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Chapter 28

“Deciding” to Kill

Understanding Homicide Offenders' Decision Making

Fiona Brookman and Michelle Wright

Abstract: This chapter examines the cognitive, affective, and situational factors that influence the decision-making processes of those who kill. With little existing research that specifically focuses on homicide offender decision making, this chapter brings together criminological and psychological research on violence-related cognition, affect, and the situational dynamics of violent encounters. The authors make the case for combining these three perspectives in order to better understand decision making and homicide. Four case studies, two cases of homicide and two of sublethal encounters, illuminate offenders' thoughts and feelings prior to and during the commission of the offense and illustrate the complex interplay of cognitive, affective, and situational factors in lethal and near-lethal events. The chapter concludes with proposed avenues for future research.

Keywords: homicide, sub-lethal violence, situational dynamics, criminal decision-making, lethal violence.

I. Introduction

There is surprisingly little literature on decision making in relation to the crime of homicide. In fact, homicide has presented particular challenges to the most well-established decision-making perspective, the rational choice perspective (RCP), due to assertions that it is a highly emotional crime that lacks rationality. As Wortley (2014) explains, “One of the most persistent criticisms of RCP is that it cannot account for the decisions made by offenders who commit so-called expressive crimes (assault, murder, rape) when in a state of emotional arousal (anger, fear, jealousy, sexual excitation)” (p. 244). RCP views offending behavior as purposeful or goal-directed (Clarke and Cornish 1985; Cornish and Clarke 2008). Furthermore, RCP emphasizes the situational factors that facilitate (or inhibit) the perpetration of crime. Rather than being propelled toward crime by uncontrollable urges, the offender interacts with, and is influenced by, the immediate environment, weighing the potential risks and rewards. It is this appraisal of the benefits and risks that renders the offender “rational.” RCP does make space for (seemingly) expressive crimes such as homicide through its acknowledgment of various cognitive and emotional bounds to rationality. Nevertheless, until recently, the bounded aspects of rationality received limited attention among the criminological research community. A notable example of this recent change is the introduction, to the criminological literature, of “dual-process models” of decision making that bring together an appreciation of both cognitive and affective contributions to offender decision-making processes (Treiber 2014; van Gelder and de Vries 2014). Bringing emotion more center stage is an important step forward in understanding homicides, which are often highly charged emotional events. Nevertheless, both approaches remain offender-centered and, as such, provide only a partial picture of lethal events. Given that homicide involves at least one other “actor” (the victim) and often third parties, it is important to understand offender decision making in the broader context of the situational and interactional dynamics that characterize most violent events. Research on homicide that takes into account situational characteristics is scarce (Ganpat, van der Leun, and Nieuwbeerta 2013). However, Wolfgang’s (1958) homicide research in Philadelphia and particularly his finding that 26 percent of all homicides were victim precipitated as well as Luckenbill’s (1977) research on “situated transactions” resulting in homicide clearly demonstrated the need to reorient homicide research beyond the offender (Athens 1997; Hull 2001; Polk 1994).

In this chapter, we pay particular attention to the cognitive, emotional, and microsituational components of decision making in relation to homicide. We ask, What were killers thinking and feeling immediately prior to, during, and after homicide? How did these thoughts and feelings guide their actions? What situational factors influenced their decision making? Our overall aim is to bring together key elements of rational choice theory with theories of cognition, affect, and situated transaction theory. In this way, we hope, in some small way, to advance rational choice theory by a careful consideration of how so-called “rationality” is bounded by emotion (hot or cold) and inextricably tied to the microsituation within which violent encounters unfold.

In section II, we examine three bodies of research literature that we believe together provide a fuller understanding of homicide decision making than the rational choice perspective in isolation. First, we focus on theories of violence-related cognition followed by a review of research that highlights specifically the role of affect in the decision to commit lethal violence

and, finally, we consider research on the interactional and situational dynamics of homicide that places decision making clearly in the phenomenological foreground. In section III, we bring some of the key findings from this body of research “to life” by considering a select number of case studies of homicide and sublethal violence, unpacking offenders’ narratives of their thoughts and feelings before, during, and after acts of serious violence. These case studies reveal the complex interplay of cognitive, affective, and situational factors in lethal and sublethal events. In conclusion, we offer suggestions for avenues of future research on homicide and decision making based on what we perceive to be current gaps in knowledge.

A. A Methodological Note

Section III of this chapter draws upon four case studies—specifically, two cases of homicide and two cases of sublethal encounters (just short of homicide). We purposely selected both lethal and nonlethal outcomes to illustrate how the outcome of violent interactions is often dependent on small but significant events, feelings, and decisions in the phenomenological foreground. The case studies were compiled from data collected by the first author as part of her doctoral research on homicide (collected during 1998–9) and an Economic and Social Research Council qualitative study of street violence (collected during 2004–5). The first study specifically explored the nature and circumstances of homicide in England and Wales and, in order to understand the social reality of committing acts of serious violence, included interviews with men who had killed or seriously harmed other men. The second study explored street violence (e.g., robbery, carjacking, and retaliatory violence) and included both male and female offenders. Issues discussed during interviews included the fine details of one recent violent street offense i.e., how it happened, why it happened, whether any weapon(s) were used, whether it was typical of any other kinds of street violence perpetrated, and generally how the violent act began, evolved, and ended.

In both cases, semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author with offenders incarcerated in various prisons throughout Britain. Interviews took place in private rooms within the respective prisons with the informed consent of the interviewees. Interviewees were provided with information sheets and consent forms prior to agreeing to take part in the research. The information sheets outlined the aims of the study and the areas the interview would cover. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that nothing of what they revealed during interviews would be passed on to the prison authorities, police, or any other agency or individual. As part of the process of confidentiality and anonymity, interviewees were asked to create a pseudonym, and these are used throughout this chapter.

Interviews lasted on average eighty minutes. Each interview was recorded with the permission of the inmate and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts have been analyzed over the years for various publications and in different ways (sometimes thematically by hand and other times with the assistance of the qualitative software package NVivo). For the purposes of this chapter, each transcript was visited afresh and analyzed by hand.

