

KENNETH POLK, *When Men Kill: Scenarios of Masculine Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp 222, ISBN 0-521-46808-6

This book is a study of homicide in Victoria for the five-year period 1985–9. There were 380 homicides, as defined by the author, during that period. (This gives an annual homicide rate within the national average over the past two decades of between 1.8 and 2.1 — 5 times less than in the United States but twice the rate in England and Wales.) Each homicide has been classified among nine “forms of victim-offender relationship” which seek to throw light on the “interactional dynamics which link victims and offenders”. Case studies in four of those nine forms have been analysed in the book in some detail providing the author with “scenarios” for those forms of homicide. These case studies have been based upon the Coroner’s files supplemented by those of the Director of Public Prosecutions. The analysis is thus presented as qualitative rather than quantitative.

The four forms of victim-offender relationship which have been most closely analysed are: (1) homicides in the context of sexual intimacy (101 cases, comprising 27 per cent of the total), (2) confrontational homicides (84 cases, 22 per cent), (3) homicide originating in other crime (61 cases, 16 per cent), and (4) conflict resolution homicides (38 cases, 10 per cent of the total).

Two themes are said to run through these four categories. The first is that most killers are male — hence the title of the book. Although the sex of offenders is only given for the first category in this study (85 per cent male), males, we are told, made up virtually all the offenders in the other three categories. It is in any event well-established that 85 to 90 per cent of homicide offenders in Australia are males. Similar figures have been found in the United States. Masculinity is found by the author to be variously operative in the four categories of lethal violence. In the “sexual intimacy” category it operates as the male desire to possess or control the female, with the female herself, usually, or the sexual rival being the victim. In the few cases in which women killed male sexual intimates (12 per cent of this category, 3 per cent of the total cases) the women had been subjected to prior violence by the men in two-thirds of the cases. In the “confrontational” category it is male “honour” in the context of spontaneous arguments usually in pubs and related public places. In the “homicide originating in other crime” category (the other crime usually being armed robbery) masculinity is manifested in competitiveness for material resources and exceptional risk-taking. In the “conflict resolution” category it is the propensity of males living outside the legal system (eg, thieves, those in the drug trade) to resolve their differences by violence. While male violence is said to manifest itself in these four categories, the possibility that the male is violent by nature, or by nurture, or both, should not be excluded.

The second common theme advanced is that most of the male killers studied were economically marginalised, from the working — or under-class. Although statistics are generally not proffered to base this contention (we are told, exceptionally, that “roughly 90 per cent” of conflict resolvers through homicide “live close to the margins of conventional society”), the case histories reproduced tend to support this contention. It is not so clear, however, that prior research is supportive of this contention. Wallace, for example, found that in New South Wales between 1968 and 1981 only 30 per cent of male killers were

unemployed while 30 per cent of all killers were skilled workers, managers or professionals. (Wallace, *Homicide: The Social Reality* (1986), pp 38-9).

Scenarios incorporating these two themes are said to “fold well” into the conception of subcultures of violence propounded originally by Wolfgang (*Patterns of Criminal Violence* (1958)), and Wolfgang and Ferracuti (*The Subculture of Violence* (1967)). The scenarios can thus be viewed as socially constructed scripts permitting violence by marginalised males in conflict resolution, in the course of other crime and in confrontations over honour. The script for male violence in control of women, the author suggests, may in fact be acted upon by some males who are less marginalised.

The author acknowledges the importance of earlier research on homicide for his own work. Thus Wallace together with Daly and Wilson (*Homicide* (1988)) are frequently referred to in the context of men killing women, and Wolfgang in relation to confrontational homicides (Wolfgang’s “trivial altercations”). The author claims, however, to be moving beyond these earlier researchers, first, by moving from quantitative (statistical) to qualitative (case history) analysis and, secondly, by refining the categories of homicide. In this latter connection the author has moved beyond the “relational distance” categories such as “family”, “friends/acquaintances” and “strangers” which he finds “static” and largely irrelevant for understanding the cases in his “confrontational” and “other crime” categories. The author is also critical of the multiplicity of existing groupings of offender-victim interaction constructed in terms of “motives” (Wolfgang), “conflicts” (Maxfield), “syndromes” (Block and Block) and the like. These groupings, it is said, do not adequately unravel the dynamics of victim-offender interaction, in particular the pervasiveness of masculine violence. The author contends for “more concise and theoretically meaningful groupings of homicides” that refer to “what it is that has transpired to bring the victim and the offender to the point where lethal violence has occurred”. Hence the relatively few, relatively elaborated scenarios, predominantly of masculine violence.

