

Homicide Event Motive: A Situational Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The motive for a homicide can be conceptualised from different perspectives, for instance, psychological, legal, investigative, and is often focused on the offender's reasons for committing the homicide. As criminology often draws on theories from various disciplines, motive's conceptualisation from study to study and comparison is difficult. This manuscript introduces a new perspective for conceptualising motive, based on the situational approach termed "homicide event motive". Defined as the fundamental reason for the homicide and drawing on theories such as the Routine Activities Theory, Crime Pattern Theory, and Theory of Closure on Deviant Acts, this conceptualisation shifts the focus from the offender's personal reasoning to the homicide situation itself and the elements that brought about the event. This manuscript will outline the theoretical foundations of homicide event motive.

Keywords: Homicide Event Motive; homicide; motive; Routine Activities Theory; Crime Pattern Theory; Theory of Closure on Deviant Acts; Situational perspective; Homicide event.

INTRODUCTION

Homicide Event Motive: A Situational Perspective

Husak (2010: 56) noted that "the concept of motive... is unclear and imprecise. Insofar as commentators have sought to analyse the concept of motive, they have defended radically different conceptions." Although for most people, motive is the "why", the meaning of the term is ambiguous having been heavily influenced by several disciplines such as psychology, policing, law, and sociology (Hicks & Sales, 2006). Psychological perspectives can be at odds with prosecutorial and investigative approaches (Hicks & Sales, 2006) and represent a lack of theory and practice overlap. With psychology and law espousing fundamentally different conceptualisations of motive, criminology is stranded between the two, evidenced by the various typologies espoused

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by criminologists and offender profilers (e.g. Holmes & Holmes, 2010; Petherick & Sinnamon, 2014; Polk, 1994; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1996; Turvey, 2012). Problems with varying definitions and conceptualisations are that studies which include motive are unable to be compared due to vast differences in motive classifications, and those focusing solely on the offender are open to criticism regarding the inability to read their mind (Hick & Sales, 2006). Therefore, a conceptualisation of motive is required that will enable interdisciplinary partnerships, connect research and practice, and overcome such hurdles as comparability and subjectivity.

This paper proposes a new conceptualisation of motive based on the situational perspective termed “homicide event motive,” defined as the reason for the occurrence of the homicide. It shifts the focus from the subjective offender motive to the event itself and forms a holistic understanding of the reasons the homicide may have occurred, incorporating situational aspects and victim interaction.

Importantly, this conceptualisation offers a utilitarian way to understand the motive for a homicide when the offender is not explicit in their motives, aids in establishing inferential reasoning in investigations and judicial processes and assists in study comparability. Homicide event motive is of value and relevance to those stakeholders who consider motive critical to the solvability and the increase of clearance rates of homicide, such as police officers and law makers. This paper serves as a theoretical introduction for both researchers and practitioners alike to its concept, its foundations, and introduce the proposed list of homicide event motives.

Defining Motive

Motive appears a somewhat simple construct to describe; it's concerned with why a person engages in particular behaviours. However, conceptualisations, along with theoretical and practical applications of motive do not always align. Criminology is influenced by the other social science disciplines with theories often the product of interdisciplinary partnerships (Bonta & Andrews, 2017; Bosworth & Hoyle, 2011). Conceptualisations of motive are as diversified as the field itself. For example, Turvey (2012: 312) defined motive as “the emotional, psychological, and material needs that impel and are satisfied by behaviour,” which alludes to motive's highly complex nature as it suggests that different influences and disparate concepts can all be classified as “motive.”

Use and meaning of the term motive ultimately depends on the user's theoretical perspective. Psychological theories, for instance, focus heavily on the introspective aspect of what drives behaviour, centring on the "criminal mind" (Burke, 2014). Psychological literature likens motive to human needs that direct behaviour toward an object which satisfies the need (Leontiev, 1978; Maslow, 1943) with criminal motive expressed with terms such as power, anger, control, and masculinity (Groth, 1979; Petherick & Sinnamon, 2014; Polk, 1993, 1994; Turvey, 2012). Psychological theories also explain motive from an evolutionary perspective (see Duntley & Buss; 2011 Eibl-Eibefeldt; 2009; Raine, 2014), such as the Homicide Adaptation Theory (Duntley & Buss, 2011), which suggests psychological mechanisms have evolved to motivate homicide as one possible response to specific situations.