II. Cognitive, Affective, and Situational Theories

We begin this section with a consideration of research most pertinent to developing an understanding of homicide offender decision making. We do not restrict ourselves to research

exclusively concerned with homicide because (a) that literature is very sparse and (b) many offenders do not actually plan (or intend) to kill (Brookman 2005; Felson and Massoglia 2012) but, rather, to inflict some level of physical harm upon the victim. Therefore, it makes sense to draw upon the wider body of literature on violent offenders' cognition.

A. Killer Cognition: Schemas, Scripts, and Thinking Patterns

Felson (2014) asserts that “many acts of violence involve careless decisions and an offender’s failure to consider the consequences.” (p. 17). This statement exemplifies the backdrop to a body of research that has tasked itself with unravelling whether and how violent offenders have particular thinking patterns or cognitive distortions that influence their “decisions” to engage in (lethal) violence.

There is a fairly substantial body of work suggesting that cognitive distortions characterize the thinking processes of (some) violent offenders (Walker and Bright 2009). For example, research has found that violent offenders perceive and interpret information in a biased manner, making “hostile attributional biases” (Dodge and Coie 1987; Beck 1999; James and Seager 2006), more recently referred to as “provocation interpretational bias” (Fontaine 2009). These biases in thinking apparently lead some individuals to perceive and interpret hostility or provocation where none exists. Research has found that some violent offenders also have attitudes and beliefs that are supportive of aggression and violence; violence is viewed as a “normal” way of dealing with conflict and solving problems (Collie, Vess, and Murdoch 2007). Normative attitudes and beliefs influence how violent offenders process information (Anderson and Bushman 2002) and, it is argued, increase the likelihood of aggressive or violent behavior (Huesmann 1988; Bowes and McMurrin 2013). Such cognitive biases, attitudes, and beliefs are said to stem from maladaptive schemas, also referred to as “hostile world schemas” (Seager 2005), developed from direct and observational learning and experience in which antagonistic behavior serves a functional purpose (Anderson and Huesmann 2003).

Schemas are regarded as the building blocks of cognition (Neisser 1976; Rumelhart 1980) and play a fundamental role in how individuals appraise, interpret, perceive, interact, and respond to situations. Three types of schemas relevant to violent offenders' cognition are (a) self-schema (which is synonymous with self-concept); (b) relational schema (guiding interaction with others); and (c) event schemas, also referred to as scripts (Huesmann 1988), which guide reactions and expectations of what will happen in certain situations (Schank and Abelson 1977). Schemas and scripts apparently operate via automatic processing and are activated by external situational cues or internal cues, such as thoughts and emotions (Anderson and Bushman 2002). Anderson and Bushman theorize that aggression is the result of the convergence of both personological (i.e., knowledge structures and personality traits) and situational factors: “The right situation can provoke most people to behave aggressively, but some people are much more likely to aggress than others” (p. 299). In terms of the enactment of violence, there is a growing body of research focusing on particular kinds of pro-violent cognition.

The term “implicit theory” (IT), rather than schema, has been advocated by Ward (2000) to refer to offenders' beliefs about the world and the desires and goals that guide their social and interpersonal behavior. From in-depth semistructured interviews with 28 sexual murderers in the United Kingdom, Beech, Fisher, and Ward (2005) identified five ITs: dangerous world,

male sex drive uncontrollable, entitlement, women as sexual objects, and women as unknowable. These ITs were identical to those found in previous research with sex offenders (Polaschek, Calvert, and Gannon 2009; Polaschek and Ward 2002), suggesting that “rapists and sexual murderers think in the same way” (Beech et al. 2005, p. 1387). The two most common ITs identified were dangerous world (70 percent) and male sex drive uncontrollable (71 percent). The sexual murderers formed three distinct groups. Each group was motivated to offend according to their IT: (1) Murderers in the dangerous world plus male sex drive uncontrollable group were motivated by the urge to rape and murder and carry out their violent/sexual fantasies; (2) those in the dangerous world in the absence of male sex drive uncontrollable group were motivated by anger, grievance, and resentment directed toward women; and (3) those in the male sex drive uncontrollable in the absence of dangerous world group were motivated by sexual urges but prepared to kill to secure compliance or avoid detection. Interestingly, the method of killing and injuries inflicted on the victim differed across the three groups, suggesting that the offenders’ ITs shaped the decisions that they made while committing sexual murder.

To explore the ITs of violent offenders, Polaschek et al. (2009) analyzed 20 offense process interviews with offenders who were currently in a prison rehabilitation program in New Zealand. The interviews focused on their index offenses, which were mostly for serious violent assaults, two of which included homicide. Four ITs were identified: (1) “beat or be beaten,” which was subcategorized into self-enhancement and self-preservation; (2) “I am the law”; (3) “normalization of violence”; and (4) “I get out of control.” The most common IT was “beat or be beaten” (57 percent), followed by “normalization of violence” (46 percent), “I am the law” (39 percent), and the least frequent “I get out of control” (12 percent). Like previous research, how violent offenders viewed themselves and others was a common theme across the ITs identified.

Toch’s (1992) “inquiry into the psychology of violence” revealed two types of approaches that violent offenders adopt in violent situations: (1) “self-preserving strategies” related to defending or enhancing self-image and (2) “approaches that dehumanize others” related to attitudes that others’ rights are not as important as their own. Maruna and Butler (2013) also identified the central importance of maintaining and defending self-image in their research on violent incidents in prison. Two key motivators for engaging in violent behavior were highlighted: “oversensitivity to being disrespected” and “threat to one’s identity.” A common theme running throughout each of these studies is the way in which violent offenders interpret and respond to perceived threats or hostility.

