

Criminological theories of murder



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Murder is a horrendous crime committed by all types of people from different upbringings, socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, race, and genders. However, certain theories can find similarities between these types of individuals, and what prompts them to exhibit such violence. The crime of homicide, specifically murder, can be effectively explained by the general strain theory, which is highly associated with the role of hegemonic masculinity identity. However other theories including social learning theory, the biosocial approach, and the role of alcohol, and the labeling theory further demonstrate the differing factors to committing murder.

General strain theory (GST) is extremely effective in exhibiting how certain types of strain can potentially lead to committing a crime. GST emphasises the importance of stressors in determining the increase in negative emotions such as frustration and anger (Agnew, 2001: 319). These emotions may pressure individuals to take corrective action, and thus turn to crime in order to reduce these strains (Agnew, 2001: 319). Atchison and Heide (2011: 781) further explain the strain theory as the result of failing to achieve goals that have a positive value in one's life, in particular, financial goals. In addition to this, when the individual views the outcome of a situation as unjust, or perceives it as worse in comparison to another's outcome in the same situation, their perception towards their overall circumstance could worsen (Atchison and Heide, 2011: 782). Moreover, another strain is the presentation of negative stimuli, such as verbal and physical abuse, negative relationships with peers and family; and the removal of positive stimuli, such as the loss of a loved one. These examples can be exemplified through the life of Charles Manson before entering prison (Atchison and Heide, 2011:

783). Some of these include rejection from parents and family, loss of loved ones, and experiences of being exposed to horrendous sexual acts (Atchison and Heide 2011: 784), which all resulted in feelings of emptiness and resentment for him acting as a great determinant in committing murder by proxy (Atchison and Heide 2011: 783). Moreover, these strains and stressors individuals experience can be linked to the notion of hegemonic masculinity, in which men who perceive themselves as dominant and superior aim to preserve their identity by dealing with these stressors through violent acts that keep them in control. Thus, the GST is highly effective in explaining how strains can lead individuals to commit the violent act of murder.

The idea of hegemonic masculinity is another extremely important factor to be considered when explaining crime. Hegemonic masculinity is a type of masculinity that exhibits dominance and legitimises the male's position as an authoritative figure, which further creates the foundation of unequal gender practices (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 65). Kennedy-Kollar and Charles' (2012: 68) study contained information from a total of 28 men who committed homicide, in particular, mass murder. Within the study, there were various stressors contributing to their horrendous crimes, all of which denied them of their hegemonic masculine identity (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 68). For instance, 71% of the men revealed financial stressors as a significant factor (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles 2012: 68). One important element of the hegemonic masculine identity is maintaining profitable employment in order to provide support for himself and his family (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 68). Additionally, 61% of the men had social stressors such as bullying and social isolation, which damaged their

hegemonic social identity as it prohibited them from being able to exercise social dominance, attain high social status, and exhibit authority and demand respect (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 68). Another important factor to consider is romantic stressors, which impacted 25% of the murderers (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 69). Romantic stressors include the experience of getting divorced, the breakdown of a relationship, and/or the lack of acceptance by women in both romantic and/or sexual advances by men prior to the act (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 69). This factor clearly portrays how important is it for men to protect their hegemonic masculine identity by asserting control and dominance over women, whom in this study, account for 28% of the victims (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 70). Moreover, 32% men experienced psychological strains, and 18% of men had other stressors, which all contributed to their failure in achieving the hegemonic masculine ideal (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 68). Most stressors co-existed including financial-social, financial-psychological, and social-psychological (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 62). The evidence of these stressors indicate that there is no specific cause to an individual committing mass murder, however, this study does demonstrate how these interrelated stressors impacting the mass murderers had felt their hegemonic masculinity identity being threatened, and consequently gain the urge to engage in cruel acts to protect and preserve this identity (Kennedy-Kollar and Charles, 2012: 62). Thus demonstrating the importance of understanding hegemonic masculinity and its impacts on committing murder.

Explaining murder also demands an understanding of the social learning theory of crime. According to Aker's social learning theory, social learning takes place through imitation and reinforcement in their everyday environment (Simons and Burt, 2011: 554). Many individuals who grow up in communities with great levels of violence develop this sense that violence is important if you are being threatened or disrespected - and that death is preferable over to dishonor (Gabarino, 2015: 106). Gabarino (2015: 106) exemplifies this through the case of Robert whose mother and father reinforce the significance of honor, resolving conflict, the legitimacy of violence as a tool in interpersonal relations (Gabarino, 2015: 106). Therefore, children alike to Robert develop a justification for their aggression in response to conflict (Gabarino, 2015: 106). Gabarino (2015: 554) further exemplifies how adolescents can make significant mistakes in social perception due their limited experience in life and their immaturity in the brain, specifically in parts involved in perceiving the emotions of others and making informed and reasonable judgments in response. Offenders commit immoral actions in order to achieve a sense of justice (Gabarino, 2015: 554). Each of the three serial murders according to Singer and Hensley (2004: 473) suffered extremely traumatic levels of humiliation and parental rejection during early childhood and turned to fire setting to release their frustration. However, in order to permanently overcome their childhood humiliation and reconcile their sense of self-worth, killers turn to homicide (Singer and Hensley, 2004: 473). This demonstrates how childhood behaviours such as fire setting can determine whether or not they commit future violence against other individuals (Singer and Hensley, 2004: 473). Overall demonstrating how upbringing and environmental impacts can

