Fall 1965

Murder and Suicide in Forty Non-Literate Societies

Stuart Palmer

MURDER AND SUICIDE IN FORTY NON-LITERATE SOCIETIES

STUART PALMER*

Research on murder and suicide in literate societies has uncovered a tendency for rates of the two forms of killing to vary inversely with each other.[1] Some researchers have viewed that tendency to be of significance;[2] others have in effect held it is coincidental.[3] Those who would account for the inverse relationship frequently do so on grounds of psychoanalytic theory[4]: that as a consequence of childhood environmental factors, the members of a society will be likely to express violent aggression either outward in the form of murder, if over-socialized, or inward in the form of suicide, if un-dersocialized. Sociological explanations have also been advanced, one of which is that as there is an increase in external restraint—the extent to which behavior is required to conform to the demands and expectations of others—suicide will decrease and murder will increase.[5] A second sociological view is that the more a society is closely structured— the more are reciprocal rights and duties stressed and enforced—the higher will be the incidence of suicide and the lower will be the incidence of murder.[6] This paper is a report of a test of some of these ideas, especially of the assumption that murder and suicide rates vary inversely.

* The author is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Sociology of the University of New Hampshire. He received his B.A. and Ph.D. from Yale University. Among his book publications is *A Study of Murder* (1960), in which he analyzed the early lives of fifty-one men convicted of murder.

[1] For example, see DURKHEIM, SUICIDE 341 (Spaulding & Simpson transl. 1951); PORTERFIELD, TALBERT & MUNDHENKE, CRIME, SUICIDE AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING 95 (1948); Wood, *Crime and Aggression in Changing Ceylon*, 51 (New Series); TRANSACTIONS OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, Part 8, p. 55 (1961).
[2] Especially PORTERFIELD, TALBERT & MUNDHENKE, *op. cit. supra* note 1.
[3] BLOCH & GEIS, MAN CRIME AND SOCIETY 270 (1962).
[4] For example, see MENNINGER, MAN AGAINST HIMSELF (1938).
[5] HENRY & SHORT, SUICIDE AND HOMICIDE (1954).
[6] Straus, J. & Straus, M., *Suicide, Homicide and Social Structure in Ceylon*, 58 AM. J. Soc. 461 (1953).

METHOD

The present study is part of a larger one in which relationships are being investigated between certain child training practices and various forms of adult aggressive behavior. For purposes of comparing data, the sample for the larger study is composed of 91 geographically diverse societies previously analyzed by Whiting and Child[7] and by Bacon, Child, and Barry.[8] At the time of the research reported in this paper, information in the Human Relations Area Files on murder and suicide was available for 40 of those societies.

Three raters made independent judgments of the relative rates of murder and suicide and of one measure of the degree to which societies are closely structured. They were told not to make ratings if there was significant doubt as to the validity of the source materials. Seven point scales were used where seven indicated a very high rate, four an average rate, and one a very low rate; zero indicated absence of the behavior in question. The ratings of the three raters were summated; the result was the score for the society with regard to prevalence of the behavior in question. Thus if all raters assigned society X a rating of seven for murder, the society's score would be 21, the maximum. Where less than three raters made judgments, their ratings were inflated accordingly. For example, if only two raters rated society Y as to murder and if both gave a rating of seven then the sum of fourteen was increased by fifty percent.

Murder was defined for the raters as the killing of a member of the murderer's society which was to some degree premeditated and which was not in self-defense or in a culturally sanctioned line of duty. A rating of seven was to be assigned those societies which had a rate judged to be at least as great as in literate societies which have 10 murders per 100,000 of the population per year. Suicide was defined for the raters as consciously motivated killing, or being the major agent or planner in the

[7] WHITING & CHILD, CHILD TRAINING AND PERSONALITY (1953).
[8] Bacon, Child & Barry, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Correlates of Crime*, 66 J. ABNOR. & SOC. PSY. 291 (1963)

TABLE 1

Murder versus Suicide Ratings

Murder	Suicide																						Total
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	Total
21									1													1	2
20																							0
19																							0
18	1																		1				2
17																							0
16																							0
15													1			1			1				3
14							1					1	1										3
13																							0
12							1			1			1										3
11			1																			1	2
10																							0.
9		1	2			1																	4
8			1												1								2
7																							0
6			1		1	1	1		1														5
5					1				1														2
4																							0
3	1		1			1	1												1				5
2	1		1										1										3
1			1																				1
0	1			2																			3
Total	4	1	8	2	2	3	4	0	3	1	0	1	4	0	1	1	0	0	3	0	0	2	40

killing, of oneself. A rating of seven was to be assigned to those societies which had a rate judged to be at least as great as in literate societies which have 25 suicides per 100,000 of the population per year.