In addition to interviews with violent offenders or analysis of case file material, psychometric tests have also been used to assess social cognition. In a psychometric-based study examining the personality and cognition of 137 murderers, Holcomb and Adams (1983) found that these males had a greater introspective self-focus than problem-solving focus. In another study, Gauci and Hollin (2012) analyzed the results of six psychometric measures of social cognition administered to 78 violent and 78 nonviolent offenders. Although no significant differences were found between violent and nonviolent offenders’ social cognition, differences were evident in the problem-solving strategies and the thinking styles of violent offenders classified as high and low risk. High-risk violent offenders scored higher on the Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles (PICTS), an 80-item self-report

measure of thinking styles associated with criminal lifestyles, and they scored lower on positive and rational problem solving.

In summary, various cognitive distortions and maladaptive thinking patterns have been identified that are said to play a contributory role in how individuals appraise and respond to confrontation or conflict. However, the identification that violent offenders tend to have distorted cognitions, although helpful, does not tell us about the decision-making processes that offenders engaged in immediately prior to, during, or after committing a violent act. Other researchers have moved closer to understanding such processes by directly probing the thoughts, feelings, and actions of violent offenders and murderers, to which we now turn.

B. To Kill or Not to Kill: Inhibitors and Disinhibitors to (Lethal) Violence

In a pioneering study, Athens (1980, 1997), a symbolic interactionist, carried out in-depth interviews with 58 imprisoned violent offenders, 27 of whom had committed homicide. He carefully analyzed the accounts of the violent offenders, focusing on the interpretations they made of situations in which they (a) committed violent acts and (b) almost committed such acts, as well as the self-images that they held.

Athens discovered that individuals who had committed violent acts (including homicide) formed one of four possible interpretations of the situation (Athens 1997, pp. 33–41):

1. Physically defensive: The offender interprets the victim's gesture as foreshadowing or constituting a physical attack, generating a grave sense of fear for self or other.
2. Frustrative: The offender becomes angry at the victim's attempts to block a specific course of action by the offender.
3. Malefic: The offender judges the victim to be extremely evil or malicious, igniting hatred for the victim.
4. Frustrative–malefic: This combines features of the two prior types; the offender starts with frustrative interpretations and then hatred replaces anger.

When these same individuals almost resorted to violence, they formed a “restraining judgment,” escaping the tunnel vision that characterized the violent events and redefining the situation as not requiring a violent response. There were various reasons for the change of interpretation and sentiments, such as perceiving that the attack would fail, fear of jeopardizing an important relationship, deference to the other person, or fear of legal sanctions. Finally, other individuals indicated that they re-evaluated the situation in light of a change in the course of action of the other person (e.g., the “opponent” conceded in some way or apologized). Notably, some of the decisions toward restraint were based on immediate or anticipated actions during the moment of the encounter (e.g., victim apologized), whereas others were based on perceived future outcomes (e.g., legal sanctions). For Athens, individuals form restraining judgments far more often than overriding judgments or fixed lines of indication and, therefore, far more violent acts are begun (or contemplated) than are ever completed.

In another notable work, Hull (2001) conducted in-depth interviews with twelve men who had planned to commit an act of workplace homicide (or serious violence **ii**) but then decided against this course of action. She specifically explored the cognitive and affective processes

in which these men engaged, in both deciding to commit the fatal/serious act of workplace violence and deciding to refrain from committing the planned act. Hull's work is particularly valuable in understanding decision making before the event.

Hull (2001) discerned five disinhibitor themes (i.e., cognitive or affective factors) that served to move the would-be perpetrators toward the decision to commit fatal or serious violence:

1. Closed-channel: A way of thinking that shuts out or distorts incoming information such that only the already formed view is validated; assumptions are not questioned.
2. Polarity: Extreme way of thinking; for example, a minor offense is viewed as degrading, and a criticism is viewed as an attack on their very sense of self.
3. Rush-seeking: The desire to seek an adrenalin rush.
4. Criminal pride: A belief system that promotes violence and in which the focus is on avoiding personal consequences. A significant amount of time is spent in planning the detail of the attack in order to prevent detection.
5. Victim stance/restorative revenge: Feelings of shame, disrespect, or embarrassment due to the provocateur's words or actions and a belief that the actions were intentional; a belief that the only way to restore a sense of power or respect is to avenge the individual.

This latter disinhibitor was the most frequently used by the twelve men, followed by criminal pride and closed-channel thinking. Five inhibitors were also identified:

1. Fear of consequences to self: Weigh the perceived consequences on their lives and report a shift away from the belief that they will not get caught.
2. Fear of consequences to others: Extend their consideration of consequences to how others will be hurt by their proposed actions—mainly family or friends.
3. Viewed self as better: After consideration, come to conclude that they were above or beyond such behavior—a moral engagement mechanism that allowed the individual to refrain from violence and still feel intact emotionally.
4. Found safer, lesser form of revenge: This lesser form of revenge still allowed them to know that they had taken action toward reinstating self-respect and power.
5. Forgave or reinterpreted: Actively decided not to take revenge or decided that the provocateur did not mean to be as insulting as previously assessed.

Although Hull (2001) does not specifically elaborate on the issue, a close reading of her data indicates that almost half of the men experienced a sense of relief having made the decision not to kill (or seriously harm) the "protagonist." This suggests that in addition to consideration of the consequences of their actions, they may have also experienced negative emotions when anticipating the homicide itself or its aftermath that prevented them from carrying out the lethal act.

In summary, violent offenders' cognition has been found to mediate violent behavior. However, this is only part of the picture, as Athens (1997) explains: "Violent criminal acts are products of people's interpretations of collective situations, and in constructing these interpretations individuals' emotions are every bit as important as their thoughts. In fact,

thinking about their raw feelings creates their emotions” (p. 129). We next consider the role of affect in shaping homicide offender decision making.

