A THEORY OF HOMICIDAL BEHAVIOR AMONG WOMEN*

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This theory explains the homicidal behavior of women in a variety of settings. Structural, social, and cultural conditions of modern societies generate strain for all women, which produces negative affect. Women tend to internalize negative affect as guilt and hurt rather than externalize it as anger directed at a target. This results in a situation analogous to overcontrolled personality, and results in low overall rates of deviance punctuated by occasional instances of extreme violence. The conditions found in long-term abusive relationships and pre- or postpartum environments are more likely to produce this result, but the theory is not limited to explaining female homicide in these settings.

Men commit much more crime—including violent crime—than women. But the homicides women commit exhibit much more consistency in their characteristics and circumstances than do homicides by men (Browne, 1987; Browne and Williams, 1993; Bunch et al., 1983; d'Orban, 1990; Gelles and Cornell, 1985; Goetting, 1987; Jurik and Winn, 1990; Martin, 1981; Walker, 1989).

About 80% of homicides by women involve the killing of intimates (Browne and Williams, 1993; Bunch et al., 1983; d'Orban, 1990; Edwards, 1984; Goetting, 1988; Mann, 1990; Wolfgang, 1958), especially in long-term abusive relationships (Browne, 1987; Goetting, 1987) and in pre- or postpartum periods (d'Orban, 1979; Hamilton, 1989; Maier-Katkin and Ogle, 1993; Stern and Kruckman, 1983). The homicides generally occur in the home (Goetting, 1987; Mann, 1990; Wolfgang, 1958) and are spontaneous rather than planned (Goetting, 1987). The women tend to be socially conforming, to view themselves in the context of traditional sex roles, and to perceive themselves as under extreme life pressures that appear in many forms, especially depression (Bunch et al., 1983; Piven and Cloward, 1979;

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Totman, 1978; Widom, 1978b; Zimring et al., 1983). However, mental illness per se does not appear to be an important factor in the killings (d'Orban, 1990; Resnick, 1970; Scott, 1973; Totman, 1978). This pattern even tends to be replicated with female mass and serial killers (Segrave, 1992), and does not differ significantly with the race of the offender (Bunch et al., 1983; Mann, 1990) despite the significant racial differences in the number of crimes known to police and in arrest rates of females for homicide (Sommers and Basking, 1992).

Most theory and research in criminology focus on explaining criminal behavior by men, and explanations of criminal behavior by women have been adapted from the male-oriented findings (Laberge, 1991; Leonard, 1982; Smart, 1976). But the consistency of the pattern of homicides by women, as well as the differences from the patterns of homicides by men, suggests the need for a separate theoretical explanation of female homicidal behavior.

Prior theories of female criminality have limited utility in explaining female homicidal behavior, for at least six reasons. First, most theories have focused on less serious criminality, so that homicide is the least discussed type of female crime (Simpson, 1991). Second, many theories attribute crime to individual pathology of females and ignore the social structural context in which such behavior occurs (Bowker, 1978; Leonard, 1982; Smart, 1976). Third, some theories associate female crime and violence with the liberation of women from traditional sex roles (e.g., Adler, 1975; Hagan et al., 1985, 1987), but studies indicate female offenders tend to be even more traditional in their life-styles and in their beliefs about sex roles than the average woman (Bunch et al., 1983; Giordano and Cernkovich, 1979; Widom, 1979). Fourth, some theories (e.g., Jurik and Winn, 1990) explain violence by women in one setting without explaining violence in other settings (Mann, 1990; Simpson, 1991). Fifth, some theories have tended to blur the line between scientific explanation and legal defense, for example, “battered women’s syndrome” can be part of the legal justification of self-defense for killing an abusive partner, while “postpartum psychosis” can be part of the legal excuse of temporary insanity for killing an infant. Sixth, theories like battered women’s syndrome and postpartum depression are very different and largely incompatible explanations of homicidal behaviors by women, yet there are some apparent similarities between women who have killed abusive spouses and women who have killed infants.