Likewise, Petherick and Sinnamon's (2014: 394) pathways perspective of motivation theory explains that people are shaped over their lifetimes and that "any given person is a culmination of various biological and life experiences." A thorough summation of these combined psychological theories into practical application can be observed within the principles of Bonta and Andrews' (2017) psychology of criminal conduct (PCC), which is premised on approaches such as behaviourism, social learning, and differential association theories in the prediction and treatment of offenders. Accordingly, criminal behaviour is influenced by personal, interpersonal, and community rewards (PIC-R), and therefore, motive might be considered a culmination of these reward systems.

The legal perspective similarly offers no single definition. The *Black's Law Dictionary* defines motive as "something, esp[ecially] wilful desire, that leads one to act" (Garner, 2014: 1,172) and is supported by Wigmore's (1935L 76) excerpt which states "the feeling which internally urges or pushes a person to do or refrain from doing an act is an emotion, and is of course evidential towards his doing or not doing the act." This suggests motive is an emotion. Some authors have emphasised the role of an objective and external desire as the cause for the behaviour or act (James, 1986; Okrent, 2012; Salmond, 1924) while other interpretations have introduced the concept of the state of mind in addition to the mind's desire (Jowitt & Walsh, 1959).

Black's Law Dictionary definition without Wigmore's supporting excerpt shifts the emphasis of motive from the cause of a mental state to an entity that causes a person to act. Austin (1995: 99–102) also wrote of motives as being "springs of action," because "every motive is a wish; and

every wish is a pain which affects a man's self, and which urges him to seek relief, by obtaining the object wished." That these definitions transcend more than one legal system and jurisdiction speaks to the current issue of motive and the need for a more concrete definition that is valid in any jurisdiction that homicide is investigated.

One point that is so clearly agreed upon in legal systems (although is debated in the legal literature [Husak, 2010]) is that motive is deemed irrelevant in demonstrating *mens rea* and is not an essential element in proving an accused perpetrator's guilt (Hall, 1960), a maxim that is embraced in most jurisdictions. Beyond the ethical debate put forth by scholars such as Hall (1960), perhaps another reason for this maxim is that what constitutes motive is not clearly defined (Husak, 2010). It seems then, like the psychological literature, the legal discipline is not as simple either.

Investigators establish motive as part of the theory of the crime (Adcock & Chancellor, 2013). It is used in the assessment of offender identity (ACPO, 2006) and importantly, it provides the context for the homicide, assisting in demonstrating the guilt of an identified perpetrator (Brookman, 2005; Pennington & Hastie, 1992). Labels adopted for motive by police tend to be utilitarian, often describing the circumstances of the homicide, for example *gang-related*, *domestic dispute*, and *money*. In research, they are often called "ostensible motives" (Wolfgang, 1958) as they describe what appears to have happened.

There are two significant issues with using police motives in research; first, most refer to the circumstance of the homicide rather than the motive,¹ and second, they are driven by data rather than theory. It is, therefore, conceivable that every police department, and indeed every police officer may use different labels, making the list infinite and ultimately incomparable. Wallace (1986: 31) raised this concern that researchers uncritically use police motives to form a "valid basis for theoretical speculation," and yet, police motives have been repeatedly used for research purposes since her warning. Perhaps, due to the ease of access to police motives, the ease with which they are incorporated into a study, and their perceived reliability, they are commonly used in homicide research.