Prevalence of severe punishment for crime in general was employed as an inverse measure of the extent to which a society is closely structured. For it can be reasonably argued that the less a society is so structured, that is, the less are reciprocal rights and duties informally stressed and enforced, the greater will be the tendency to resort to more or less formalized and severe punishments.[9] It might be expected, then, that the greater the prevalence of punishment in a society, the lower the rate of suicide and the higher the rate of murder. (It should be emphasized that the concern here is with overall punishment for all types of crimes, not

[9] For example, see 2 SOROKIN, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS 523–632 (1937).

simply for murder and suicide.) Overall criminal punishment was defined for the raters as the totality of frustration consciously inflicted by the society through its agents upon violators of the given society's mores. A rating of seven was to be assigned to those societies which (1) meted out punishment to almost all known offenders and (2) stressed very heavily such penalties as execution, severe torture, total ostracism, and banishment.

Results

Table 1 shows that murder and suicide were found to vary with each other to a considerable degree. When the societies were grouped according to whether they were above or below the median scores for murder and for suicide, the results are as indicated in Table 2. Thirteen of the 40 societies were above the median for both murder and suicide; fourteen were below the medians for both. Six were above the median for murder and below

TABLE 2

SOCIETIES ABOVE AND BELOW THE MEDIAN RATINGS FOR MURDER AND SUICIDE*

	Below Suicide Median		Above Suicide Median	
Above Murder Median	18—Yungar	—0—(18)	21—Jivaro	— 8—(17)
	11—Rwala	—2—(8)	21 Maori	—21—(18)
	9—Alorese	—1—(18)	18 Muria	—18—(15)
	9—Samoans	—5—(15)	15—Ashanti	—18—(18)
	9—Thonga	—2—(3)	15—Chukchee	—15—(12)
	9—Kaska	—2—(8)	15—Trukese	—12—(21)
			14 Ainu	—12—(18)
			14—Azande	— 6—(15)
			14 Chagga	—11—(18)
			12—Copper Eskimo	— 6—(2)
			12—Lamba	—12—(18)
			12—Tiv	— 9—(6)
			11—Comanche	—21—(17)
Below Murder Median	8—Omaha	—2—(8)	8—Bena	—14—(3)
	6—Lovedu	—4—(11)	6—Kwakiutl	— 6—(12)
	6—Papago	—2—(5)	6—Navaho	— 8—(12)
	6—Sanpoil	—5—(14)	5—Marquesans	— 8—(14)
	5—Aymara	—4—(14)	3—Hopi	—18—(3)
	3—Ifugao	—2—(17)	3—Taos	— 6—(18)
	3—Trobrianders	—5—(5)	2—Lepcha	—12—(5)
	3—Zuni	—0—(6)		
	2—Andamese	—0—(0)		
	2—Ifaluk	—2—(6)		
	1—Wogeo	—2—(14)		
	0—Lapp	—0—(2)		
	0—Tanala	—3—(0)		
	0—Tikopia	—3—(9)		

* The number that precedes a society's name indicates that society's rating for murder; the number that immediately follows a society's name indicates the rating for suicide; and the number in parentheses that follows a society's name indicates the rating for overall criminal punishment.

TABLE 3

MEAN RATINGS FOR MURDER, SUICIDE, AND OVERALL CRIMINAL PUNISHMENT

	Societies Below Suicide Median	Societies Above Suicide Median	Total

Societies Above Murder Median	N = 6
	  Murder: 10.8
	  Suicide: 2.0
	  Punishment: 11.7
		N = 13
		  Murder: 14.9
		  Suicide: 13.0
		  Punishment: 15.0
			N = 19
			  Murder: 13.6
			  Suicide: 9.1
			  Punishment: 13.9

Societies Below Murder Median	N = 14
	  Murder: 3.2
	  Suicide: 2.4
	  Punishment: 7.9
		N = 7
		  Murder: 4.7
		  Suicide: 10.3
		  Punishment: 9.6
			N = 21
			  Murder: 3.7
			  Suicide: 5.0
			  Punishment: 8.4

Total	N = 20
	  Suicide: 2.3
	  Murder: 5.5
	  Punishment: 9.0
		N = 20
		  Suicide: 12.1
		  Murder: 11.4
		  Punishment: 13.1
			N = 40
			  Suicide: 7.2
			  Murder: 8.4
			  Punishment: 11.0

the median for suicide; seven were below the median for murder and above that for suicide. Thus 67.5 percent of the societies fell in the low-low cell or in the high-high cell. And as Table 3 shows, for the thirteen societies which were above the medians for both murder and suicide, the mean score for murder was 14.9 and for suicide, 13.0. For the fourteen societies which were below the medians for murder and suicide, the mean score for murder was 3.2 and for suicide, 2.4. Thus, in these 40 societies taken as a whole, a definite tendency for murder and suicide to vary together is demonstrated.

Also indicated in Table 3 is the relationship of overall punishment to frequency of murder and of suicide. The mean score for punishment was 15.0 for those 13 societies where the scores for murder and suicide were above the medians. The mean score for punishment was 7.9 for the 14 societies where the scores for murder and suicide were below the medians. For the six societies that had murder scores above the median and suicide scores below the median, the mean score for overall punishment was 11.7. For the remaining seven societies, those where murder scores were below the median and suicide scores were above the median, the mean punishment score was 9.6. Where punishment was high, murder and suicide were high; where punishment scores were in the middle range, either murder or suicide was high and the other was low; and where punishment was low, both murder and suicide were low.