This article addresses the limitations of these prior theories by incorporating individual, situational, and structural variables, including the

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1. For a discussion of the interactive effects of race, class, and gender, see Simpson (1991) and Daly (1993).
tendency for offenders to be traditional rather than liberated women, in a single explanation of violence by women in different settings.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE NEW THEORY

Concepts from three existing theories of criminal behavior are utilized in developing a new theory of female homicide. Agnew (1992) argues that the removal of positively valued stimuli and/or the presentation of negative stimuli result in "negative affect" and the adoption of "coping mechanisms" for avoiding this affect. Blockage of these coping mechanisms then may generate deviant responses. Megargee (1966, 1973) argues that when an "overcontrolled personality" overcomes its high level of inhibition, an explosion of aggression occurs at a level "beyond the rational requirements of the situation." Bernard (1990, 1993) argues that chronic high arousal among the "truly disadvantaged" results in unfocused explosions of angry aggression against visible and vulnerable targets. These concepts are incorporated in an explanation for female homicide by interpreting them in the context of literature on the conditions and experiences of women in contemporary societies.

Feminist literature (de Beauvoir, 1952; Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Friedan, 1983; hooks, 1984; MacKinnon, 1987, 1989) can be interpreted as arguing that, because of social and cultural conditions in contemporary society, women frequently experience the removal of positively valued stimuli and/or the presentation of negative stimuli. This results in widespread negative affect among women, with high levels of chronic stress and attempts to develop coping mechanisms.2

In Agnew's (1992) theory, the level of deviance of a particular group depends on the level of stress the group experiences, the constraints they face regarding legal and illegal coping strategies, and their disposition to delinquency and crime. As such, Agnew's theory does not necessarily predict high rates of violence among women, despite the high levels of stress depicted by feminist literature. The reason is that women generally are socialized not to express or even experience anger (Bernardez-Bonesatti, 1978; Lerner, 1980). Anger necessarily includes external attributions of blame for the negative affect (Averill, 1982; Daly and Wilson, 1988:254–258). But women tend to interpret negative affect in ways that include internal attributions of blame, such as disappointment, depression,

2. Agnew (1992) uses the term strain to refer to this phenomenon. In order to clarify current usages, we use strain to refer to social structural phenomenon (Bernard, 1987), stress to refer to psychological experiences of the individual, and arousal to refer to physiological responses of the body to these social and psychological conditions (Bernard, 1990, 1993).
and despair. These internal attributions effectively rule out coping mechanisms that address the external world in the attempt to reduce the negative affect. While this increases stress, it also decreases the tendency to adapt deviant responses to it. This results in a situation analogous to what Megargee (1966, 1973) described as overcontrolled personality. Most violent offenders are probably "undercontrolled" and act out their impulses without restraints. Some violent offenders, however, have very severe restrictions on their impulses, particularly the expression of anger. These offenders generally engage in almost no violence over long periods despite extremely high stress levels, but then occasionally and at somewhat random intervals they erupt in extreme violence.

Since Agnew's theory suggests women experience very high levels of stress combined with very high levels of controls, Megargee's theory would seem to predict low rates of violence for women in general, punctuated by very infrequent and almost random instances of extreme violence. This is much closer to the pattern of homicidal violence found among women.

In addition, the situations in which women kill frequently, including long-term abusive relationships and the immediate pre- or postpartum environment, are associated with high levels of chronic physiological arousal. Bernard (1990, 1993) argues that a large and well-established body of research, taken as a whole, predicts that biologically and psychologically normal people who experience such chronic arousal would tend to direct violence against visible and vulnerable targets in their immediate environments. Bernard uses this research to explain the high rates of violent behavior among the truly disadvantaged—extremely poor minority group members who reside in inner-city areas. We make a comparable argument here for women experiencing these situational variables in their immediate relational environment.

In the following sections of this article, each of the major components of the theory is discussed in more detail. In each section, we elaborate a component of the theory of female homicide, and we conclude with several propositions derived from the theory.

"BASELINE" STRESS AND NEGATIVE AFFECT IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN

A central element of feminist thought is that women in general experience a significant degree of stress due to the structural, social, and cultural conditions of contemporary society. Women's stress actually may be higher than men's (Al-Issa, 1982; Hill and Crawford, 1990; Wethington et al., 1987), but at minimum there is support in the literature to claim that women experience at least as high a level of stress as men.
HOMICIDAL BEHAVIOR AMONG WOMEN

Current psychological and psychiatric literature indicates that adult women are under a great deal of stress (Cutrona, 1984; Daly and Chesney-Lind, 1988; Dean and Lin, 1977; Eckenrode and Gore, 1981; Wethington et al., 1987). This literature points to the intensity of role socialization, role intersection and conflict, social/familial support, structural inequities and conditions of society, and individual coping techniques that frequently result in despair and depression.