C. The Role of Affect in Homicide

The saying “blinded by emotion” captures the theoretical notion that feelings can disrupt cognitive processing and lead to less than optimal decision making. The role of affect in decision making has received increasing attention since RCP was first proposed (Damasio 1994; Goleman 1995; Rusting 1998), and recently Clarke (2014) and van Gelder (2013) have advocated the development of RCP to incorporate the role of affect in offender decision making. For example, van Gelder proposed a new dual-process framework of offender decision making that incorporates both affective (“hot”) and cognitive (“cool”) perspectives. This model is reminiscent of Kahneman’s (2011) two-system model of “fast” (System 1) and “slow” (System 2) thinking. System 1 involves heuristic, intuitive, and emotional processes and is fast, automatic, effortless, associative, and difficult to control or modify. In contrast, System 2 is deliberative, involving slower, effortful, controlled, and flexible processes. Van Gelder’s model differs only in the explicit focus on the interaction of the processes underlying affect and cognition based on Metcalfe and Mischel’s (1999) hot emotional “go” and cool cognitive “know” two-system framework underlying self-control. These developments are particularly important when considering homicide, given the emotionally charged contexts within which such violence usually occurs.

Various kinds of affect have been identified in the research literature, including six universally recognized primary emotions (anger, fear, disgust, sadness, surprise, and happiness) (Ekman and Friesen 1975; Damasio 1994) and a set of moral or social emotions (e.g., embarrassment, shame, compassion, guilt, and pride). These moral emotions are viewed as socially constructed and develop through socialization (Kemper 1987; Tangney and Fischer 1995; Haidt 2003). Damasio has also identified “background emotions” (i.e., well-being or malaise and calm or tension), and two major dimensions of emotional experience—positive and negative affect—have been identified (Watson and Tellegen 1985). Affect can also be differentiated in terms of whether it is immediate or anticipated (Loewenstein and Lerner 2003).

So let us consider some of the emotions that seem to be operating (and therefore impacting upon decision-making) before, during, and after homicide.

Jacobs and Wright (2010) explored the bounded nature of rationality during retaliatory violence, paying particular attention to the emotion of anger and its potent relationship to retaliatory violence. Through their analysis of in-depth interview data with 52 active street criminals from St. Louis, Missouri, they discerned three prominent bounds that mediate retaliatory decision making: anger, uncertainty, and time pressure. To briefly elaborate on the first of these, they found that anger bounds retaliatory decision making either by encouraging offenders to “strike excessively relative to the affront” (an error of scale) or by causing aggrieved individuals to lash out at innocent victims (an error of target) (pp. 1746–47). Aggrieved individuals cannot always locate their primary target or may only suspect their involvement. This uncertainty leads to redirected strikes.

In addition to the primary emotion of anger, moral emotions such as shame and humiliation have been identified as predominant features in violent offenders’ accounts of their behavior

(Katz 1988; Walker and Bright 2009). For example, Gilligan (1996) found that homicide and violent offenders identified being “disrespected” or “ridiculed” as a key trigger for their violence because it engendered feelings of shame and humiliation. Gilligan, like Luckenbill (1977) and Athens (1997), explains how violence often stems from violent offenders’ motivation to “save face.” Shame has also been identified as the dominant emotion propelling offenders to commit familicide (Websdale 2010) and multiple homicide (Scheff 2011). For example, Scheff suggests that together with social isolation, shame, embarrassment, and humiliation result in a “social emotional equivalent of a chain reaction” that leads individuals to decide to commit multiple murder.

In Collins’ (2008) micro sociological theory of violence, “confrontational tension and fear” are the emotional states from which violence stems. Collins states, “Violence as it actually becomes visible in real-life situations is about the intertwining of human emotions of fear, anger, and excitement, in ways that run right against the conventional morality of normal situations” (p. 4). He notes that many existing criminological theories assume that violence is easy, whereas he takes the opposite view and argues that violence is in fact difficult: “No matter how motivated someone may be, if the situation does not unfold so that confrontational tension/fear is overcome, violence will not proceed” (p. 20). For Collins, emotional tension gets released into a violent attack only where there is a weak victim or where there is an audience, especially where audience members are well known to the protagonist, making it difficult to back down without losing one’s reputation.

What is notable about most research on affect and homicide is the attention to negative emotional states (e.g., anger, humiliation, and fear) in either propelling the offender toward violence or, in the case of Collins’ findings, holding him or her back. Rarely have researchers investigated the role of positive affect in homicide, despite some evidence that this may play an important role. Even Katz (1988), well known for his work on the seductions and pleasures of crime, reserves his discussion of pleasurable emotions (“sneaky thrills”) to property offenses.

Equally, empirically based research on positive affect and violent crime is virtually non-existent. Farrington (1987) found that violent offenders had lower resting heart rates than nonviolent offenders, from which it has been suggested that violent offenders are likely to be “thrill seekers attempting to relieve their boredom” (p. 13). Furthermore, research has found that psychopathic offenders are often motivated by external goals (e.g., monetary gain, revenge, or sadism) and are more likely than non-psychopathic offenders to engage in instrumental rather than reactive violence and commit instrumental/predatory homicide (Cleckley 1976; Williamson, Hare, and Wong 1987; Cornell et al. 1996; Woodworth and Porter 2002; Porter et al. 2003). Porter and Woodworth (2007) suggest that psychopathic offenders “may derive satisfaction from the process of planning and committing predatory violence” (p. 103).

In summary, the way in which violent offenders think and feel influences their decision making. However, we must also consider the immediate social context within which homicide occurs and the situational factors that facilitate (or inhibit) lethal violence.

D. Interactional and Situational Dynamics of Homicide

Since Wolfgang's (1958) classic study of homicide in Philadelphia, criminologists have developed increasingly sophisticated analyses of the processual development and interactional dynamics of violent situations. The major substantive approach that has guided such investigations derives from symbolic interactionism and stresses the role of situational identities or self-images in interaction (Becker 1962; Toch 1969; Luckenbill 1977; Athens 1997). Relatedly, criminological research on the microenvironment of crime (e.g., studies of the interactional dynamics of offenders, victims, and third parties and the lethality of situations dependent on the availability of weapons, temporal, and spatial factors) has provided some important clues as to the social–environmental triggers that can impact decision making (prior to and during the commission of crime). What the two approaches (interactionist and microsituational) acknowledge is that homicide is (often) a dynamic and evolving event in which the “actors” interpret and mold each other's decision making and behavior. It is because of this focus on the dynamic and evolving nature of homicide that it lends itself to an appreciation of decision making in the moment.

