's report of investigation, the death certificate, and autopsy reports. Some case files also include toxicology reports, newspaper clippings, correspondence, subpoenas, and photos. Beginning with a listing of the 730 homicides that were on file for 1989, we excluded 41 cases where the victim was under 18, and 407 cases where the victim-perpetrator relationship was listed in the database as parent, child, sibling, other relative, stranger, or unknown. We then reviewed the files of the remaining 282 cases where the victim-perpetrator relationship was listed as spouse, friend, or other to determine whether the victim and perpetrator were or were not married or unmarried heterosexual partners. In cases where we could not determine the partnership status from the medical examiner records, we asked the police officers involved in the cases. Based on these interviews, only cases determined to be partner homicides were included in the sample. In 1992, telephone interviews were conducted with the investigating officers in all of the cases of partner homicide

to determine the circumstances surrounding each one. We used a semistructured interview guide for these interviews, which typically lasted around 20 minutes.

Definitions

In this study, we defined partner homicide as one where the victim and the perpetrator were current or former legal or common-law spouses, cohabitants, or dating partners at the time of the homicides. This definition excluded homosexual relationships, one-night stands, and prostitute-client relationships. The protocol for classifying the history of domestic violence was conservative. If the evidence clearly confirmed a history of prior violence perpetrated by the victim or perpetrator against the other, we classified the case as a "yes," and if the evidence clearly confirmed that there was not a history, we classified the case as a "no." If the evidence did not clearly confirm the presence or the absence of prior violence, we classified it as "uncertain." Evidence included (a) statements from the police or in the medical examiner record that there had been domestic-violence-related calls to the police; (b) statements by family or friends to the police or medical examiner, during their investigation, that there was such a history; or (c) newspaper clippings in the file that indicated there was a history. We defined victim-precipitation as the victim initiating physical violence or the use of weapon, or threatening the perpetrator with physical violence or the use of a weapon during the time period surrounding the homicide but not necessarily at the instant the homicide occurred. The time period we considered was largely determined by the available evidence, and, in general, included the day the homicides occurred.

Development of Case Study Profiles

We used all data available from the medical examiner files and police interviews to construct case study profiles for each homicide. The amount of detail varied from case to case depending on how much the police remembered, on whether there were newspaper clippings in the medical examiner files, and on the amount and type of details they provided in the medical examiner's narratives. Although we noted where evidence provided by the medical examiner and law enforcement differed, we did not attempt to reconcile differences of opinion between the two sources. Neither did we try to validate any information provided from additional sources. For example, if the police reported that they found, during their investigation, that the woman had made domestic-violence-related calls to the police we assumed these reports to be accurate.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the cases in two different ways. First, we created a coding form to standardize and quantify data on the characteristics of the victim, perpetrator and homicide, and of the circumstances surrounding the homicides. We then created a quantitative data set from the coded forms and analyzed the data using Epi-info, an epidemiological software package (Dean et al., 1994). Second, we undertook a qualitative approach to case analysis. The aim of this analysis was to identify patterns, commonalties, and differences across the cases. Through an iterative reading of the cases, the first two authors came to consensus on the themes, whether or not there was a history of domestic violence and whether or not the case was victim precipitated (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

Victim and Perpetrator Characteristics

The final sample consisted of 108 partner homicides. This was 15.7% of all homicides in which the victim was over 18, and 14.8% of all homicides in North Carolina for 1989. The 41 men murdered represented only 7.8% of all men murdered that year, whereas the 67 women accounted for 41% of all women murdered. Partner homicide as a percentage of all homicides was somewhat higher in North Carolina that year than in the nation as a whole, in which case it accounted for 12% of all adult homicides (Greenfield et al., 1988). The main reason for this appears to have been the higher portion of women murdered by partners: 41% in North Carolina compared with 28% nationwide. The portion of men murdered by their female partners was similar (7.8% in North Carolina compared with 7.7% nationally). Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the homicide victims by sex of victim.