There is clearly a difference in how motive is conceptualised between the different disciplines. There is huge advantage to be gained by pursuing the criminal mind and looking at how an offender's life history has affected their current behaviours; it is the only way to understand why

humans engage in homicide and to ascertain what might be implemented for its prevention (Petherick & Sinnamon, 2014) and offender treatment and rehabilitation (Bonta & Andrews, 2017). Where this perspective departs from practice, however, is best summed up by Hicks and Sales (2006), who argue that internal or latent variables in a homicide investigation are not as useful as overt behavioural manifestations.

Canter (2000) similarly suggested that although a psychodynamic interpretation of an offender's motivation may be of interest to the investigator, there is only value to be gained if it will allow inferences to be made that will contribute to their decision making and investigative processes. Terms and concepts such as power and control are not commonplace in the vernacular used by police and do not exist in the motives they record.

Homicide investigators arguably have less practical use for understanding the offender's behaviour in terms of its physiological basis (Canter, 2000; Hicks & Sales, 2006) than the purported reason for the violent interaction, and, as noted by Newburn, Williamson, and Wright (2007), the motives listed by police reflect those more ostensible or pragmatic reasons based on what they have learned through their experience. It makes the most sense then that investigators treat motive in a manner that clearly outlines the reason why the homicide, as a whole, has occurred.

There is, however, another perspective that can influence the way motive is thought about. Katz (1988: 4) stated,

Whatever the relevance of antecedent events and contemporaneous social conditions, something causally essential happens in the very moments in which a crime is committed. The assailant must sense, then and there, a distinctive constraint or seductive appeal that he did not sense a little while before in a substantially similar place. Although his economic status, peer group relations, Oedipal conflicts, genetic make-up, internalized machismo, history of child abuse, and the like remain the same, he must suddenly become propelled to commit the crime. Thus, the central problem is to understand the emergence of distinctive sensual dynamics.

Simply, there is something in that moment, a culmination of the relationship between the victim and offender and the surrounding situation that spurs the offender to act with homicide.

THE CONCEPT OF MOTIVE—NEW PERSPECTIVES

So, where does this leave homicide motive research? In his discussion of the interviewer and interviewee, Katz (1988: 7) noted that,

Typically, the person [interviewee] will not be able to help us with the analysis because he is taken in by his own efforts to construct the dynamics. If we ask, “Why did you do it?” he is likely to respond with self-justifying rhetoric... If we ask, “How did you do that? And then what did you do?” we are likely to discover some poignant moments. And, because the person constructs this definition of the situation through bodily comprehension, we may catch the conditions of his involvement in exceptional circumstances when it is undermined by an incongruent sensuality.

Therefore, the offender is caught up in their own set of explanations and will usually tell a story that will justify their behaviours to themselves and others or will prove personally beneficial. *Shifting* the sole focus away from the offender and their personal motives to a holistic review of the event itself is one way to counter these obstacles. This is a similar idea to the distinction made by Turvey (2012) between offender motive and crime-scene motive in that crime-scene motive is fixed to the time in relation to that event and will not change.

This paper proposes that rather than limiting the concept of motive to the offender’s *personal* reasons for committing the homicide (often called offender motive), motive should instead refer to the reasons the *homicide* occurred. These conceptualisations sound similar in their descriptions, but they are not the same. Offender motive is a narrow, subjective, and one-dimensional part of the event, belonging solely to an individual with no regard for the other elements that are involved in the situation.

This reflects a dynamic approach to the study of motive, or the search for the origins of behaviour from prior experience (Roeckelein, 2006). The second conceptualisation, on the other hand, is a situational approach, which acknowledges that a homicide does not occur in a social or ecological vacuum and is a descriptive approach as opposed to dynamic, concerning the naming, classifying, and diagnosing of motive (Roeckelein,

2006). It is proposed that this conceptualisation be called and is henceforth referred to as *homicide event motive*.

