

Murder and society: why commit murder?

Peter Morrall looks at how the phenomenon of murder varies in motivation, cause, definition and consequences according to global situations and societal values.

The official global murder rate per annum is rising toward one million (Morrall, 2006). But there is no universal, cross-cultural meaning of murder that can be adhered to in any context, no matter who are the victims and who the killers. Murdering can be sanctioned by the State (the death penalty) or by groups with a particular interest in using murder (suicide-bombers) as a tactic to achieve what are considered laudable aims not only by themselves but by other groups or States.

Moreover, societies adopt their own moral hierarchies of murder depending on who are the victims and who are the perpetrators. This means that even if all killing is legally proscribed, particular types of killing are given harsher punishments than others. Furthermore, punishments vary hugely transnationally. Non-custodial sentences may apply for infanticide in some countries, whereas in others it is viewed as warranting long-term imprisonment. In some parts of the world the death penalty is handed out for drug-trafficking, adultery, and sedition, but in other parts these acts may not be even criminalised or they attract alternative approaches to social control such as medical treatment and hospitalisation.

Take for example the Iraq war. According to research by Burnham *et al* (2006), 655,000 Iraqi civilians have died in the three years following the invasion of 2003. Yet the invasion forces do not routinely collect data on civilian deaths. Therefore, the criminal or military justice systems, except in rare cases, do not address these killings. By the end of 2006 only a handful of American troops and one British soldier had been found guilty of any serious crime in which Iraqi civilians had died (although four US marines were awaiting trial for the murder of 24 civilians in the town of Haditha).

Motives

So, what can be said about the reasons for committing murder when there are so many types of murders? 'Motive' is central to police investigations. Although a conviction is possible without a motive being discovered, finding a specific reason makes it much more likely. Motives for murder can be condensed into four sets of 'Ls': Lust; Love; Loathing; and Loot:

Lust: a lover kills a rival for his/her object of desire; the 'thrill-killer' who murders people because he

gains a sexual payoff.

Love: the 'mercy killing' of a baby with a major deformity or partner with incurable cancer.

Loathing: lethal hate directed towards one person (for example, an abusive parent), group (such as homosexuals or prostitutes), culture or nation (for example, Palestinians towards Israelis and *visa versa*).

Loot: killing for financial gain through inheritance or insurance pay-outs; a murder occurring during a robbery, or gang-warfare over the control of drug markets; employment as a contract killer or mercenary.

But finding a motive for murder does not go far enough to explain murder. Most people experience lust, love, and loathing, and seek 'loot' in the sense of wishing to be free from financial concerns. However, the vast majority of people do not commit murder.

Mad-bad

Can murderers be considered to be either mad or bad? A few very 'mad' people do kill because of their psychotic delusions and hallucinations, or because they have psychopathic personalities (Morrall, 2000). But most people who suffer from mental disorder (even those who are severely paranoid or psychopathic) do not kill. Moreover, defining madness is in itself contentious and can be a 'default' label when no motive is apparent.

Furthermore, the most 'evil' individuals in history (for example, Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin, and Mao), are viewed as heroes by some inhabitants of the very countries whose populations they ruled with such terrible cruelty. Modern military and political leaders, whilst executing warfare, construe the deaths of innocent civilians not as murder but as 'collateral damage'. Computerised modelling of likely outcomes from their lethal interventions inform them at the planning stage about just how many babies, children and adults are going to die. Consequently, 'badness' can be a matter of opinion.

Individual

Testosterone, the male sex hormone, can be correlated with competitive and assertive behaviour (murder is largely an act of men, although women are becoming more violent). A reduction of serotonin increases the likelihood of spur-of-the-moment and

hostile impulses. Alterations in the breakdown of glucose in the body also appear to affect mood and behaviour. Both hyperglycaemia and hypoglycaemia can lead to aggression. Alcohol in the bloodstream undermines higher-order control exercised by the cerebral cortex. Environmental pollutants circulating in the body (for example, pesticides and lead) are linked to heightened aggression. Nutritional deficiencies caused by eating too much 'junk' food may provoke aggressive behaviour and even murder (Lawrence, 2006).