Of the homicide victims, 62% were women and 52.7% were African American. By race and sex, 30.5% of the victims were White women, 29.6% of the victims were African American

TABLE 1
Demographics of Partner Homicide Victims by Gender, North Carolina, 1989 (N = 108)

Variable	Female (n = 67)		Male (n = 41)		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Age						
18 to 29	26	38.8	10	24.4	36	33.3
30 to 39	22	32.8	9	21.9	31	28.7
40 to 49	10	14.9	11	24.4	21	19.4
50 to 59	6	8.9	5	12.2	11	10.2
60+	3	4.5	6	14.6	9	8.3
Race						
African American	32	47.8	25	61.0	57	52.8
White	33	49.3	13	31.7	46	42.6
Other	2	3.0	3	7.3	5	4.6
Education^a						
< High school	17	25.8	21	51.2	38	39.2
High school	40	60.6	11	26.8	51	52.6
> High school	5	7.5	3	7.3	8	8.2

a. Education was missing for 11 cases.

women, 23.1% were African American men, and 12% were White men. The remaining five women and men were Native American and Hispanic. The race was known for both the victim and the perpetrators for 105 homicides, and of those, 89.5% were intraracial. Nearly three fourths (74.2%) of the women had graduated from high school, whereas fewer than half (48.7%) of the men had done so. Only 16.8% of the victims had education beyond high school. Overall, the victims ranged in age from 19 to 97 and the perpetrators ranged in age from 19 to 88. The mean age for the female victims was 35, whereas the mean age for the male victims was 9 years higher at 44. This age difference was significant, $\chi^2 = 9.35, p < .01$.

As shown in Table 2, fewer than half of the couples were, or had been, legally married, whereas the remainder were either cohabiting or dating. Although more of the male victims (51%) than the female victims (45%) were, or had been, legally married to their partners, this difference was not significant, $\chi^2 = 0.42, p > .05$. The majority (78%) of the victims were still in a relationship with each other (current partners) at the time the homicides occurred, whereas 21% had separated (former partners) prior to the homicides. Again, the male and female victims did not differ in terms of

TABLE 2
Victim-Perpetrator Relationship by Sex of Victim, North Carolina, 1989 (N = 108)

Relationship	Female (n = 67)		Male (n = 41)		Total
	Current	Former	Current	Former	
Married	22	8	16	5	51 (48.1%)
Cohabiting	20	4	10	2	36 (34.0%)
Dating	9	4	6	0	19 (17.9%)
Total	51 (76.1%)	16 (23.9%)	32 (78.0%)	7 (17.1%)	106

NOTE: Complete data was missing for two cases.

TABLE 3
Victim-Perpetrator Relationship by Race of Victim, North Carolina, 1989 (N = 108)

	White (n = 46)			African American (n = 54)		
	Current	Former	Total	Current	Former	Total
Married	24	8	32 (69.6%)	11	5	16 (29.6%)
Cohabiting	9	1	10 (21.7%)	18	5	23 (42.6%)
Dating	3	1	4 (8.7%)	12	3	15 (27.8%)
Total	36 (78.3%)	10 (21.7%)	46	41 (75.9%)	13 (24.1%)	54

NOTE: Complete data was missing for four cases.

the status of their relationships with their partners at the time of the homicides.

Analysis by race, results of which are shown in Table 3, indicated some similarities and some differences in relationship status (current or former) and type of relationship (married or unmarried). First, the majority of both Whites and African Americans were current partners when the murders occurred. However, the majority of the White couples were currently or formerly married, whereas a majority of the African Americans were currently or formerly in nonmarital relationships (cohabiting or dating). This difference was significant $\chi^2 = 9.96$; $p = .002$.

About half (54%) of the murders were committed between Friday and Sunday and 71% occurred in or around the home of the victim, most frequently in the bedroom. The majority (64%) of the victims died at the scene of the crime, whereas an additional 30% died at a hospital or other medical establishment. Children, other family members, friends, and police witnessed about 33% of the murders.