Concrete examples of stresses in the lives of women can be found in many aspects of social life. For example, women in general occupy jobs that have less status and salary, offer fewer opportunities for development of skills, and limit opportunities for professional advancement, economic success, and personal satisfaction. The inadequacies of the work situation provide incentives for women to become dependent on men as “head of household” or to accept dependency on the welfare state for themselves and their children (Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Friedan, 1983). Additionally, access to higher education and the legal process frequently are limited for women (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988; Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Frug, 1983; Rich, 1979).

But these concrete stresses do not reveal the more profound sources of stress in the lives of women, which generally are described as “oppression” in the feminist literature. Perhaps the most general and significant component is the internalization of ideas that devalue femaleness. Widespread cultural messages imply that males are rational, moral, mature, independent, and assertive and that females are irrational, immoral, emotional, dependent, and submissive (Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Edwards, 1981; Frug, 1983; Kessler and McKenna, 1978; Lowe and Hubbard, 1990; Mackinnon, 1987, 1989; Martin, 1981; Oberman, 1992). Such images are communicated in many different forms and in an enormous range of contexts beginning at a very early age (such as in children’s movies and television shows) and persisting over the life span (such as in experiences in school and on the job). Consequently, women tend to internalize these messages into their own self-concepts.

This general cultural view of women is based on what Simone de Beauvoir (1952) characterized as the “otherness” of women. She argued that in the grammar of social life, men are always the subjects and women the objects in the male-centric universe:

(Woman) is defined and differentiated with reference to man, not he with reference to her. . . . He is the Subject, he is the absolute. . . .
She is the Other (p. 267).3

The pervasiveness of this cultural message leads to a tendency for women

3. See Cain (1990) for a discussion about how the otherness of women plays itself out in criminological theories.
to incorporate this view into their own self-concepts. The incorporation of such “objectification” may then generate a need to take on the appearance prescribed by male fantasy, which may cause or intensify dissatisfaction with the physical self. The consequence of internalizing self-image on the basis of appearance rather than the substance of character (especially when the standard of appearance is unrealistic) is low self-esteem, which then generates low self-confidence and negative affect.

The general cultural view of the otherness of women is especially prominent in the social roles related to sexuality and reproduction. There are a variety of legal and cultural restrictions on access to birth control, abortion, and prenatal care, as well as continuing development of laws directed at the control of female sexuality and reproduction (Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Lowe and Hubbard, 1990; Moyer, 1992; Oberman, 1992). These laws and the ideology from which they derive establish the social identity of women in reproductive and sexual roles and are at the core of a distinction between good girls and bad girls (MacKinnon, 1989; Moyer, 1992). Young single women in particular receive mixed messages indicating that both participation and nonparticipation in sexual behavior is deviant. One effect of this is to promote marriage as the institution within which this dissonance can be resolved. Marriage is also the only way to confer “legitimacy” on children. Thus, the social status of a woman and of her children depends on the legality of her relationship to a man. But satisfactory marital relations are not available to all women (again the significance of race and class variation), so that some women can only experience parenthood if they are willing to violate social norms and suffer the consequences for that violation (Wilson, 1987).

Even the one social role that is highly honored and reserved exclusively for women—motherhood within the context of marriage—may generate stress (Cutrona, 1984; Hobbs, 1965; Wandersman et al., 1980). Achieving the status of “good mother” requires willingness to make great sacrifices, special “inherent knowledge,” and nurturing ability bordering on the saintly. This status often is seen not only as the ultimate, but even as the only, fulfillment of womanhood, so that failures to achieve it may generate great negative affect.

The requirements of employment outside the home can interfere with attempts to achieve this status. In 1992, women represented 48% of the U.S. labor force (Bureau of the Census, 1992). The burdens of motherhood may be undertaken as part of a 16- or 18-hour day and such roles frequently conflict (Aneshensel and Pearlin, 1987). On the other hand, failure to achieve an ideal of motherhood may be used to discredit the achievements of a woman in the workplace. A similar penalty is not applied to men when they fail to achieve an ideal of fatherhood.