When overall punishment was viewed with regard to scores for murder and, separately, to scores for suicide, the following were found (Table 3): Those 19 societies that fell above the median for murder, regardless of their scores for suicide, had a mean punishment score of 13.9; the 20 societies that fell above the median for suicide, regardless of their murder scores, had a mean punishment score of 13.1. The 21 societies that fell below the median for murder had a mean punishment score of 8.4; and the 20 societies that fell below the median for suicide had a mean score for punishment of 9.0. Thus with respect to the 40 societies studied, there is the general tendency for murder and suicide each to increase as overall punishment increases.

DISCUSSION

The finding that there is a considerable positive relationship between frequencies for murder and suicide in these nonliterate societies casts serious doubt on the contention that if murder is relatively uncommon then violent aggressive tendencies will be directed by individuals toward themselves and that as murder is more common suicide will be resorted to less. It is unlikely that practically all societies tend to have similarly sized reservoirs of aggression that under certain circumstances result in the behavior of murder and that under quite different circumstances eventuate in suicidal behavior.

Rather, it is likely that societies generate various levels of drives toward violent aggression in their populations. Given that, which form of killing the drive may take will depend on many variables. But judging by the results presented above, in some societies at least some of those variables may well be similar for both murder and suicide. That this may be so is hardly startling when one realizes that although they have often been treated as opposites, murder and suicide have much in common, besides the taking of life.[10] The sadistic dimension of murder is frequently accompanied by a masochistic need to be punished—not only by the frustration inflicted by his society but also by the murderer's consequent feelings of guilt.[11] The masochistic dimension of suicide can of course be accompanied by the sadistic drive to hurt others who have stood in close relationship to the suicide —to aggress against those others by throwing the burden of guilt upon them.

Moreover, the idea of victim-precipitation may apply in both forms of killing.[12] The murderer's victim may play his role in the homicidal duet in such fashion that he helps to move the interaction toward a point where his death occurs. And just as the murderer may unwittingly or otherwise "engineer" a social relationship such that the victim helps to precipitate murder, so the suicidal individual may consciously or unconsciously maneuver the interaction with someone close to him such that that someone does in fact cooperate to bring about his death. (While cooperation can be of the "handing him the gun" variety, it can also be of the type that supplies psychological blows to the suicidal person's weak ego.) Further, those who stand in close relationship may of course

[10] Bromberg, *A Psychological Study of Murder*, 32 INT. J. PSYCHO-ANALYSIS 1 (1951); Zilboorg, *Some Sidelights on the Psychology of Murder*, 81 J. NERV. & MEN. DIS. 442 (1935).
[11] REIK, THE COMPULSION TO CONFESS (1959).
[12] VON HENTIG, THE CRIMINAL AND HIS VICTIM 338 (1948); WOLFGANG, PATTERNS IN CRIMINAL HOMICIDE 245 (1958).

in various ways motivate an individual to kill himself without any implicit or explicit encouragement from him.

The finding that there is in the 40 societies analyzed here a positive relationship both between overall punishment and murder and between overall punishment and suicide casts some doubt on the idea that as the extent to which a society is closely structured increases, suicide will increase and murder will decrease. It must be kept in mind, however, that punishment is but one measure of this structuring and that to employ it is an indirect and inverse measure of the degree to which reciprocal rights and duties are stressed and enforced requires the assumption that in those societies where such stress and enforcement are weak, formal punishment will be resorted to as a substitute measure. Nevertheless, in the societies studied here it does seem clear that the greater the emphasis on criminal punishments of all kinds, the greater the tendency to resort to murder and to suicide as ways of resolving human problem situations. Perhaps violence, whether it be severe punishment, or murder, or suicide, perpetuates and gives rise to violence.

Two most central questions remain: First, what are the influences that give rise to violent aggressive drives? Presumably they are to be found in the realm of varying types of excessive psychological frustrations that are engendered by sociological variables such as conflicts in roles and in cultures.[13] Second, what are the influences that direct violence toward the goal of murder *or* toward the goal of suicide? Despite the overall evidence presented here, some societies, including a few in this study, have high rates of one and low rates of the other. And where the two rates for a given society are similar, what patterns of influence distinguish those who kill others from those who kill themselves? Socialization variables no doubt play some part and a future paper will present findings concerning them. Knowledge about these various matters is in general, however, sparse indeed. A substantial generation of such knowledge would serve to increase understanding of those less violent and less bizarre and more common forms of behavior wherein humans hurt humans. Hopefully, the results of the larger study, of which the research reported here is a part, will be of relevance.

[13] Gibbs & Martin, *A Theory of Status Integration and Its Relationship to Suicide*, 23 Am. Soc. Rev. 140 (1958); SELLIN, CULTURE CONFLICT AND CRIME (1938).