The Homicide Situation and Homicide Event Motive

The “situation” has been widely used within the social sciences to understand behaviour and connect people’s behaviour to the context. The situational perspective, therefore, requires that the researcher considers the broader context of the occurrence of the crime (Miethe & Regoeczi, 2004) and the analysis examines the relationship between behaviours and the surrounding conditions (Birbeck & LaFree, 1993)

More recently, Miethe and Regoeczi (2004) described the homicide situation as “the quintessential convergence of offender, victim, and offense characteristics that define the situational context of homicide and that forms the basis for distinguishing homicides *qualitatively*” (Miethe & Regoeczi, 2004: 1). The situational approach, therefore, refers to the context of the crime and is focused on the union and interaction of the people involved and the characteristics of the place of occurrence (for example, location, time, and guardianship).

The focus on the situation is based on the observation that a lot of criminological theories are theories of offender behaviour (Miethe & Meier, 1994). This is certainly understandable given it is their behaviour that requires prevention. Theories of crime that are more general or that focus solely on one element of the crime neglect to account for the influence the specific environment and others involved, have on the situation. For instance, Petherick and Sinnamon’s (2014) pathway perspective of motivation and other needs-based theories (such as Brehm, Wright, Solomon, Silka, & Greenberg’s [1983] Energisation Theory) successfully outline the experiences and psychological needs of an offender as imperative to their current and future motivation, however, fail to consider the influence of the victim in the specific situation.

Similarly, Wolfgang’s (1957) victim-precipitated criminal homicide accounts well for the victim’s role in the proceeding violence and partly dispels connotations regarding the typical victim, however, is focused on only one element of the situation. Alternately, more general and macro-level theories such as those based on evolution (for instance, the Homicide Adaptation Theory by Duntley and Buss [2011]) are well-able to explain why humans engage in homicide, however, are too broad to account for the idiosyncrasies for the motive of each individual case. These theories provide great value in understanding motivation and elements of the

homicide situation but can be disjointed in their common application and explanation.

The situational approach draws on theories such as Routine Activities Theory (Felson & Cohen, 1980), Lofland's (1969) Theory of Closure on Deviant Acts, and Crime Pattern Theory (Brantingham & Brantingham, 2008) that integrate the idea that lifestyle patterns provide opportunity for crime to occur. They are not offender focused but rather conceive the homicide as an event occurring within a context, not only involving the interaction between the victim and offender, but also the lack of capable guardians, and physical and behavioural dimensions, such as the functional and perceptual properties of the crime (for instance, location, time, guardianship; Davidson, 1989).

Homicide event motive characterises homicide as a social event; the offender *believed* or *perceived* something about the victim that influenced them to act, whether it was based on something that happened or not, such as the perception of infidelity versus knowing an affair occurred. Importantly, it is this perception that influenced their action. To not take into consideration the victim's role and influence is to surely disregard an important part of the homicide's story, which is inherently linked with the motivation for why the homicide occurred.

Furthering this theoretical basis, Wortley (2001: 63) argued "motivation to commit crime itself may be situationally dependant" and the understanding that the situation can induce behaviour is a useful paradigm with which to examine motive. The environment can escalate an already considered crime or precipitate a crime that was previously considered. Therefore, there must be a motivated offender to interpret the entire situation and perceive something about the victim and surrounding conditions, along with a conducive environment that all influence the decision of whether to commit the act (Lofland, 1969). The offender is, therefore, a major part of the event, but is not the only element (Miethe & Meier, 1994).

Homicide event motive is based on empirical research that has examined the similarities and uniqueness of homicides driven by expressive and instrumental motives within the social context (in other words the holistic combination of victim, offender, and situation; Miethe & Drass, 1999; Miethe & Regoeczi, 2004). Using homicides committed in the U.S from 1976 to 1998, Miethe and Regoeczi (2004) observed that most cases (78%) were distinctly expressive or instrumental in terms of their situational characteristics. For example, it was observed that

expressive homicides were characteristically committed amongst older adults in situations involving intragroup conflicts (in particular, family, intimate partners, and acquaintances) while instrumental homicides were typified by intergroup attacks involving younger males.