Even with the many recent changes in families, the burdens of raising
children still fall primarily on women. They are the ones who are most penalized by the limited availability of child-care services and the lack of resources committed to securing child-support payments. The result is the predominance of mothers and children—particularly minority mothers and children—in the ranks of the poor (Bureau of the Census, 1988; National Center for Children in Poverty, 1987).

While this is not an exhaustive list of the sources of stress in the lives of women, our point is that stresses in the structural and social domains of employment, marriage and personal relationships, motherhood, and the legal regulation of sexuality and reproduction, combined with more general stresses derived from cultural devaluation of femaleness, are conducive to the development of negative affect in women. This line of argument leads to the following propositions:

1. Stress is higher for women, on average, than for men.
2. Women with lower social status experience higher stress, on average, than women with higher social status.

**BLOCKAGE OF WOMEN’S COPING MECHANISMS**

Early strain theories (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Merton, 1938) focused on the relationship between the blockage of “goal achievement” and deviant behavior. Agnew (1992) added a new focus on the relationship between the “blockage of pain avoidance” and deviant behavior. Agnew argued that “the inability to escape legally” (1992:58) from negative stimuli results in negative affect, such as fear, despair, disappointment, depression, and anger. This leads to the adoption of coping mechanisms to alleviate the stress and manage the negative affect.

We argued above that there are important differences between men and women concerning the sources of stress and negative affect in their lives. Here, we argue that there are important differences between men and women in the coping techniques that they typically use to deal with negative affect and in the blockage of those techniques. Agnew considers coping techniques for a broad range of negative affects because he attempts to explain a broad range of deviant behavior, but we focus on coping techniques related to anger because it is the negative affect most directly linked to aggression and violence (Averill, 1982).

Women generally view themselves as part of a collective of relationships around them and evaluate their self-worth based on the value and success of these relationships. But anger involves alienation from those very relationships. Lerner (1980:145) argues that

the expression of legitimate anger and protest is more than a statement of dignity and self-respect; it is also a statement that one will
risk standing alone even in the face of disapproval or the potential loss of love from others.

For women, "standing alone" is particularly difficult because the collective of relationships in which they are involved is an essential element of self-concept, and anxiety about separation from significant others may threaten their sense of self-worth.

Lerner (1980) and Bernardez-Bonesatti (1978) assert that few women achieve the level of autonomy necessary to separate their sense of self-worth from the relationships in their life. Women who have achieved this are able to experience and express anger when appropriate to the situation, but they must be prepared to face criticism that they are "shrill," "bossy," or "bitchy" for behaving in a way that might be considered "tough," "strong," or "assertive" if done by a man (Spelman and Minow, 1992).

Women with lower levels of autonomy often react to these same situations by striving above all to preserve relationships. The coping mechanism adopted by these women involves cognitive reinterpretation, which delegitimizes the anger and recasts it as guilt (characterized by a sense of failure) or hurt (characterized by sadness) (Bernardez-Bonesatti, 1978; Lerner, 1980). This generally works through a culturally induced process of self-doubt (Lerner, 1980). This process begins with a series of questions about the anger (Is it legitimate? Am I really the aggrieved party? How will others view this reaction from me? Will I destroy a significant relationship if I become angry?). These questions precipitate fear that the risks associated with being angry are too great to be tolerated. At this point, the cascading negative affect can include elements of anger, fear, guilt, hurt, self-doubt, and anxiety about the possibilities of separation and retaliation. This combines with the "baseline" negative affect, described above as experienced generally by women in contemporary societies, at which point the whole coping mechanism can break down.

This process may be interpreted by others as unreasonable or even irrational, particularly if the situation ultimately culminates in some form of aggression when the coping mechanism breaks down. In general, however, reinterpretations of anger into hurt or guilt are in compliance with the cultural message that women are weak, incapable of defending themselves, and willing to suffer. Therefore, it is also consistent with the woman's self-concept when she has internalized this cultural message. This line of argument leads to two more propositions:

3. Women, on average, have more blockages on coping mechanisms for dealing with anger than men.

4. Women with lower social status, on average, have more blockages
Most criminological literature (e.g., Nettler, 1984) describes homicidal offenders as undercontrolled personalities who respond too readily with aggression. Megargee (1966, 1973) identified overcontrolled personalities as a second category of violent offenders. These individuals ordinarily manage negative affect through a variety of coping mechanisms that involve cognitive reinterpretation or withdrawal, and they exhibit powerful inhibitions to the expression of anger, so they engage in much less violence and aggression overall than others. But on the infrequent occasions when their inhibitions are overcome, they erupt in a display of uncontrolled aggression that is very extreme and violent. Megargee's theory has been widely tested with generally supportive results, but mainly with populations of men (Blackburn, 1968, 1971, 1986; Holland and Holt, 1975; Lane and Kling, 1979; Lang et al., 1987; McGurk and McGurk, 1979; Walters et al., 1982).

One study by Widom (1978a) found that about one-fourth of female offenders awaiting trial had the characteristics of an overcontrolled personality and that they had the fewest prior convictions. However, the study included only 66 subjects and did not focus on those who had committed homicide. Widom noted that, despite its apparent utility, the concept of overcontrolled personality had been neglected in the literature of female criminality. An extension of Megargee's theory to violent female offenders seems appropriate since women exhibit similar inhibitions on the expression of anger and similar behavior patterns with respect to the expression of aggression. Additionally, this phenomenon is not just a matter of individual adjustment; it receives strong reinforcement in structural and cultural institutions.

We assert as an element of our theory that women as a group are more "controlled" than men, particularly with respect to their experience and expression of anger. This is consistent with their generally low crime rate, which is the effect of the high controls predicted by control theories (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969). But it is also consistent with the opposite effect of producing overcontrolled personalities that, when overwhelmed, may produce the most extreme forms of violence, particularly homicide. This "overcontrol" is centered in women's tendency to respond with guilt and hurt to situations in which men tend to respond with anger. That is, in these situations, they experience the high level of inhibition that is central to the development of what Megargee
characterized as overcontrolled personality. This argument leads to a fifth proposition:

5. Women are more likely to develop overcontrolled personalities than men.

SITUATIONAL STRESSES

Relying on an extensive and well-established body of biological and psychological research on the connection between physiological arousal, anger, and aggression, Bernard (1990) proposes a purely social theory to explain the high rate of violence among the poorest minority group residents of inner cities. This body of research, taken as a whole, readily leads to the prediction that people with normal biological and psychological characteristics would respond with high levels of violence to the social circumstances commonly experienced by this group. This is a purely social theory because variation in the rates of violence is explained solely by variation in social circumstances. Thus, the theory does not hypothesize any variation in biological or psychological characteristics, such as low autonomic nervous system functioning (Mednick, 1977) or low self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), although it does not deny that such variation might occur and might be related to violence.

Bernard identifies three factors—urban location, low social position, and discrimination—that are sources of chronic, high physiological arousal. A fourth factor—social isolation—concentrates the effects of the other factors and limits the availability of “targets” against whom the resulting aggression can be directed. These four factors are relevant to the explanation of inner city violence, but analogous arguments can be made about the sources of chronic, high physiological arousal among women who are experiencing abusive relationships and pre- or postpartum environments. While we will discuss these two situational settings because of their frequent association with female homicide, they do not represent the only settings in which women would experience conditions that might culminate in homicide.

Urban location is associated with increased physiological arousal because of the physical difficulties of dealing with the environment (e.g., traffic) and the chronic assault on the senses caused by crowding, noise, pollution, and the loss of personal space and quiet time for rest and recuperation from the rigors of daily life. Similarly, abusive relationships and postpartum environments often entail a fairly wide range of the physical difficulties that increase physiological arousal as the woman struggles to cope with them.

A marked reduction of personal space—even for women in large homes—is an inevitable consequence of the postpartum environment.
Even under the best of circumstances, the new mother loses her ability to create a zone of privacy or separateness. In addition, abusive relationships (with or without physical battering) generally involve severe restrictions on personal space and freedom of movement. Thus, both of these circumstances would be expected to be associated with chronic, high physiological arousal and, thus, with an increased probability of angry aggression.

Low social position is associated with increased physiological arousal because it entails limited financial resources. People with such limited resources must live with a variety of aggravations, annoyances, and inconveniences that other people would use their resources to avoid, resolve, or eliminate. The essence of being poor is that you live in difficult and stressful circumstances.