TABLE 4
Victim-Precipitated Homicide by Sex of Victim, North Carolina, 1989 (N = 108)

Victim-Precipitated	Female Victim		Male Victim		Total
	N	%	N	%	
Yes	0	—	25	61.0	25
No	58	86.6	8	19.5	66
Insufficient data	9	13.4	8	19.5	17

We were able to confirm the presence or absence of a history of domestic violence in 66.6% of the cases. There was not enough information about the remaining 36 cases to determine whether there was or was not a history of domestic violence. A history of domestic violence was present in 95.8% of these 72. In all but one of these cases, the domestic violence was male perpetrated. The three cases where we were able to confirm that there was not a history of domestic violence were all male-perpetrated homicides; also, two of these were murder-suicides, and the third was an attempted murder-suicide. The victims were all elderly, and the information available suggested that these three could be considered mercy killings; however, we do not know whether the three women homicide victims consented to the murder-suicides.

As shown in Table 4, we had sufficient data to make a determination as to whether 90 (83.3%) of the cases were victim precipitated. Of these, the majority (n = 65; 72%) did not appear to be victim precipitated, according to our definition. There were significant differences according to sex of victim, however. None of the cases of male-perpetrated homicide were documented as being preceded by female-initiated violence; in contrast, however, the data indicated that 25 (75%) of the 33 cases of female-perpetrated homicide on which we had adequate data were preceded by male-initiated violence, $\chi^2 = 60.6$; $p = .000$.

Contextual Analysis

Qualitative analysis of cases indicated that partner homicide is a complex phenomenon not given to easy generalizations. Patterns did, however, emerge to reveal five themes common across both male- and female-perpetrated homicides: (a) Woman battering is often the context for partner homicide; (b) staying with and leaving an abusive partner can both be dangerous options; (c) protective measures for battered women are inadequate; (d) domestic violence is not necessarily private violence; and (e) alcohol and firearms often accompany fatal violence. Each of these are discussed below and illustrated with examples from the cases.

Woman Battering Is Often the Context of Partner Homicide

The overriding theme to emerge from these cases was that partner homicide is most often the final outcome of chronic women battering. Statements from witnesses, family, friends, and police such as "There was a long history of domestic violence/quarrels/arguments," "It was a tit for tat kinda thing," "She had called the police many times," "This couple was known to the police," were repeated throughout the case histories. Indeed, it appears that habituated aggression was the context for the homicides perpetrated by both men and women. It seemed that there was, in fact, nothing very unusual for the couple about the day the homicides occurred. The two cases below illustrate this theme:

Married couple who had been arguing. He left the house and got into his truck. She grabbed onto the mirror of the truck and yelled at him to come back. She then fell back and stood away from the truck. He said that he was leaving and proceeded to go forward. She called out that he was going to run her over. He said that he didn't give a damn and drove forward. He opened the door and knocked her down. She ran in front of the truck and he kept coming toward her. The impact of the truck hitting her knocked her from the yard onto the street. He ran over her head on a left-hand turn, then backed up over her, pulled into the driveway and called 911. Witnessed by neighbors. Known history of domestic violence. According to the police, "It was a regular Saturday night thing. He'd get drunk and they would fight. Sometimes she'd call the police and sometimes he'd call." Police had been called at least six times, some of the time by neighbors.

Couple had been drinking and fighting. She superficially stabbed him in the chest and he struck her back in the mouth. She went to the ER for treatment but got impatient and left before she received care. She returned home where the arguing continued. She took her gun and shot him in the head. She then fled and flagged down a taxi. The driver called the police. This couple was known to the police due to their long history of domestic violence. There was an assault warrant out against him at the time of the murder.

Both Leaving an Abusive Partner and Remaining in a Relationship Can Be Dangerous Options for Battered Women

Analysis of these cases indicated that battered women are in danger when they remain with their abusers, when they attempt to leave or end the relationship, and after they do leave and are living apart from the batterer. We found, as have others (Campbell, 1992; Wilson & Daly, 1993), that some of the couples had separated prior to the killings. In this study, 17% of the women in our sample were killed after leaving or attempting to leave their abusive partner. The first case below illustrates how dangerous the act of separating can be; the second illustrates that even women who sustain their separation from abusers remain at risk.

Couple had been separated for a few days, and she threatened to leave him. The wife came home to get some of her belongings. Her husband shot her in the home; she ran across the street. He got another gun, followed her and shot her a second time. He then returned home and shot himself.