One particularly illuminating analysis of lethal interactions is Luckenbill's (1977) article, “Criminal Homicide as a Situated Transaction.” Luckenbill's research, based on the content analysis of 70 homicides (excluding felony and contract murder) from various official documents, unraveled the dynamic interchange of moves and counter-moves between offenders, victims, and, often, bystanders of homicide. During these interactions, the key players develop lines of action shaped in part by the actions of each other and predominantly focused on saving or maintaining “face” and reputation and demonstrating character. Luckenbill identified the following six stages of interaction: (1) The victim affronts the offender with insults or noncompliance; (2) the offender interprets this as personally offensive; (3) in order to restore “face” and demonstrate strong character, the offender retaliates with a challenge or physical attack (in 14 percent of cases, the victim was killed at this stage); (4) the victim does not comply with the offender's challenge or command or else physically retaliates, and a “working agreement” that the situation is suited to violence emerges; (5) a commitment to battle is now forged (enhanced by the securing of/availability of weapons); and (6) the termination and aftermath (e.g., the offender flees the scene or awaits the police).

In a similar vein (although more quantitative in focus), Felson and Steadman (1983) compared the interactive processes leading to homicide and assault by examining the case files of 159 males incarcerated for convictions of assault, manslaughter, or murder. Felson and Steadman discovered that homicide victims were more likely to have displayed a weapon compared to victims of assault, “suggesting that offenders were more likely to kill the victim if the latter had a weapon” (p. 65). Their data also suggested that offenders were more likely to kill intoxicated victims. Finally, victims of homicide were found to be more aggressive than those who were assaulted but not killed; specifically, they were more likely to engage in identity attacks, physical attacks, and threats compared to victims of assault. Felson and Steadman further debated whether their homicide offenders retaliated for strategic reasons (e.g., to avoid being attacked/killed) or for the purpose of saving face. They suggested that both were relevant and concluded that the actions of offenders are not irrational; rather, “each participant's actions were a function of the other persons behavior and the implications of that behavior for defending one's well-being as well as one's honor” (p. 72).

The aforementioned research illustrates that in many forms of homicide, offenders and victims are cognizant of each other's intentions and potential to do harm—a theme that has been developed further in research on adversary and weapons effects. Adversary effects refer to “the threat posed by the person or persons with whom an individual is in conflict” (Felson and Painter-Davis 2012, p. 1241). For example, Stretesky and Pogrebin (2014) conducted in-depth interviews with inmates convicted of gang-related gun violence and discovered that all 22 viewed “the streets” as fraught with danger. This fear, combined with a desire to display power, ensured that they armed themselves and were willing to use their weapons. As one female respondent indicated, “I’d rather get caught with a gun than without” (p. 317). This statement illustrates the cost–benefit analysis undertaken by such young people who reason that it is riskier to go without a gun (it may result in death should they encounter an armed rival) than be caught with a gun by the police (and risk criminal justice sanctions). This “kill or be killed” sentiment is arguably more prevalent in communities in which people are quick to retaliate and prone to carrying and using weapons (Felson and Painter-Davis 2012). For example, Felson and Pare (2010) analyzed dispute-related homicides and assaults in order to explore the role of adversary effects in these violent encounters, and they found that offenders avoided assaulting blacks and southern whites unless the offenders had a gun. They suggested that this was due to the fact that members of these groups were perceived as a greater threat (i.e., more likely to be armed and/or prone to retaliation).

Despite this research, predicting how a person might respond to his or her perceptions of an adversary or a weapon is far from clear. As “game theory” reminds us, people confronted with such situations face the dilemma of whether to attack or retreat. Hence, adversaries who are armed and violent may or may not elicit a violent response (Myerson 1997; Felson and Pare 2010). Therefore, although there is research that seems to demonstrate that the presence of a weapon can make individuals behave more aggressively compared to situations without weapons (Carlson, Marcus-Newhall, and Miller 1990), equally there is research that suggests the reverse (Kleck and McElrath 1991).

Those caught up in violent confrontations do not simply focus on their adversary in deciding whether and how to respond; their “decisions” can also be influenced by the effects of third parties. Although not all homicides involve bystanders, those that do, it seems, evolve in ways that are dependent on whether and how the audience intervenes and the relationship between combatants and the audience. To elaborate, 70 percent of the homicides that Luckenbill (1977) examined were performed in front of an audience. **iii** In more than half of the cases, interested members of the audience intervened in the interaction and actively encouraged the use of violence (e.g., by cheering one or other of the combatants toward violent action or providing a lethal weapon). In the remaining cases, members of the audience adopted a neutral role. Luckenbill suggests that such inaction “can be interpreted by the opponents as a move favoring violence” (p. 194). The audience also played a key role once the victim had fallen, adopting a supportive, hostile, or neutral role. Supportive audience members (almost 50 percent of cases) assisted the offender to escape, destroyed incriminating evidence, and failed to assist the police when initially questioned. In the hostile role (more than one-third of cases), bystanders tried to apprehend the offender, assist the victim, and notify the police. In the remaining cases, the audience was neutral, apparently shocked at having witnessed a homicide.

Collins (2008, p. 203) analyzed the role of the audience in 89 first-hand observations of “violence-threatening confrontations” and found strong parallels between the degree of encouragement or opposition by the audience and the amount of violence that occurred. For example, of those cases in which the audience encouraged the fight, 88 percent resulted in a serious fight, compared to 32 percent of the incidents in which the audience remained neutral. Collins also claims that the influence of the audience is “all the more powerful” when at least one of the combatants is well known to the audience because this gives the actor a stake in maintaining or losing his reputation (p. 368) (see also Phillips and Cooney 2005).

Finally, it is worth noting that alcohol and/or drug consumption permeates many situations in which homicide occurs (Brookman 2010). For example, Shaw et al. (2006) found that in 45 percent of 1,579 homicides they examined, the offender was intoxicated at the time of the killing, whereas Dobash et al. (2002) found that 38 percent of male homicide offenders were drunk or very drunk at the time of the offense and 14 percent were using illegal drugs. Although the links between drug/alcohol consumption and homicide are far from straightforward, there is evidence that alcohol decreases cognitive capacity and lowers self-control and can contribute to the “decision” to use violence because intoxicated individuals may fail to consider the costs (Felson 2014).

