



Third Parties in Conflict: Factors in Creating A Peacemaker Homicide Outcome

By: Annika Kohrt

Introduction

Homicides in many instances involve more than an easily delineated victim and offender. A United States Bureau of Justice Statistics special report in 2002 found between 1993 to 1999 that 66% of violent crimes occurred in the presence of a third party (Planty, 2002, p. 1). This brief examines specifically the patterns in third-party intervention in conflict, and the factors that lead to the death of an intervening third party (i.e. a peacemaker homicide outcome). To that end, this research describes the patterns discussed in the criminological, sociological, and psychological literature about third party intervention. Moreover, this brief tests the literature's predictions about peacemaker homicide situations against Minnesota homicide data pulled from a Center for Homicide Research database. These findings reveal a small number of peacemaker homicide occurrences, but also significant that may provide insight into prevention methods.

Defining "Third Party Involvement in Conflict"

A conflict occurs when two or more parties interact with aggression. Aggression is defined as verbal or physical behaviors directed toward another individual and intended to cause harm (Anderson & Bushman, 2002, p. 28). A third party is a participant in an incident who was not initially part of it, but rather joined it in progress (Parks, Osgood, Felson, Wells, & Graham, 2013, p. 6). This actor must be over the age of 12 in this study. Specifically of interest in this research is the "peacemaker" or "settlement agent," a variety of third party that intervenes in a conflict with the intent to stop violence (Cooney, 1998, p. 7). Settlement agents (or peacemakers) can be classified as informal or formal, encompassing legal officials, strangers, and parties known to the disputants (Phillips & Cooney, 2005). A peacemaker homicide is the label assigned when settlement agents are killed as a result of their intervention in a dispute. Homicide is death caused by the behavior of someone other than the victim (Wolfgang, 1958). To be classified as a peacemaker homicide, a killing can be neither a pre-meditated nor an accidental act of violence by the offender.

Theoretical Background

Situated transaction theory and routine activity theory set the framework for an understanding of crime and conflict. Situated transaction theory was proposed in 1977 by David Luckenbill in *Criminal Homicide as a Situated Transaction*. With this theory, he postulates that criminal homicide is the outcome of a dynamic exchange, and is not a one-sided event (Luckenbill, 1977). An offender, victim, and oftentimes bystanders are part of this occurrence (Luckenbill, 1977). Luckenbill asserts that social occasions which encompass transactions ending in murder go through a time-ordered set of stages (Luckenbill, 1977). This framework gives this research the concept that who is the victim and who is the offender is not determined until the conclusion of the interaction. Additionally, Marcus Felson and Lawrence E. Cohen postulated routine activity theory in 1979 in *Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activity Approach*. Per this approach, crime occurs when there is a motivated offender and a suitable target in the absence of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979). These variables

must converge in space and time for a crime to occur (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Successful peacemaking plays the role of capable guardianship in this paradigm. Crucial to this research is the question: what makes a guardian capable?

Hypotheses: Characteristics of Peacemaker Homicides

On the grand scale, peacemaker homicide situations and peacemaker homicide victims can be expected to fit patterns found in previous research on violence. The most frequent setting of a peacemaker homicide is predicted to be a public drinking establishment. Intoxication has long been associated with aggressive behavior (Bushman & Cooper, 1990; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Graham et al., 1998; Miles, 2012). Bars and clubs are also places of high frequency third-party involvement in incidents of aggression, where third parties play a significant role in the outcome (Miles, 2012; Wells & Graham, 1999). Leisure times (e.g. evenings and weekends) are times of increased incidents of violence, which is often tied to drinking times (Luckenbill, 1977; Wolfgang, 1958, p. 109). This physical and temporal setting fits with the predictions of routine activities theory (Roncek & Maier, 1991).

Previous research predicts many of the personal characteristics of actors in conflicts leading to peacemaker homicides. Many studies have shown that males are more likely to *directly* intervene in conflict, and thus put themselves in danger of physical harm (Borofsky, Stollak, & Messé, 1971; Huston, Ruggiero, Conner, & Geis, 1981; Shotland & Stebbins, 1980). Huston et al. (1981) also finds that those who intervene are more likely to have a sense of capability. They are more likely to have had exposure to crime, and to be taller, heavier, and better trained (Huston et al., 1981). The age and gender of involved parties can be predicted by general patterns of violent conflict. By this logic, offenders are likely to be male (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Wilson & Daly, 1985; Wolfgang, 1958). In the United States, homicide rates are highest for victims and offenders between the ages of seventeen and thirty-four (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016), but for the predicted setting of a public drinking establishment, the predicted ages of involved parties are between twenty-one and thirty-four years. Peacemakers are also more likely to die when intervening aggressively, or displaying a weapon (Felson & Messner, 1996; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Zimring, 1968).

