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# To Every Good Thing There Must Be a Beginning

Sandwiched between the typical headlines, local features, announcements of births and deaths, weather and sports news typical of major metropolitan newspapers in the United States, the *Denver Post* on Sunday, 22 March 1992 ran separate stories on the violent deaths of two young Colorado girls. A fifteen-year-old had hung herself in a jail cell in Weld County, Colorado, on the previous Wednesday and had died the next day (*Denver Post*, 1992a). Her death was discussed as an unfortunate suicide. The second story told of a ten-month-old girl who had allegedly been beaten to death by a worker in a day-care center in Arapahoe County, Colorado, some three months earlier (*Denver Post*, 1992b). The newspaper was refocusing on a possible homicide that by itself was old news. Recent allegations, however, claimed that earlier accusations against the woman held in the death of the ten-month-old had been mishandled by the authorities. It will not surprise the reader to know that the day-care worker was being charged with criminal conduct or that the girl's death had been officially labeled as a murder. There was little that was unique in the *Denver Post* stories, and most readers of other major newspapers on 22 March 1992 would have been only momentarily shocked to discover accounts of similar violent deaths in or near their own communities.

Citizens of the United States in the late twentieth century may not have learned to accept the body count associated with violence in their society, but they have nonetheless become accustomed to it. In fact, the stories in the Denver newspaper were located in section C, well off the

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front page, and both stories were relatively short. Some characteristic surrounding a violent death has to be particularly startling for the story to appear on the front page of a major newspaper.

The *Kansas City Star* ran such a story on 22 March 1992, concerning a Sullivan, Missouri, man who killed himself in his basement with a twelve-gauge shotgun after taking the lives of five family members spanning three generations (*Kansas City Star* 1992). Greatly increasing the newsworthiness of this violent episode was the protagonist's standing in the Sullivan area. He was a community leader who owned a construction company and served as a county commissioner. Actually, high social status is not uncommon among the perpetrators of murder-suicides involving family members, but members of the affected community may find such events shocking (West 1967).

The public's emotional reaction to these three types of violent deaths ranges from sorrow to bewilderment for suicides, especially those involving younger persons, to fear and outrage at the killing of innocent victims by murderers. On a more cognitive level, people are often interested in obtaining answers to three types of questions. The first is linked to the common reaction of disbelief and addresses the issue of how "normal" people can commit such acts. For example, it was suggested that the county commissioner in Sullivan, Missouri, had become depressed because of a recent change in prescription medication, and a surviving relative declared, "It was not him there" (*Kansas City Star* 1992, 1) when the murders of kin were carried out. The second question asked by the public is whether the violent death could have been foreseen, an inquiry that implies that the tragic episode was a surprise. A Weld County District Court judge who had seen the teenage girl shortly before her suicide was reported to have stated, "I've seen some of them down and depressed. . . . She wasn't one of them. . . . I didn't see her as a suicidal person" (*Denver Post* 1992a, 3C). Related to the second question, which focuses on prediction, is the third one about the potential for prevention. The major implication of the follow-up story of the day-care center death in Colorado is that the tragedy could have been prevented if only local authorities had made a proper response to an earlier charge of child abuse.

The public's concern with the ability to predict and the potential to prevent violent deaths overlaps with the professional (and personal) interests of sociologists, criminologists, psychologists, and investigators from other fields (such as psychiatry, anthropology, history) who study homicide or suicide at either the individual or aggregate level. Most academics who conduct research on violent deaths have put aside the question of whether normal people commit these acts. The sheer

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volume of lethal human violence in the United States—22,909 homicides and 30,232 suicides in 1989 (National Center for Health Statistics 1992)—is compelling evidence that, at most, we are dealing with typical people who sometimes commit abnormal, or atypical, acts.

Although much will be said about homicide and suicide in the following pages, the focus of this book is only secondarily on individual or aggregate events of lethal violence. Instead, this volume is primarily about how professionals (and, to a lesser degree, the public) think about or conceptualize homicidal and suicidal behaviors. On one basic point, lay and professional definitions of these causes of death are in agreement. Namely, although homicide and suicide share the common component that a death occurs because of the purposeful actions of a human agent, they are perceived as fundamentally different in nature. Suicide and attempted suicide are considered public health or mental health problems and are thought of as tragedies for the deceased and often for surviving family members. Homicide and attempted homicide are also seen as tragedies and health issues; but depending on the surrounding circumstances, they are also viewed as crimes or offenses against society to be handled by criminal justice agencies. The perceived seriousness of criminal homicide—that is, murder or manslaughter—is exemplified by the fact that it is currently the only crime for which capital punishment is a potential penalty in the United States.

The distinction between homicide and suicide found in public and professional thought is also reflected in the social organization of research directed at their understanding and prevention. Most investigations of lethal violence focus on either homicide or suicide, but not on both at the same time. Many of the studies that are concerned with both conceive of them as separate indicators of anomie, disorganization, or other underlying problems in the social fabric. Research on homicide and suicide is frequently funded by different agencies, and the results usually appear in separate monographs or specialty journals such as *Criminology* and *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*. Finally, the pools of experts on homicide and suicide called on by the media to provide appropriate insights and comments often have few common members. In brief, homicide and suicide are seen as distinct, unrelated behaviors.

There is, however, a second way of examining homicide and suicide that sees them as connected, representing alternative expressions of the same underlying motivations and social forces. While we will be concerned primarily with the scientific version of this perspective, it is important to note that a similar mode of conceptualizing homicide and suicide was once prevalent in the public mind, at least in Western societies. Early Christian thought made no distinction between suicide and

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homicide in regard to their moral and religious implications, and the same word or closely related ones were used to name both types of deaths in the Germanic and Scandinavian languages. The serious punishments, including death, imposed for unsuccessful attempts to end one's life in some European nations were invoked precisely because attempted suicide was viewed as equivalent to attempted murder.