Research by Ganpat et al. (2013) considered a range of the factors discussed thus far. Their study compared several event characteristics (e.g., location and time of the event, alcohol consumption by offender or victim, and the presence and number of third parties) and actors’ behavior (e.g., the offender or victim displaying/using a weapon and victim precipitation) in lethal versus nonlethal events and examined the extent to which these factors influenced the likelihood of a lethal outcome. In terms of event characteristics, they found that in lethal events it was more likely that offenders carried a firearm; that either no third parties were present or, if present, third parties had no ties with either offender or victim; and that victims were under the influence of alcohol. Alcohol use by offenders did not influence the likelihood of a lethal versus nonlethal outcome. In terms of actors’ behavior, they discovered that offenders of lethal events were more likely to have displayed or used a firearm and that victims who died were more likely to have precipitated the event than those who survived.

In summary, research to date has revealed how the decision to resort to violence or, in relatively rare instances, to kill depends on how offenders perceive, interpret, and react both cognitively and affectively to elements of the microsituation, which is guided by their schemas, scripts, and implicit theories. In section III, we bring the research literature “to life” by presenting four case studies of homicide and sublethal violence, narrated by the offenders. These various case studies reveal the complex interplay of cognitive, affective, and situational factors in lethal and sublethal events.

III. Case Studies of Homicide and Sublethal Violence

In this section, we consider four case studies and in so doing elaborate upon, and in some cases problematize, existing research in the area of cognition, affect, and homicide. Each case study picks up a particular subtheme within the literature examined thus far and helps to demonstrate the complex cocktail of cognitive, affective, and situational forces that play a role in decision making and homicide.

A. The Case of Gavin: Adversary, Weapons, and Third-Party Effects on Decision Making

This case, which typifies the most common type of homicide in the United Kingdom and many other areas of the world, involves a male-on-male spontaneous confrontation in the context of a “night out.” It illustrates adversary, weapons, and third-party effects in the unravelling of the violent exchange, as well as the violence-related cognitions (schemata) of young men.

Gavin was twenty-three years old at the time of interview and was serving a four-year prison sentence for a serious violent assault after being charged with attempted murder. Gavin had previous convictions for assault, theft, and burglary. He relates the following sequence of events that led up to a sublethal assault on a young male outside a nightclub:

I just went out with the boys in my local area drinking, and it’s guaranteed to have a fight up there. We were talking to this guy, he pulled a knife on my mate so him and my mate started arguing. We were talking tidy [politely] first of all and then he pulled a knife out and I thought “well I can’t let my mate, you know” [get hurt] so then he turned the knife on me and I just took the knife off him and that.

Gavin and his friends launched a vicious assault upon the victim, who remained on a life support machine for four months and was ultimately brain damaged and partially paralyzed. Gavin explained his part in the assault as follows:

I just felt angry cos he pulled a knife out and I felt if you have to fight you don’t need weapons, if you do, you’ve got to be prepared to use it, so it just wound me up. If someone carries a knife well it’s not there for show is it? It’s there to be used. I did feel really bad about it and I do now, all the way through my sentence like, I’ve felt bad about it. What happened, it shouldn’t have happened, but at the end of the day he shouldn’t have pulled a knife out. If he hadn’t pulled it out, nothing would have happened.

The situational “trigger” for Gavin’s attack on the victim appears to be the appearance of the knife, and in this brief initial account, Gavin provides information about his beliefs (schemas) regarding the fair “rules” of fighting (i.e., knives are not necessary) and his apparent emotional reaction to seeing the knife (i.e., anger, as opposed to fear).

As outlined previously, the precise role that weapons play in the cost–benefit calculations of would-be violent offenders is complex. On the one hand, there is research that suggests that aggressive stances and the carrying of weapons can deter adversaries from becoming aggressive and inhibit violence (Anderson 1999). On the other hand, there is also research that suggests that offenders are more likely to have lethal intent when they expect their victims to be armed and willing to retaliate (Felson and Messner 1996).

This case study reveals how the micro detail of violent encounters can affect decision making. In a slightly different scenario, in which the offender was not among friends, he may not have pushed forward with an attack in response to the “threat” of a knife. Perhaps, instead, he would have formed a “restraining judgment” based on the fear of consequences to himself (Athens 1980; Hull 2001).

Although Gavin states that “nothing would have happened” if the victim had not produced a knife, it is clear from his opening statement that violence was a common and expected feature

of the night-time lifestyle in which he indulged. As such, his pre-existing event schemas primed him to respond with violence to this kind of situation. Gavin's statements suggest that he may have held the implicit theory (IT) of "beat or be beaten" and "I am the law," discussed previously (Polaschek et al. 2009).

The fact that this group of friends enacted this violent assault in front of one another is also significant insofar as threats to their "masculine" identity were made publicly and so the pressure to respond and escalate the violence in order to "save face" (Luckenbill 1977; Polk 1994) may have also played an important role. Nevertheless, the presence of (one of) the third parties was also critical in helping to prevent a further (potentially lethal) escalation of violence:

I was gonna use the knife, I did go back to pick it up to use it. I thought "well if he was gonna use it on me, I'm gonna use it on him so he'll never do it again." But one of my mates took it off me and said "don't be stupid," so just left it there then.

This exchange between friends was a key moment within the "heat" of the violent act, realigning Gavin's decision making and, ultimately, his decision not to use the knife.

B. The Case of Paul: The Role of Affect and Pleasurable Emotion in the Enactment of Lethal Violence

As outlined previously, most research on offender decision making has focused on negative affect. The following case, by contrast, illustrates how positive affect—pleasure—can play a role in propelling one toward the decision to kill.