Women in long-term abusive relationships and in postpartum environments probably are distributed throughout the class structure, so they do not have fewer financial resources, on average, than other women. However, abusive relationships typically include tight controls on access to financial resources, even when the people involved are quite wealthy. In that practical sense, abused women frequently have limited financial resources. In addition, the birth of a child often is associated with severe financial strains due to a host of new expenses and restrictions on the ability to earn income (Belsky and Kelly, 1994). For most people, the period of time around the birth of their children is the poorest of their lives. In that sense, postpartum women often have limited financial resources. Finally, we note that by far the largest group of poor people in the United States at present are women and their children (Bureau of the Census, 1988; National Center for Children in Poverty, 1987). This indicates that there is some direct relationship between these circumstances and limitations on financial resources (cf. Simpson, 1991; Daly, 1993).

Discrimination increases physiological arousal because it entails being the target of intentional harms, threats, and insults, as well as the deliberate blocking of goal-directed activities (Allport, 1954:51–65). Because of the social context in which discrimination exists, the target usually is unable to prevent these actions from occurring or to retaliate for them. The result is chronic, high physiological arousal.

The baseline stress experienced generally by women in contemporary society can be attributed to discrimination based on institutionalized sexism. But beyond that, abusers typically use all of the elements of discrimination—intentional harms, threats, and insults, as well as the deliberate blocking of goal-directed activities—within the abusive relationship. That is because the goal of abuse is identical to the goal of discrimination—to achieve, maintain, and manifest power over the target.

In addition, postpartum women may experience discrimination, couched
in cultural terms of what is best for the child. Issues surrounding pregnancy and the care of young children, for example, may complicate a woman’s relationship to the workplace, particularly for nonprofessional women. Employers who strongly adhere to the cultural standards of “good mother” may deliberately penalize female employees who they believe are failing to live up to this standard. Like other targets of discrimination, the female employees often lack the power to prevent this discrimination or to retaliate for it, and so would be left with residual chronic, high physiological arousal.

Social isolation in Bernard’s (1990) theory plays two roles. The first role has to do with the formation of a “subculture of angry aggression.” Chronically aroused people tend to believe that it is appropriate to become angry in more rather than fewer situations (constitutive rules of anger) and that it is legitimate to respond with higher rather than lower levels of violence and aggression (regulative rules of anger). Social isolation of a chronically aroused group means that interpersonal communication is largely restricted to other people who independently generate similar rules about anger out of their own socially structured experience. These people then legitimize each other’s rules by understanding, acceptance, and approval. In that sense, these broad and severe rules for anger, although structurally generated, become subcultural.

Women in abusive relationships and postpartum environments generally are isolated as individuals, not socially isolated in a group that has interpersonal communications among its own members but is cut off from communication with others. This limits the opportunity for structurally generated rules about anger to become subcultural. Nevertheless, some level of subcultural approval for these homicides seems to be generated through media representations of battered women’s syndrome and postpartum depression as defenses in cases of criminal homicide. That is, there is at least some social support for the view that these killings are legitimate, appropriate, or at least excusable responses within the context of these situations.

Social isolation in Bernard’s theory plays a second role: It limits the choice of the target for the angry aggression. For the “truly disadvantaged,” the sources of chronic physiological arousal are largely invisible and invulnerable. For example, broad historical, economic, and social conditions are invisible in the sense that the aroused person may not really perceive them at all, while politicians, employers, and landlords are often invulnerable in that they can make retaliation too costly to be practical. Under these conditions, aroused people tend to transfer blame to visible and vulnerable targets in the immediate environment and retaliate against those targets (e.g., kick the dog, yell at the kids, slap the wife around). Physiologically, this reduces arousal (and therefore is reinforcing) even if
these targets had no role in generating the arousal to begin with. This explains why so much angry aggression among the truly disadvantaged is directed at other truly disadvantaged people.

For women in abusive relationships and postpartum environments, the immediate sources of arousal may be readily visible—the abusive partner and the new baby—so that angry aggression is likely to be directed at these targets. The new baby is quite vulnerable, except that other adults can retaliate in the baby's behalf if they learn that the mother has aggressed against it. The abusive partner is only rarely vulnerable, such as when she or he is asleep. One could certainly argue that there may be broader sources of the arousal—for example, the relative lack of support for child care and child rearing in the larger society, or the failure of criminal justice agencies to protect abused women adequately—but these would be invisible and invulnerable and thus not practical targets for retaliation and arousal reduction. In other situations in which women might experience these same variables, the act of striking out at the most visible and vulnerable target might involve other family members or possibly even those present in the work environment if it is perceived as presenting these variables.