The problem in research of separating that which is in the data from that which was already in the mind of the researcher is accentuated in the type of qualitative research on which this study is based. How far do these scenarios emanate from the data and how far are they imposed upon the data by the author? The author seems to slide over this problem when he states that the main purpose of his analysis has been to explore “in a *highly inductive fashion* four particular scenarios of predominantly masculine violence” (emphasis added). Reading the many case histories reproduced in the book, one is struck by the relative particularity of each of them as much as by their similarity to the others in the assigned category. Indeed sometimes the similarity is quite attenuated. Thus the “conflict resolution” category contains case histories dealing with killings over debts, drug deals, shared space and to silence witnesses. It is the variety of homicides rather than their categorisation that compels interest.

Some indication of how the imposition of categories and the elaboration of themes may skew the data and its interpretation can be found in the author’s treatment of homicides by women. These are dealt with under two categories — “sexual intimacy” (15 female killers out of a total of 101) and “family intimacy” which is dealt with shortly in a “rounding out” chapter. (“Multiple killings” — killing sprees and serial killings — are also dealt with in this “rounding out” chapter. Although further manifesting male violence such killings resist analysis in terms of the dynamics of offender-victim relationships.) In fact the “family intimacy” category accounted for more killings (40) than the “conflict resolution” category (38) which gets a separate chapter. Of the 31 children killed in the context of “family intimacy” 14 were killed by their mothers and two by the parents jointly. In 11 per cent of the total cases in the study a woman was involved in the killing as offender or

accomplice. (The Wallace study for New South Wales showed 15 per cent women offenders and the Wolfgang study for Philadelphia 17 per cent.) The author explains women killing their spouses in terms of prior violence from the male victim but there is no attempt to explain how it is that on the author's Victorian figures women were six times more likely than men to be killed by their spouses, on Wallace's more extensive New South Wales figures only three times more likely, and on Wilson and Daly's figures for Chicago or Detroit no more likely at all. As to women killing their children this is explained as "rarely traumatic" but rather as "tragedy" in that it is "reactive to the breakdown of a close circle of intimacy".

There is always a risk of distortion in the homicide picture where limited populations are studied over short periods. Thus there happened to be two killing sprees in Victoria from 1985 to 1989 (Hoddle Street and Queen Street, 15 victims in total), but there were no known serial killings. There was, surprisingly, no known death resulting from a sexual assault. There were no gang killings.

It could be argued also that distortions can arise through the definition of homicide. It is customary to exclude war killings and racial, ethnic and religious killings from the definition of homicide for study purposes but surely something could be learnt about the homicidal propensities of humankind (or mankind) if such killings and their motives and context were also studied. Negligent homicides, including by dangerous (usually male) driving, are also generally excluded but it is not clear why, particularly if attitudes to the lives of others are seen to be of significance. Another interesting definitional problem concerns whether killings by police in arrests or in the prevention of crime should be included — they are in the present study but not in Wallace's.

What are the policy indications from this study? Three are suggested by the author. Firstly, greater gun control, thought likely to be of limited impact except perhaps in confrontational encounters. Guns in fact contribute to only 23 per cent of homicides in Australia in contrast with 64 per cent in the United States. Secondly, role playing by boys at school to convey that violent and controlling masculine behaviour is unacceptable. Thirdly, economic policies by governments that would ameliorate economic marginality, policies that the author notes are not being pursued by governments either of the left or the right. These are suggestions that, even if implemented, are not likely to impact greatly on homicide rates. Perhaps surprisingly, the author does not suggest (as Wallace did) early intervention by public agencies in escalating domestic violence situations, situations which produce the largest group of killings.

This study is a valuable addition to a growing body of research on homicide. The focus on the dynamics of the offender-victim relationship is instructive and the highlighting of the masculinity of lethal violence calls for public responses. It would be unwise to think, however, that a greater understanding of homicide or policies to try to reduce it will allow it to be engineered out of existence.

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