Paul was twenty-six years old at the time of interview. He had served half of a fourteen-year prison sentence for the robbery and murder of an elderly man in his home. Paul had convictions for arson, criminal damage, vehicle theft, credit card fraud, and burglary. Paul describes the murder, which he states was orchestrated by his co-defendant's hatred of the victim whom, he claimed, was a pedophile. Paul had already explained that their intentions were to "get the victim drunk" and then rob him when he fell asleep. This plan had gone awry when the victim became uneasy and "sensed danger":

My co-defendant said, "get upstairs then" and as he knew the bloke I thought, well I didn't know what he was gonna do, this is totally new to me, um, so they went upstairs, and I just started to ransack the place downstairs . . . and then there was movement upstairs, banging going on, as if furniture is being moved and I just went upstairs, 'cos it was getting louder and louder, and the bloke was tied up on the bed. The bedroom was smashed up, it was in total disarray. It seemed as if I stood there for about five minutes in shock, but it was only a few seconds, and he said, my co-d said, "grab this," so I grabbed this telephone cord and put it around his neck, literally five seconds, and then I said, "come on, let's get out of here." I could see blood over the top of his head and my co-defendant went out of the room, and I stood at the doorway and looked back at the man and I could see he was still breathing, his head was moving from side to side and I thought "he'll be OK."

When pressed further to explain why he pulled the cord around the victim's neck, he explained:

I looked at him and, um, I just felt, how can I put it, like a sensation run through me. Even though what I was doing was bad, I felt good, I don't know if you can understand that, um, I

felt good and obviously afterwards, you know, I felt terrible about it, but at the time, when I was actually doing, the actual, putting everything else to one side, me, flex and him, um, the feeling for what I was doing, you know . . .

Aside from the immediate emotions highlighted by Paul (initial shock, followed by pleasure), he also indicated a more general experience of negative affect or “background emotion” (Damasio 1994) of tension and chaos:

Once I started ransacking, it was as though, if you have a bottle of pop and you shake it and take the top off, it all comes out, that’s what happened in the house to me and um it was as if someone had a video recorder and was flashing things from my past and it was all running round in my mind and it was haywire, just total confusion and such a horrible feeling, and I’ve never experienced it again, and I never want to.

This case also exemplifies the dynamic and evolving nature of violent events in that the change in mood and behavior of the victim as he “sensed danger” and became scared led the offenders to quickly change their plans. Clearly, it is not possible to understand homicide by focusing solely on the offender and his or her cognition and emotions because those of the victim and any third parties are also critical in understanding how such encounters evolve in situ.

C. The Case of Burt: The Role of Planning in a Premeditated Revenge Killing

Burt was thirty-six years old when interviewed and had served eleven years of a life sentence for murdering a man who, he claims, had sexually abused him as a teenager. Aged twenty-five years old at the time of the killing, he had previous convictions for armed and street robbery and various forms of assault. He and his brother were working together on a market stall when they spotted the abuser. Burt picks up the story:

He walked off and Bill said, “I’m going after him,” and I said, “no, no, you’ve got thousands of people on the streets, you kill him here and what’s gonna happen, we’ll follow him.” So we followed him . . . to a club . . . and we sat there for about seven hours and I said, “look he’s either drunk, or he’s gone out the back door or he owns the place. One of us is gonna have to go in there.” I said, “I’m not going in there, cos you know we’re panicking now.” So I said, “we’re gonna have to pull straws,” and I pulled the short one. So I go in, disguised, actually gone in a shop and bought a hat and glasses . . . and he’s behind the bar. So we got the address and went away, back to the stall, we know where he is now. We can talk about it later on. This is about four or five weeks before the actual murder took place.

Burt’s account illustrates his initial “rational” decision to avoid attacking the victim in front of a street full of witnesses and his efforts to avoid being recognized by the victim. Burt and his brother followed the victim on several other occasions between the initial sighting and the murder, including to his home and several other clubs where he worked. Burt then made the decision to visit one of the clubs where he knew the victim was working and attack him:

Anyway so decided to go round and beat him up . . . I’m on me own, me brothers not there . . . and I just went for him, we started fighting and I actually beat him to death in the club, but I got my fair share, got a broken nose, black eye . . . for a sixty-year-old, he couldn’t half go. I used a vodka bottle. He threw me across the fucking bar, I went behind the bar and

come up chucking bottles. But even with the vodka bottle, it was half full, he's still coming at me. It took about twenty minutes.

When asked how he felt when he realized that he had killed the victim, he replied,

Relieved. But I just, you know afterwards I wished my brother had been here, cos he would have got the same pleasure.

Some five weeks of planning were involved in this event, which included following the victim on numerous occasions. Moreover, the actual murder took twenty minutes to complete—far from the quick event that some scholars (e.g., Collins 2008) suggest typifies most homicides. Despite the planning, the homicide itself was far from controlled. Burt was heavily intoxicated, and his fight with the victim was more difficult than he had anticipated. Finally, various emotions are described during this narrative, including panic (beforehand) and anger (during the attack), followed by both relief and pleasure (in the aftermath) when the victim lay dead.

D. The Case of Jane: Kidnap, Torture, and an Aborted Homicide

This final case study is included to illustrate (a) how the decision to commit a homicide can be made but then unmade, (b) the role of group dynamics in spiraling violence, and (c) the aftermath of violence. The story, as it unfolds, provides a compelling illustration of the value of combining elements of rational choice theory, situated transaction theory, and research on affect.

Aged twenty-eight years old at the time of interview, Jane had more than 40 criminal convictions, mostly for violent offenses such as assault, kidnapping, robbery, false imprisonment, and various weapons charges. Jane provides an account of the kidnap and prolonged torture of a young woman:

Jane: A girl owed me 10 pound for drugs. I had three co-defendants and we took her in my house and against her will took some money off her and her jewelry and beat her up and kept her there for a few hours. They didn't like her anyway and she was passing down the road and that I just said I would call her in and see what she had to say. Nothing was planned it just went, you know what I mean, one thing after the other and it just got out of hand like. . . . I called her over to my house and I hit her and her eye come out really, really bad and I thought "I gone a bit far here so I can't let her go." Things then went from bad to worse like . . . it went on for hours. Do you know what I mean? Shaved her hair off and broke her ribs with a hammer, made her drink bleach. It was quite a big case, do you know what I mean?