Megargee (1973:137) points out that overcontrolled personalities do not progressively learn "socially acceptable or more moderate methods for expressing aggression." This observation seems particularly appropriate for women in these situations. Generally speaking, they have little or no prior history of aggressive behavior and therefore have little experience in the expression of anger. Women simply are not socialized into an understanding of expectations about appropriate levels of aggression and anger or in the use of physical aggression. In Bernard's terms, they have never developed "regulative rules" for anger.

"Regulative rules" imply the possibility that anger can be controlled and directed in appropriate ways, but this requires experience and learning. Men for whom the experience and expression of anger are culturally approved are more likely to establish personal rules for the regulation of anger and aggression. These rules have considerable variability—indeed, it is precisely the variation in these rules among the truly disadvantaged that Bernard was seeking to explain. Women, on the other hand, are less likely to have regulative rules because of culturally generated restrictions on the experience of anger. That is, they may have no regulative rules for

4. Mann (1990) found only about 30% of the women who committed homicide in her study had a prior history of an assaultive behavior, although about half had previous arrests for nonviolent property-related crimes. Others have noted the significance of acknowledging that of this 30% with a previous involvement in assaultive behavior, a certain percentage are women who were accomplices in the situation but were also charged (Mann, 1990; Totman, 1978; Wolfgang, 1958).
the expression of anger precisely because they have only one constitutive rule for the experience of anger: Anger is always inappropriate and always forbidden. When these women finally experience anger, they are likely to express it in uncontrolled and unregulated ways. For example, women in long-term abusive relationships or postpartum environments are affected by chronic “baseline” stress (as experienced by all women) and also by the intense peaks of stress brought on by their particular situations. If these high levels of stress overwhelm their traditional coping mechanisms of converting anger into hurt and guilt, these overcontrolled women will come face-to-face, perhaps for the first time in their lives, with the experience of intense anger amounting to rage.

For these women, the experience of such anger implies that all the rules already have been broken. Under these circumstances, the regulation of their expressions of anger is unlikely. Since women spend a significant amount of their time in the home, this environment may be the most common place where the situational variables appear and homicidal behavior results. However, it is not necessarily the only place these variables would appear. This argument leads to the three more propositions:

6. Women, on average, are less likely than men to have developed regulative rules for the experience and expression of anger.
7. Women experiencing peaks of stress are more likely than men to explode with episodes of extreme uncontrolled violence.
8. Targets of this violence are most likely to be those in the immediate environment, whether or not those targets represent the actual source of stress.

CONCLUSION

Most theoretical explanations of women’s homicidal behavior have concerned the killing of abusive partners. Thus, they have relied heavily on the immediate characteristics of abusive relationships to explain the killings. However, in addition to killing abusive partners, women also kill nonabusive partners, children, and other adults in their lives. In this article, we have attempted to explain women’s homicidal behavior in all of the settings in which it might occur.

In addition, because most women kill intimates, most previous explanations have tended to incorporate the woman’s relationship to the victim into the explanation itself. Thus, there has been one type of explanation for the killing of spouses and a different type of explanation for the killing of children. There also has been some tendency for these theories to blur the line between scientific explanation and legal defense, so that the theories themselves provide the basis for exoneration in court—for example, battered women’s syndrome and postpartum psychosis. In contrast, we
have attempted to present a single, empirically adequate theoretical explanation for various types of homicides by women, and we have ignored whether this explanation can form the legal basis for court handling of these cases.

This theory is similar to Agnew's (1992) general strain theory, but it incorporates different sources of negative affect, different techniques for coping with that affect, and different limitations on those coping techniques, based on institutionalized conditions in the lives of women. It is similar to Megargee's (1966, 1973) theory of overcontrolled personality, but it proposes that this is a general, culturally supported, and institutionalized phenomenon among women even though it may be uncommon among men. Finally, it is similar to Bernard's (1990, 1993) theory of angry aggression among the truly disadvantaged, but the structural sources of chronic arousal are reinterpreted as situational variables related to various settings involving a group (women) that has developed little in the way of regulative rules for aggression.