The couple had been separated for about 60 days. She had filed two separate assault charges; assault charges were pending, and there was a restraining order against him. He had threatened to kill her in the past and he had previously gone to her workplace and fired a shotgun into her computer. He left his office, stole a truck, confronted her at the day care center where she was picking up their 4-year-old child and shot her to death.

However, it is important to highlight that the majority of the victims in this study were still in the intimate relationship with their partners at the time the homicides occurred, as illustrated below:

A woman and her fiancé had gotten into an argument at a local bar. She went outside and superficially slashed her wrists. He then struck her in the face. She went and lay down on a hill by the railroad station. She died from a spinal cord injury due to blunt force. There was a history of domestic violence; she had filed assault charges against him but had dropped the charges.

Protective Measures for Battered Women Are Inadequate

Dovetailing with the theme above was the finding that the protective measures available to battered women, such as restraining and protective orders, and the option to file assault charges, were not reliable guarantees of their safety. In many cases, the couple was well known to the police, who had been called to the residence more than once. Results indicated that 35% of the women had called the police at some point prior to the homicides, three women had called the police the day of the homicide, and at least four women had restraining orders.

He had an extensive arrest record and had been charged six times for assaulting her; the last time was one month before the murders. He had also been charged with abusing all four of her children and sexually abusing one girl. He had also been in prison for 23 years for murder and had been charged by a previous girlfriend with rape. Three months before he had shot her in the temple but would not let her go to the hospital. Just prior to the murder he was beating her, yelling at her and calling her a bitch. They were arguing over a gun when he shot her.

Additionally, in several cases, the police arrived on the scene after the murder. Or, with the case described below, they were actually present during the homicide.

He had been arrested for assaulting her earlier that day. Police officer accompanied him to the trailer that they shared to retrieve some of his belongings. An argument ensued; they argued back and forth. He started toward her and she stabbed him with a steak knife in front of the officer. There had been many prior calls to police. According to the police, "It was a tit for tat type thing."

Domestic Violence Is Not Necessarily Private Violence.

Domestic violence is often thought of as occurring in private settings behind closed doors. However, in this study, around one third of the homicides occurred in the presence of others, including children, other family, and friends. Even when there were no known witnesses to the homicides, the data indicate that many in the couples' social networks as well as the police knew the women were being battered. The case described below illustrates how often, for whatever reason, observers to the escalating aggression were unable to prevent the deaths.

Man and woman were at his father's house, where they lived. On the evening of the homicide, the two were arguing, pushing and shoving. The father was arguing with his daughter and the woman "butted in." The man told her to stay out of it, and she got a butcher knife and cut him on the chest. The man then went to get a gun from his truck. When he returned, she lunged at him with a knife (although he said that she had a knife, the police never found one and witnesses said that they did not see a knife). He then shot her in the face and neck. No history of domestic violence was on record, but witnesses testified to a history of physical abuse against her.

Alcohol and Firearms Often Accompany Fatal Violence

Use of alcohol by the males and the ready availability of guns seemed to be critical correlates of the homicides we studied. Although we only have blood alcohol levels for the victims, the body of evidence suggested that alcohol use by the male partner, whether victim or perpetrator of the homicide, was a common part of the circumstances surrounding the homicides: Just under 70% of the male victims had been drinking prior to their deaths. By contrast, a substantial majority (66%) of the women victims had no alcohol in their systems. This difference was significant, $\chi^2 = 11.77$; $p < .001$. Of the male victims, 29% had blood alcohol levels over 200 mg at the time of death, compared to 9% of the women victims. The case below illustrates the presence of alcohol.

Earlier in the day he had threatened his wife and gotten angry at other people over an alleged debt. He had been drinking heavily. The wife told her daughter that he was "going to blow her (the wife's) head off." He had held a gun to her head earlier—in one instance the daughter had tried to intervene and was pushed to the floor. He continued to drink and play with the gun. He went into the kitchen where she was cooking and their 13-year-old daughter was doing her homework and told her that she had hurt him so much and that he wanted to hurt her back. She was making plans to leave him, and he said the sooner the better. He was waving a pistol around and kept telling her how bad she hurt him, and she kept telling him he was the one messing up. He was going to shoot her in the heart because of how much pain he felt. The arguing continued and the daughter went upstairs. She told him to get the gun out of her face. He shot the gun into the ceiling, and she asked him why he shot the gun in the house. He shot her in the head about 15-20 minutes later.