For the evolutionary psychologist David Buss, killing is a core element of human nature because in evolutionary terms it serves a purpose. Specifically, it is advantageous to reproduction. It is an adaptive strategy. Murder, therefore, is inherently logical. The mind is designed to murder. The gains for killing, argues Buss, are: the killer has not been killed and therefore can reproduce; augmenting his (and it usually is a man) own survival and the death of a reproductive rival, he can have sex with the dead man's mate, and take his property; it scares the hell out of any would-be antagonist; he is immediately converted into a sexually attractive partner for admiring females; he has displayed another attribute that these doting but vulnerable women need, protection from predatorial males (presumably, also from dinosaurs and other marauding beasts).

Society

Sandra Bloom (2001) argues that Western societies, particularly the USA, are essentially 'sick' due to their addiction to violence. It is society rather than individuals that propagates violence. Values such as those associated with actual physical violence, or competitiveness in sport and at work, are inculcated into the individual via, for example, the educational system and the media.

Elie Godsi (2004) points out how violent acts of the powerful in society are concealed, whereas the violence of the powerless are revealed. For example, governments and businesses are responsible for the spread of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), asbestosis, and methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA). The tobacco and arms industries have brought about millions of deaths in the first world, and continue to do so in the third world.

Miethe and Regoeczi (2004) have analysed different murder situations for different sorts of people in the USA (for example, men, women, teenagers, adults, strangers, intimates, blacks, whites and Hispanics). They suggest that murders committed using guns revolve around issues of gender, race, class and urban locations. Moreover, violence is correlated with 'hot spot' situations such as parking lots, bars/pubs, night clubs, accident and emergency hospital units, psychiatric acute services, sex shops and 'red light' areas, drug-buying locations and shelters for the homeless. The home offers a viable killing arena, not only because of the relationships within it, but because it is shielded from observation and has its own rules of conduct.

Individual and society

However, the split between faulty individual and faulty society, whilst offering an explanation for some murders, is in general too simplistic. There is a 'reflexive' relationship between social factors and the individual's constitution.

For example, Jonathan Pincus (2002) links murder

with sexually damaging childhoods. But he suggests that neurological disorder (and possibly illegal drug use) has to be present before the likelihood of violence increases. Pincus also accepts the role of society in 'releasing' the potential to murder created by awful personal experiences and cerebral pathology. Governments and media give backing to violence by initiating 'moral panics' about certain groups (for example, paedophiles, refugees), as well as starting wars and indoctrinating the population to view a former friendly neighbouring country as an enemy.

Devastation and fascination

Reasons for murders being committed may be complex and/or obscure. What is far more knowable is the devastation caused by murder for both the secondary victims (the families and friends of both the primary victim and the perpetrator). Murder invokes a particularly virulent and long-term form of bereavement, which can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder. Moreover, the degree of violence across the world has created a tertiary victim, that of global society itself.

But, despite the suffering, murder is also fascinating. Our lust for gore is voracious. Real and fictional murder abounds on television, cinema, the internet, books, plays, magazines, and 'murder mystery weekends' that can be taken as holidays. However, the reasons for the fascination of murder are as complex and obscure as those that purport to explain why murder is committed.

Dr Peter Morrall is Head of Mental Health, Learning Disabilities and Behavioural Sciences, University of Leeds.

References

- Bloom, S. (2001) (ed), *Violence: A Public Health Menace and a Public Health Approach*. London: Karnac.
- Burnham, G., Lafta, R., Doocy, S. and Roberts, L. (2006) 'Mortality after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-sectional Cluster Sample Survey', *The Lancet*, DOI:10.1016/S0140-6736(06)69491-9.
- Buss, D. (2005) *The Murderer Next Door: Why the Mind is Designed to Kill*. New York: Penguin.
- Godsi, E. (2004) *Violence and Society – Making Sense of Madness and Badness*. Ross-on-Wye, England: PCCS Books.
- Lawrence, F. (2006) 'Omega-3, Junk Food and the Link between Violence and What We Eat', *The Guardian*, 17th October.
- Miethe, T. D. and Regoeczi, W. C. (2004) *Rethinking Homicide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morrall, P. (2006) *Murder and Society*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Morrall, P. (2000) *Madness and Murder*. London: Whurr.
- Pincus, J. (2002) *Basic Instincts: What Makes Killers Kill?* New York: Norton and Company.