This theory provides a number of empirically testable propositions at the aggregate level: the low overall rate of homicide by women, the high rate of intimates among the victims of homicides by women, and the distribution of homicides by women among racial and class groups. At the individual level, however, prediction would be considerably more difficult, but this is also true of the earlier theories that we relied on. Megargee's theory is considered to be empirically supported, but it includes a degree of randomness that makes individual-level prediction quite difficult (Blackburn, 1993). Individual-level prediction within Agnew's (1992) theory requires consideration of a variety of dispositional variables, and similar variables would have to be considered in this theory for prediction at the individual level. Finally, Bernard's (1990, 1993) theory was intended to assert aggregate-level predictions about rates of violence among truly disadvantaged people, but not to predict which of those disadvantaged people would be more likely to engage in the violence.

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Al-Issa, Ihsan

Allport, Gordon W.

Aneshensel, Carol S. and Leonard I. Pearlin

Averill, James R.

Belsky, Jay and John Kelly

Bernard, Thomas J.

Bernardez-Bonesatti, Teresa

Blackburn, Ronald

Bowker, Lee H.

Browne, Angela

Browne, Angela and Kirk R. Williams

Bunch, Barbara, J., Linda A. Foley, and Susana P. Urbina

Bureau of the Census
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Cain, Maureen

Cloward, Richard A. and Lloyd E. Ohlin

Cohen, Albert K.

Cutrona, Carolyn E.

Daly, Kathleen

Daly, Kathleen and Meda Chesney-Lind

Daly, Martin and Margo Wilson

Dean, Alfred and Nan Lin

de Beauvoir, Simone

Delphy, Christine and Diana Leonard

d'Orban, P.T.

Eckenrode, John and Susan Gore

Edwards, Susan

Friedan, Betty

Frug, Mary J.

Gelles, Richard J. and Claire P. Cornell
Giordano, Peggy C. and Stephen A. Cernkovich

Goetting, Ann

Gottfredson, Michael R. and Travis Hirschi

Hagan, John, A.R. Gillis, and John Simpson

Hamilton, James A.

Hill, Gary D. and Elizabeth M. Crawford

Hirschi, Travis

Hobbs, Daniel F., Jr.

Holland, Terrill R. and Norman Holt

hooks, bell

Jurik, Nancy C. and Russ Winn

Kessler, Suzanne J. and Wendy McKenna

Laberge, D.

Lane, Paul J. and Jean S. Kling

Lang, Reuben A., Roger Holden, Ron Langevin, George M. Pugh, and Ray Wu
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Leonard, Eileen B.

Lerner, Harriet Goldhor

Lowe, Marian and Ruth Hubbard (eds.)

MacKinnon, Catharine

Maier-Katkin, Daniel and Robbin S. Ogle

Mann, Coramae Richey

Martin, Del

McGurk, Barry J. and Rae E. McGurk

Mednick, Sarnoff A.

Megargee, Edwin
1966 Undercontrolled and overcontrolled personality types in extreme antisocial aggression. Psychological Monographs 80: No. 3.

Merton, Robert

Moyer, Imogene L. (ed.)

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Nettler, Gwynn

Oberman, Michelle
Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward

Resnick, Phillip J.

Rich, Adriene

Scott, P.D.

Segrave, Kerry

Simpson, Sally S.

Smart, Carol

Sommers, Ira and Deborah Basking

Stern, Gwen and Laurence Kruckman

Totman, Jane

Walker, Lenore E.

Walter, Glenn D., Roger L. Greene, and Gary S. Solomon

Wandersman, Lois, Abraham Wandersman, and Steven Kahn

Wethington, Elaine, Jane D. McLeod, and Ronald C. Kessler
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Widom, Cathy Spatz

Wilson, William Julius

Wolfgang, Marvin E.

Zimring, Franklin E., Satyanshu K. Mukherjee, and Barrik Van Winkle

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Thomas J. Bernard is Professor of Criminal Justice and Sociology at The Pennsylvania State University. He is currently writing a paper on the proper uses of theory in criminology and editing a book on prison life as viewed by a life-sentenced inmate. In addition, he is (once again) trying to write another edition of Theoretical Criminology.