Firearms, used in 67% of these homicides, appeared to be readily available within these households, and many of the men had previously threatened their partners with guns. Handguns were the most commonly used weapons. They were used for just under half of all the homicides regardless of sex of victim. Knives were the second most common weapon and were more likely to be used by female (25%) than male (12.5%) perpetrators. Of the male victims, 25% had more than one knife or bullet wound, whereas 34% of the women did so. Some of the battered women in this study carried or had easy access to guns that, ultimately, they used to kill their partners, thereby possibly saving their own lives. More often, however, women were the ones killed by the easy availability of guns.

Dating couple with a long history of domestic violence. He kept coming back after she had asked him to move out. Neighbors knew of domestic violence. He had recently threatened her with a small handgun that she managed to wrestle away from him and keep with her for several days. On the afternoon of the murder, a female friend had been visiting her at her home. When the friend left, the boyfriend came into the house. Very shortly thereafter, the neighbors heard loud voices and within minutes he went to the friend's house to say that he had shot her. Neighbors saw him with a gun and heard a shot and called police. When police arrived she was dead and he was sitting there with a gun.

Conceptualizing Partner Homicide

The critical finding from this population-based study is that partner homicide emanated from a history of habitual male aggression in almost all (95.8%) of the cases where a history of domestic violence could be confirmed or eliminated. Partner homicide was revealed in case after case to be a fatal outcropping of an underlying continuous process of male physical and psychological aggression against women rather than discrete events disconnected from the routine daily life created and sustained by battering.

Although the findings of sex differences in victim-precipitated homicide argues for the value of using a victim-precipitation framework to examine gender differences in circumstances that lead men and women to kill their partners, this framework was inadequate in explaining the complexity of male- and female-perpetrated partner homicide. In practice, the determination of whether a homicide is victim precipitated often is reduced to answering the question of "who started it?" (Block, 1993; Polk, 1997; Rasche, 1993), thereby limiting the homicide context to actions immediately surrounding the event. Polk (1997) notes that one of the problems inherent in using a victim-precipitation framework is "to establish when the dock starts ticking on precipitation" (p. 150). In cases of partner homicide, he observes that

The killing by men of their women partners occurs without prior violence on the part of the victim. When women kill their male partners, on the other hand, in a large proportion of the cases it is precisely the prior violence of the male that sets the stage for the lethal violence that follows. (p. 153)

A particular incident of violence, however, may not immediately precede the female-perpetrated homicide (Polk, 1997; Rasche, 1993). In our study, many of the women perpetrators killed their partners when life-threatening danger was not imminent, that is, on the point of happening, and when the men were not armed.

Additionally, there were often other people present, who, potentially, could have helped the women escape or offer protection. The case below illustrates this complexity.

Couple was "known to the police" for domestic violence. It was Super Bowl Sunday. She was at a friend's house. All were intoxicated. He entered the friend's house and began "beating on her for no reason" in front of everyone. He left. Her sister arrived and took her to her residence where she got a knife. They went to a club and drank some beer. She saw him outside the club talking to another woman. She went outside and confronted him. They argued and she pulled a knife from her pocketbook and stabbed him.

Although the woman was assaulted prior to stabbing her partner, there was a severing of a temporal relationship between his aggression and her response. Indeed, the woman seems to have armed herself with a knife and then deliberately confronted her partner. Whether this constitutes a case of victim-precipitation is subject to varying opinions about the time allowable between precipitation and response. The explanation for this murder as well as the others maybe historical and cumulative over time. For this reason, extending the concept of victim precipitation to include the cumulative nature of the violence would improve its usefulness as a framework for explaining partner homicide.

Because of the importance of looking beyond the circumstances incident to the homicide event for risk factors and explanations, a framework that explicitly considers the preexisting gender-based power imbalances may be more appropriate for analyzing partner homicide than one based on the circumstances just prior to the commission of the act, or one based on the frequency or severity of injury perpetration (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Smith, Tessaro, & Earp, 1995). Agudelo's anti- action, proaction framework helps us to conceptualize both men's and women's use of fatal force as behavior that continues from two habitual patterns: (a) male-perpetrated physical and psychological aggression against women and (b) women's struggles to protect and defend themselves both physically and psychologically. These patterns of male aggression and female resistance created gender differences in power and experience that predated, and to some extent foreshadowed the fatal events.