Fiona: Why did it spiral like that?

Jane: Don't know. We were just, I don't know. We were out of control. I just don't know. I don't know. Obviously she owed me money but I would never have . . . things just got out of hand. I think people were showing off in front of people and she lost her sense of being a person like. I just went overboard. The four of us were, yeah, "bigging" ourselves up.

Fiona: Did you think at any time, "we should stop this"?

Jane: Yeah, from the beginning. I remember when I hit her and her eye really came up bad I just thought "I have gone too far."

Fiona: Why didn't you stop then?

Jane: I was frightened she would go to the police. My intention then was to kill her. Do you know what I mean? I just thought when I hit her and it come out huge I thought "I'm gonna go back to jail" and I thought "right, you can't go now."

This extract illustrates Jane making a cost–benefit calculation in keeping with the RCP. In order to avoid the pains of punishment, she made the decision to kill the victim. Although this may seem "irrational," Jane had already accrued several convictions and knew that even a relatively minor assault would result in her arrest and likely imprisonment. Nevertheless, whether by design or luck, the attack on the victim did not result in her death, and Jane ultimately made the decision to release the victim, as she explains:

Jane: My friends had to go a couple of hours later, it was just me and her. They went and I was on my own with her. She was sitting in the chair and I said "just go and get out" and she ran out the back door like.

Fiona: Why did you then let her go?

Jane: I was on a come down like, do you know what I mean? I was left on my own and my baby was upstairs and I wanted it to end. I had sobered a bit and come down off the drugs, do you know what I mean?

Fiona: So she left and then what?

Jane: The police came and that was that.

This final part of Jane's account outlines her consequential thinking and also hints at the disinhibiting effects alcohol and drugs may have had on her thoughts, emotions, and actions prior to and during the attack on the victim and the inhibiting effect once the effects wore off. Jane must have known that she would be arrested and imprisoned for this vicious attack as she was making the decision to release the victim, yet she did so. She highlights four factors that prevented her from carrying through her original plan to kill the victim: (1) Her friends have left and she is alone with the victim, (2) an awareness that her baby is upstairs, (3) "coming down" from the effects of alcohol and drugs, and (4) wanting "it to end."

This case clearly illustrates how, in one event, a violent offender (or group of offenders) can move between various affective states and that these, in turn, can impact upon the extent to which "rational" or irrational decision making occurs. Relatedly, in keeping with the case of Burt, this case also illustrates how violent incidents are not necessarily the short-lived or quick events that some researchers (e.g., Collins 2008; Felson 2014) have suggested.

It is hoped that the case studies have helped to illustrate the dynamic nature of different types of homicide events and how cognitive, affective, and situational factors together precipitate violent actions. Homicide offender decision making takes place in a context that is often fast-paced, highly emotional, and often the offender, victim, or both have consumed alcohol (or drugs) that likely impairs "rational" decision making. Even in planned homicides, one cannot fully prepare (cognitively or emotionally) for every eventuality or anticipate fully one's own emotions or reactions in the moment.

IV. Conclusion

Understanding the decision-making processes of killers is a complex task. However, by synthesizing research from cognitive, affective, and situational perspectives, it is possible to more carefully untangle how and why violence generally, and lethal violence specifically, unfolds. Nevertheless, many questions remain. For example, in thinking about the role of emotion in homicide, van Gelder's (2013) "hot/cool" perspective provides a useful conceptual framework leading us to consider how the "hot" (affective) and "cool" (cognitive) systems function before, during, and after homicide. Does the "hot" system have a more dominant role in the "decision" to enact violence in the moment and the "cool" system in planning murder? We hypothesize that the reality is rather more complex. As we have seen from the case studies considered in this chapter, within one homicide event, an offender can move between various kinds of affect (e.g., from calm to agitated) and experience different emotions (e.g., anger and fear). We think it likely that different emotions are evoked in different homicide scenarios and that the emotions experienced by offenders will vary during the different stages of enactment and aftermath.

Similarly, questions remain regarding the precise role of affect in different types of homicide, and more research is warranted into the role of positive affect. For example, in relation to sexual homicide, is it anger, sadistic pleasure, or both that arouses the "decision" to kill? Is the action of taking items of the victim's belongings ("trophies") a way of cognitive and emotionally reliving and fantasizing about the killing? Does the method of killing influence the type of emotion experienced? How does it feel to fire a gun?

Homicide is an incredibly diverse offense, and we have only touched upon some of its manifestations in this chapter. Future research might consider distinguishing between homicides that fall at various points on the continuum of those planned ahead of time with a targeted victim or set of victims at one extreme (e.g., hit men and suicide bombers) to those for which death was not an intended outcome at all (e.g., some corporate homicide, gross negligence cases, and brief fist fights). In this way, we may be able to move closer to a more nuanced understanding of the various ways in which killers "decide" (consciously or subconsciously, with or without particular affect) to take a life.

Finally, future research could pay considerably more attention to the role of inhibitors to lethal violence, particularly among violent offenders who have stopped short of killing and especially among "competent" killers, such as contract killers or terrorists. Understanding how pathways to homicide can become blocked among those who are committed to murderous intent may be invaluable in helping to prevent or reduce lethal violence.

We hope this chapter has gone some way to unravelling homicide offenders' decision-making processes and look forward to further research that finds new and refined ways to understand the cognitive, affective, and situational factors that propel would-be killers toward, or away from, lethal action.

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Notes

i Interviewees were aware that confidentiality would not apply if they (a) mentioned something that showed a significant and previously undetected risk to themselves or another or (b) provided specific and identifying details that could link them to a serious offense (e.g., murder) that had not previously been disclosed.

ii Workplace homicide/violence in this context referred to a planned act (although ultimately aborted) of lethal or serious violence against one or more individuals working at, or otherwise present at, the workplace of the offender. Generally, this referred to coworkers and managers.

iii However, this is an artefact of Luckenbill's selection processes for the homicides that he examined rather than a "good" measure of the usual proportion of homicides that take place in front of an audience.