negatively effect children into becoming future offenders and commit crimes such as murder.

The biosocial approach to murder further emphasises the importance of considering psychological disorders and biological factors in determining crime. Allely, Minnis, Thompson, Wilson and Gillberg (2014: 296) reveal that greater than 10% of murderers have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and similar majority of them have injured their head. Moreover, these offenders have encountered psychosocial factors including parental divorce, sexual or physical abuse, and have also undergone major surgery as adolescent (Allely et al., 2014: 296). Thus this evidence further corroborates the idea that to a certain degree, there is a relationship between environmental and neurodevelopmental factors, which can potentially lead to individuals developing into murderers (Allely et al., 2014: 297). Furthermore, Taskiran, Mutluer, Tufan & Semerci (2017, p. 1364) show support for the aforementioned studies as they show a past history of crime within families are positively correlated with the gravity of the crime. In addition to this, psychiatric factors such as Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Conduct Disorder (CD) are related with the potential to commit crimes of greater magnitude as younger children (Taskiran et al., 2017: 1365). Moreover, the study greatly contributes to existing literature which show that lower scores on the CBCL-anxious-depressed subscale is associate with a decrease in committing severe crimes (Taskiran et al., 2017: 1365). Therefore exhibiting how biosocial approaches to crime can contribute to the explanation of what causes murder.

The role of alcohol is another significant factor in committing murder. A report from the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) (2009) provides evidence for the effects of consuming alcohol on changes in behaviour. These include the notion of alcohol myopia, which argues that alcohol causes individuals to place focus on the situation at hand, with restricted knowledge to the potential consequences of their actions, which creates higher chances of violence (AIC, 2009). Moreover, further research shows alcohol consumption impacts the brain as individuals show greater difficulty to acknowledge other individual's perspectives, solve problems, and make less impulsive and more objective decisions (AIC, 2009). According to the toxicology and police reports within the AIC report (2009), approximately 729 homicides were related to alcohol, representing 47% of all recorded homicides between 2000 and 2006. 60% of these homicides included alcohol consumption from both the victim and the offender (AIC, 2009). Thus accentuating the detrimental effects of alcohol as a factor in committing murder.

The labeling theory is another extremely important factor to be considered when explaining murder. According to Atchison and Heide (2011: 780). The labeling theory places focus on the impacts of formal punishments on lawbreakers. Following the experience of being processed within the criminal system after committing violent acts, these offenders feel labeled (Atchison and Heide, 2011: 780). Additionally, the exposure to constant negative labels from society and the altered perception towards them impacts their sense of self – if they are labeled as bad, they view themselves as bad (Atchison and

Heide, 2011: 780). Moreover, the self-fulfilling prophecy coincides with the labeling theory in the sense whereby individuals start to embrace these aberrant labels and behave the way they're already being perceived by others (Atchison and Heide, 2011: 780). This notion of labels negatively impacting offenders to further exhibit violent behaviour is supported by Restivo and Lanier (2013: 133). After being formally labeled as delinquents, these individuals place themselves in the company of like-minded individuals who also embrace their labels. (Restivo and Lanier, 2013: 133). According to Restivo and Lanier's (2013: 133) findings, an individual's relations with other wrongdoers were an extremely strong factor in subsequent involvement in criminal acts. Therefore demonstrating how the labeling theory has negative implications on those who deviate from society's norms, as they tend to accept these labels and commit further violent behaviours to uphold them.

In conclusion, there are various theories that explain the cause of murder. The general strain theory is highly effective in demonstrating how certain types of strains and stressors such as failing to achieve goals, presentation of negative stimuli and the removal of positive stimuli, lead individuals to release their frustration through violence. This can be linked to hegemonic masculinity identity theory whereby men who feel their identity is being threatened or eliminated when going through certain types of strain – such as financial, romantic, social, and psychological – aim to attain it by resorting to engaging in cruel acts such as murder. Moreover, the social learning theory is significant in exhibiting how their upbringing and environmental impacts during childhood can increase the chances of wrongdoing. Other

factors such as the labeling theory, the role of alcohol, and the biosocial approach are important factors when considering the causes of murder.

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