Given that the context for the majority of these homicides was ongoing woman battering, similar violent behavior between men and women (e.g., perpetration of homicide) concealed very real differences in the lives of men and women perpetrators. These differences stemmed from the gendered experience of battering, an enduring and traumatic condition that shapes women's behavior, distorts their view of self, and undermines their beliefs in the controllability of their own lives (Smith, Tessaro, et al., 1995). Battered women have a continual perception of being at risk for future harm, an eroding sense of personal power, and a growing feeling of entrapment. Because this experience of battering was shared by the women victims as well as the women perpetrators, the 108 women involved in the homicides in this study—67 murdered, 42 murderers—were in similar psychological and social positions vis-à-vis their abusive male partners prior to the homicides. When viewed from the standpoint of battered women's experiences, some women's use of fatal violence can be seen as a response to their sense of fear, reasonable expectations of future harm, or in reaction to cues that, to them, implied danger (Smith, Earp, & DeVellis, 1995; Warr, 1994). Society's inability to protect the women, in the past, from their partners' aggression may have served to reinforce their awareness of their unequal social power; this may have led some to believe that their use of deadly force was their safest option. The following example illustrates a woman's use of deadly force as an extension of her resistance to male power:

He came home from work and found her asleep on the sofa. He told her to fix him something to eat. She refused. He struck her in the mouth. Her son, who was about 17 or 18, got the car keys away from his (step?) father to take his mother to the hospital. She got a gun from the other room and shot her husband. She testified to a history of domestic violence. Police reported having received calls from her although no charges were ever filed against him.

The male victims of homicide and male perpetrators of homicide also shared similar psychological and social positions vis-à-vis their female partners; this position resulted from their continual struggle for power over

women through the use of a myriad of control tactics including but not limited to physical violence (Pence & Paymer, 1986). The men's common history of their use of force to maintain power over women suggested that the behavior of the 41 male victims and 67 male perpetrators, at the time of the homicides, was principally a continuation of aggressive behavior designed to maintain their position of power. This continuation is illustrated by the following:

He had been drinking, came home with food. He kept knocking the food on the floor and ordering her to pick it up. He dragged her into the bedroom and made her strip. He called the children in to "see what mama looks like," and then sent them back to their rooms. Kids were hiding and crying. They heard her say, "Please don't shoot me," and then a gunshot. He set her pubic hair on fire. Autopsy shows that she was severely beaten before she was shot. Her family testified to a long history of domestic violence.

Neither the victim-precipitation nor the antiaction, proaction analytic frameworks necessarily imply that women's use of violence is inherently good or justifiable but men's is not. Rather, both men's and women's violence can be seen to have purpose and directionality, and both cause injury, disease, and death. The murders of both men and women are socially significant and cause harm to the surviving partners as well as any children, other family, or friends. Both need to be prevented.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A strength of this study is that our data link victim, offender, incident, and cause of death information. This is important because the victim-offender relationship and the circumstances surrounding the homicide are central to an analysis and understanding of the crime (Block & Christakos, 1995). It does, however, have several limitations. First, this study was limited to the homicides that occurred in one state; nevertheless, a statewide analysis does improve on studies that are limited to one city and does provide the opportunity to study contextual information not generally available in national data sets. Second, police memory is subject to recall bias. However, these 108 cases covered 54 counties, and only six counties had over three homicides each. The police were forthcoming when they knew the information and equally so about not knowing. Nevertheless, variation in memory and the amount of detail provided in the medical examiner files limited our knowledge on circumstances and history of domestic violence, provided more detail on victims than perpetrators, and resulted in an inconsistent amount of data across cases. Finally, this study, as does most homicide research, used point-in-time measurement techniques. This limits our ability to understand the complexity of homicides that are really the final endpoint of chronically violent relationships that are constructed by gender. Future studies of partner homicide need to include historical data that helps us to connect the homicide event with the daily life circumstances of those involved.

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