Similarly, a set of studies initiated by Salfati and Canter (1999) empirically tested patterns of behaviours at homicide crime scenes to determine whether they are indicative of the expressive and instrumental themes. Their study, which involved 82 British single-offender and single-victim homicides, tested whether behaviours observed at the crime scene can be thematically split into expressive and instrumental themes, or a hybrid of the two. Their model successfully allowed 65% of the cases to be assigned to one of the dominant themes (instrumental or expressive) while a further 35% were considered a hybrid.

A limitation of the situational or opportunity theory of homicide is that it lacks the capability to discover what leads to why behaviours ensue (Birbeck & LaFree, 1993), which, of course speaks to motive. This concern is warranted and paradigms such as the PCC (Bonta & Andrews, 2017) provide a great alternative for understanding the offender motive in terms of both personal and situational elements.

Typically, empirical situational analyses of homicide are a sociological exploration of an area (a country or city, for example) and motive is often a quantitative variable included from the police records. From this perspective, motive as a situational variable is clouded by the issues already raised about police-recorded motives while quantifying an ultimately qualitative construct is problematic. This, however, is where homicide event motive's strength arises from; by examining the situation, the subjectivity of judgement of the researcher and of the idiosyncratic offender's motive is sidestepped and the aetiology of the homicide can be understood.

HOMICIDE EVENT MOTIVES AND DEFINITIONS

Homicide event motive is defined the reason for the occurrence of the *homicide*. Its intention is to provide a pragmatic and utilitarian conceptualisation for police that is based on theoretical underpinnings and a holistic interpretation of the homicide situation. The labels adopted by police (see the Australian National Homicide Monitoring Reports) reflect the ostensible reason for the homicide's occurrence, such as *revenge*, *jealousy*, *desertion/termination*, *domestic argument*, *alcohol-related argument*, and so forth.

The police motives quite clearly outline the context of the homicide, indicating that this is the most useful and practical interpretation to police when investigating homicide. With this in mind, the suggested labels adopted for the homicide event motives are based on those utilised in the U.K.'s *Murder Investigation Manual* (ACPO, 2006). These categories are like the vernacular used by police being suggested for use in homicide investigations, and therefore, have utilitarian value. These motives, however, are not so context-specific and refined to only one motive list that they cannot be applied to other studies. It is far more sensible to use a list that is considered "higher order" than police motives, yet still encompasses and accounts for them. This increases the practical value this conceptualisation has for investigators and maintain that the motives are condensed and limited enough to use in analyses and compare from study to study.²

The original classification from the manual comprised eight motives (*gain, jealousy, revenge, elimination, conviction, sex, thrill, and hate*), however, following a research review, were reduced to seven for the set of homicide event motives. *Sex* as a motive was not included because past literature has suggested that sexually based homicides are "motiveless" (Douglas, Ressler, Burgess, & Hartman, 1986). Homicides motivated by apparent and overt sexual reasons such as conduct a sadistic fantasy have been included under *thrill*. *Elimination*, from the original list has also been changed to *concealment* broadening the definition to include a wider array of situations. Following are the suggested motives and their definitions.

Gain

The primary reason for the homicide was to acquire some personal and tangible gain, for example: the victim was killed because they had something the offender wanted, such as money or property. This includes robbery and theft situations, but also other ways in which offenders might gain from the homicide, such as business advantages, personal position, and promotion. Furthermore, a relationship with another person may be gained by eliminating a third party, however, this must be clearly from a position of envy, rather than jealousy. *Gain* should also be conceptualised as the offender gaining by stopping something, such as blackmail or eliminating the need to repay a debt, avoiding divorce and a subsequent settlement, and child support, for example.

Jealousy

Jealousy is defined as “when a person either fears losing or has already lost an important relationship with another person *to a rival*” (emphasis added; Parrott, 1991: 4). Daly, Wilson, and Weghorst (1982: 12) suggested “jealousy... [is]... a *state* that is aroused by a perceived threat to a valued relationship or position and motivates behavior aimed at countering the threat. Jealousy is ‘sexual’ if the valued relationship is sexual.” Therefore, jealousy homicides involve the *perception* of the threat of a loss to another, that is, there is a third person involved in the situation. Either the offender’s lover or their rival may be homicide targets and they may include situations involving, for example, estrangement, termination of a relationship, infidelity, and relationships that involve three people.