In the social sciences, the idea that homicide and suicide are alternate expressions of the same underlying phenomenon was first suggested in the 1830s but was not systematically developed until the late 1800s with the work of the Italian scholars Enrico Ferri and Enrico Morselli. Although their ideas were influential in guiding research in Europe, their position was strongly criticized by Emile Durkheim, who believed that homicide and suicide were distinct acts with particularistic sets of causes. Of course, it was Durkheim's *Suicide* that more than any other single volume influenced sociologists and other social scientists in the United States, and the theoretical position outlined by Ferri and Morselli received little attention on this side of the Atlantic. Like Ferri and Morselli, Sigmund Freud viewed suicide as homicide turned inward toward the self. His work was known in the United States, but it had little impact on the social sciences until after World War II.

Following in the footsteps of the European moral statisticians, Austin Porterfield's empirical investigations of the spatial juxtaposition of homicide and suicide rates in the late 1940s paved the way for the development of a model stressing linkages between the two forms of lethal violence. In 1954, Andrew F. Henry and James F. Short, Jr., constructed a theoretical explanation of the relationship between homicide and suicide on the foundation provided by Freud and the frustration-aggression hypothesis developed by John Dollard and his associates at Yale University in 1939. Their book, *Suicide and Homicide*, was well received upon release and is now considered a classic in criminology. Its publication stimulated some attention to the common sources of homicide and suicide, as well as attempts at further specification (for example, Gold 1958). Attention to Henry and Short's thesis gradually waned, however, and articles by Sheldon Hackney (1969) and Hugh Whitt, Charles Gordon, and John Hofley (1972) marked the end of a period when the possibility that homicide and suicide should be studied together was given serious consideration by more than a handful of scholars. Research on lethal violence has not abated in the 1980s and 1990s, but it has once again been almost exclusively focused on either homicide or suicide. Hypotheses suggesting a connection between the two are rarely tested, and investigators in each area often appear to be unaware of developments occurring in the other.

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Our basic argument in this book is that although there are dissimilarities between homicide and suicide, there is much to be gained from revitalizing the theory developed by Henry and Short. Specifically, there are numerous issues related to lethal violence that can be better addressed—and, in some cases, understood—by working from an integrated model that emphasizes the similarities between self-directed and other-directed lethal violence. These include the peculiar nature of Southern violence in the United States; continued differences in the patterns of lethal violence between blacks and whites; and the relationships between homicide, suicide, and economic development in a cross-national context. We are not, however, advocating a cessation of research that views homicide and suicide as distinct behaviors. Depending on the topic of investigation, this approach may be entirely appropriate and reasonable. Our contention is that for many research questions related to human violence, the goal of explanation will be better served by a theoretical model that explicitly takes into account the connections between homicide and suicide. In the following chapters, we attempt to establish our case to the reader's satisfaction.

## OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 reviews the early history of the stream analogy, the idea that homicide and suicide are linked, as it was developed in Europe by the moral statisticians; and it discusses Durkheim's criticism of the analogy. The same theme is traced in the works of Freud and Dollard and his collaborators. As the title of chapter 2, "Old Theories Never Die," implies, there have been two previous incarnations of the stream analogy, and the present volume represents the third. Chapter 3, "Old Wine in New Wineskins," examines the revival of interest in the stream analogy, which lasted from the late 1940s through 1972.

In chapter 4, we review the literature on lethal violence circa 1972–92. A basic premise of this chapter is that although interest in human violence is not lacking either among the general public or scholars, the study of suicide and homicide have become separate enterprises. In addition, a high percentage of investigations that do examine both homicide and suicide lack a unifying theoretical model. Finally, we address the question of whether accidental deaths should be studied along with those from homicide and suicide.

Chapter 5 focuses on recent developments in social psychology, which, though they do not directly address suicide and homicide, seem to us to resolve some of the issues raised in chapter 3 and left unresolved

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in chapter 4. In particular, we identify a version of attribution theory that provides linkages between the individual level of analysis and the more macrolevel perspective that guides our own research.

In chapter 6, we specify an integrated model of self- and other-directed lethal violence that is, in essence, a modified and updated version of the theoretical perspective developed by Henry and Short. The definition and measurement of two synthetic variables, the lethal violence rate (LVR) and the suicide-homicide ratio (SHR) are explained, and their connection to the stream analogy is detailed. Implications that should not be, but frequently are, drawn from the stream analogy (for example, that homicide and suicide rates are by necessity inversely related) and relevant methodological questions (such as the ratio variables issue) are discussed. Finally, a strategy for testing the model across multiple levels of analysis, using logic derived from Gayl Ness's 1985 work on comparative cross-national research, is proposed.

Chapters 7 and 8 present empirical analyses derived from the model. Chapter 7 examines the effect of inequality and economic development on lethal violence measurements—suicide and homicide rates, the LVR and the SHR—in the cross-national context. Following the approach outlined by Ness, chapter 8 focuses on the United States, which, not surprisingly, emerges as an outlier in many cross-national analyses. This chapter offers a new understanding of Southern violence, one that focuses on regional differences in the SHR instead of high homicide rates. A major advantage of this perspective is that it transcends the ongoing debate between proponents of structural and cultural explanations of Southern homicide.

The concluding chapter, "Charting the Currents of Lethal Violence," provides a recapitulation and evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the stream analogy. In addition, we suggest further avenues for research on lethal violence and raise the issue of whether the model can be expanded to include collective violence, such as riots and wars, as a third branch in the stream of lethal violence.

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