Data and Methods

Data Collection

The Center for Homicide Research provided access to the Minnesota Homicide Database, which uses seventy-four different variables to code Minnesota homicide cases. Data collection is an exhaustive ongoing search conducted by researchers at the Center for Homicide Research, based on news reports and available medical and court records. For this research, the criminal and justifiable homicide cases between 2006 and 2015 were examined. This encompasses killings that are a violation of criminal law and killings with a legal justification (Morawetz, 2002). The victim ages were filtered to age 12 and above. The database contained 1,021 homicides within these parameters.

One of the variables coded for is an approximately 255-character narrative where the coder describes the situation of the killing. Based on the previously defined definition of a peacemaker homicide and these narratives, nine cases were identified as peacemaker homicides. These diagnoses were confirmed by a check of the news reports found by previous searchers of these cases. Subsequently, wide-ranging Google searches revealed one more peacemaker homicide in the time and place parameters. In total, ten peacemaker homicides were identified in Minnesota in this ten-year time period.

Results and Discussion

Peacemaker homicides made up 0.98% of the criminal and justifiable homicides in 2006-2015 of victims above the age of 12 in the Center for Homicide Research's Minnesota Homicide Database. There was an average one peacemaker homicide per year, with a standard deviation of 0.77. Ultimately, the specific instance of a peacemaker homicide was not a common occurrence in Minnesota during this time period. Moreover, if the

trends observed by the 2002 United States Bureau of Justice Statistics report on third-party involvement in violent crime have remained steady, a great number of conflicts in which third parties are present or involved do not end in homicide.

Significantly, sixty percent of the peacemaker homicides took place in a bar/tavern setting. Approximately three percent of reported settings in the sample of criminal and justifiable homicides took place in a bar/tavern setting. Of the homicides in the sample that took place in a bar/tavern setting, twenty percent of these were peacemaker homicides. Within this sample, there seems to be no preference for particular days of the week. The time of day that the peacemaker homicide incident occurred happened only in evening or nighttime hours (or “leisure times”), even when not in a bar setting.

In this sample, only males were found to be the victims of peacemaker homicide, and only males were offenders in the killing of the peacemaker. However, in the initial conflict, females were involved parties in forty percent of conflicts. An additional twenty percent of the peacemaker homicides took place in a setting with a violent crowd, of which women may have been a part. The age of the peacemaker victims ranged from twenty-two to fifty-three, with an average age of 34.7 years. This is a larger age range than predicted, encompassing older victims than expected. Of the known offenders’ ages, the age range was between twenty-three and forty-seven, with an average of 29.27 years. Offenders averaged younger than peacemakers. This could be due to an increased sense of capability and subsequent willingness to intervene in older men, while offenders tended more towards the patterns predicted by general crime data. Display of a weapon by the victim occurred only once within this sample. Otherwise more research can be done on the aggressiveness of intervention and its effect on lethal outcomes.

Limitations

Several layers of interpretations of a complex interpersonal scene is the primary weakness in this data. The database was not coded with this research in mind, so peacemaker homicides may have been missed by unclear narratives. Future research with witness interviews or observational data would be helpful. An examination of the foundational documents would be useful in confirming the counts achieved by examining narratives in the database.

Methods for Creating Better Environments for Effective Third Party Intervention

One of the most significant findings of this research was the connection between bar/tavern settings and peacemaker homicides. It can thus be extrapolated that approaches to lessening the danger of peacemaker homicides would do well to focus on the bar/tavern setting. In other research, it has been found that poorly maintained bars or physical space where people are likely to come into conflict can increase the likelihood of violence (Miller, Pederson, Earleywine, & Pollock, 2003; Graham et al., 2013; Quigley, Leonard, & Collins, 2003). Additionally, there are several crucial situational factors that are predicted to lead to the escalation of aggression. These types of situational characteristics are likely to be found in peacemaker homicides where a conflict has ended lethally instead of peacefully. Aggressive interventions are more likely to increase aggression, while nonaggressive interventions are more likely to decrease aggression (Wells & Graham, 1999). That is, victims of homicide were more likely to engage in identity attacks, physical attacks, and threats than were victims of assault (Felson & Steadman, 1983). In the view of Cohen and Felson’s routine activity theory, a homicide is partly due to the lack of capable guardianship. Bars and taverns may be able to take steps to train their staff to be more capable guardians for the increased safety of patrons and the bar staff themselves. Training should be focused on patterns of conflict identified in the research.

More research is needed to examine the relationship of intoxication to peacemaker homicides, to examine the relationship between the unruliness of bars and the likelihood of peacemaker homicides, and the usual business repercussions of a death in a bar.

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Annika Kohrt is a researcher at the Center for Homicide Research. She can be reached at kohrt008@umn.edu.

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CENTER for HOMICIDE RESEARCH

2828 University Ave SE, Suite 202

Minneapolis, MN 55414-3252

www.homicidecenter.org