Revenge

Homicides that stem from the urge to inflict punishment for a real or perceived wrongdoing. Also included are what are known as “honour killings”, in which a person is killed because they are suspected of being involved in something deemed immoral which has brought disgrace onto their family (Vitoshka, 2010). These vengeful incidents also include intimate partner homicides in which the offender experiences feelings of anger and possessiveness (for instance, following dissolution of the relationship), leading them to kill their partner.

Concealment

When a homicide is committed to conceal another crime’s occurrence. These homicides should be perceived as occurring after the other criminal event. There are two major scenarios; the first are events where offenders are escaping a situation (e.g. following a burglary and fleeing the scene), and the second, eliminating a person who can identify the offender as being involved in a prior crime.

Conviction and Hate

There are two interrelated themes for these homicides. The first are homicides that are committed out of fear or hatred of specific social groups, in particular those from different racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious groups. The second are those that are committed from dedication to a cause, and may include terrorists, group initiation-type behaviours, or the mentally ill acting under the influence of a harmful delusion (for example, hearing voices telling them to commit the homicide).

Thrill

Homicides committed for pleasure and excitement, out of curiosity, to achieve power and control, or to relieve boredom or catharsis.

Love

Homicide committed to remove a person they love from a situation they *perceive* as being “worse than death”. This includes both altruistic homicides and assisted suicides. For altruistic homicides, the perception for the offender of the situation is that it must be so bad they would rather see the victim die than be alive to experience it (for example, a parent who cannot bear the thought of themselves committing suicide and leaving his or her children in the care of others, also known as an extended suicide). These may occur with or without the consent of the victim. Assisted suicides may include the killing of a terminally ill person with their consent or a person who is in great pain (considered mercy killings).

CONCLUSION

This manuscript introduced the concept of homicide event motive as a new way of understanding and thinking about homicide and the reasons it occurs. Given the complexity that is homicide, this conceptualisation proposes that it is useful to think of motive in terms of a framework that involves not only the sole perspective of the offender, but also the victim and situational elements involved.

It takes a holistic view of the event to understand the way in which the different elements have all influenced and affected the motive for the homicide. By doing so, this conceptualisation overcomes some of the hurdles and criticisms that the motive literature has faced thus far, in particular, the subjectivity of the pure offender motive. It may, therefore, aid in determining the reasons for the homicide’s occurrence when the offender does not disclose their personal motives. Practically speaking, this may also help establish inferential reasoning within a homicide investigation and subsequent judicial processes.

Use of homicide event motive in investigations will enhance the tools already at investigators’ disposal, such as criminal profiling, cultural and diversity specialists, and forensic evidence to enhance the opportunity to solve a homicide. With further research, it would also offer an empirically based line of enquiry got police and argument for lawyers to demonstrate guilt of an accused perpetrator.

This definition can be adopted by many different fields to aid in interdisciplinary partnerships since its focus is not based in one discipline alone. What can result are motive lists that are incompatible and are not comparable to one another, so it is difficult to draw conclusions and inferences from more than one study.

Homicide event motive helps in crossing these barriers between disciplines and offers a conceptualisation that can be utilised by all. Future research would benefit from examining whether the conceptual foundation of homicide event motive is beneficial in explaining other non-lethal violence, such as antisocial behaviour and assault. Finally, to empirically support this theoretical conceptualisation, the situational characteristics that are associated with each motive should be investigated to establish whether there are qualitative differences between them to form empirically based motive typologies.

NOTES

1. *Motive* refers to the reason the homicide occurred whereas *circumstance* refers to the elements of the situation (such as location).
2. See Parker (2017) for full in-depth discussion of positive and negative implications of different disciplines' conceptualisations of motive.

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