The Social Construction of Murder and Violence

Definitions of Murder and Violence

One fact of the human condition is that people die. Some of these deaths are caused by factors that are unrelated to human intent. These deaths are officially classified in the United States as either “accidental” or “natural.” Other deaths, however, are viewed as deliberate human acts that are malicious and unnecessary. The individuals held responsible for them are subjected to punishments for what they have done. Murder is defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2014) as the willful (nonnegligent) killing of one human being by another. Murder is the most serious, but rarest, of all the violent crimes (any crime that involves force or the threat of force) defined by this federal agency. Rates of violence, especially lethal violence, are high in the United States when compared to other Western, industrialized nations (Beeghley, 2003; Winslow & Zhang, 2008). Messner and Rosenfeld’s (2013) comparison of murder rates in 16 Western nations reported that the U.S. rate of murder was the highest in the sample, being more than five times greater than the average of all the other nations (p. 21).

Killing and murder are related, but they are not identical. It is possible for a killing to not be a murder (but not the other way around), as when a police officer shoots a felon in the line of duty or when a condemned criminal is lawfully executed for a crime. Murder and manslaughter are the two types of illegal killing identified by U.S. law. A killing in which an offender plans out
the murder (premeditation) and then deliberately carries it out (with malice aforethought, indicating that criminal intent existed) is a first-degree murder. Second-degree murder lacks the element of premeditation, but malice aforethought is still present. Manslaughter is an illegal killing that lacks both premeditation and malice aforethought (Hall, 2002). Some killings are excluded from the FBI’s definition of murder. These include suicides (being self-inflicted, suicides are not killings of one human by another human), accidental deaths, and traffic fatalities (these latter two because they are not viewed as intentional). If a person dies of a heart attack as the result of being robbed or witnessing a crime, it would not be classified as a murder either.

A psychiatric diagnosis used to explain individual violence is that of antisocial personality disorder (APA, 2013). This diagnosis describes someone who is self-centered and uncaring about others, willing to do anything that will benefit him or her, even if it involves extreme acts of violence (Kiehl, 2014). The ambiguity of the term “antisocial personality”—it is also called psychopathy, sociopathy, or dyssocial personality disorder—is paralleled by confusion over its meaning. Despite strenuous efforts to make the term more precise, it is still used as a catch-all to describe bad people and bad behaviors that seemingly cannot be explained in any other way. The diagnosis is a way to understand why seemingly normal people could do seemingly abnormal things: They have a mental disorder that has afflicted their moral development. The trouble is that the term is circular—individuals get labeled as having antisocial personalities because they do antisocial things. The unrestrained pursuit of self-interest, the principal sign that identifies antisocial people, may be found in too many people for the diagnosis to have much value. Sociopathic traits are not necessarily bad for an individual who possesses them and, kept within limits, they are not bad for others either (Regoli, Hewitt, & DeLisi, 2010).

The Elasticity of Violence

No act is universally defined as violent and then negatively sanctioned in all human societies. In one setting, people may be negatively sanctioned for too much violence; in another setting, they may be sanctioned for too little violence; and in still another setting, they may be sanctioned for committing the wrong type of violence (Edgerton, 1976).

What audiences label as violence is not dependent on the harm that is inflicted. Instead, what observers regard as instances of violence are illegitimate, unjustified, inexcusable—or deviant—actions taken by one person or a set of persons against another. In other words, violence is a loaded, biased, socially constructed concept. (Goode, 2008, p. 150)
In some places, for some people, certain acts of violence are viewed as normal and reasonable—as evidence of courage and bravery—and at other times, for other people, what appear to be similar acts are viewed as serious public health emergencies (Koop & Lundberg, 1992).

The killing of one human being by another can elicit a wide range of social reactions, influenced not only by time and place, but also by characteristics of the victim and the offender and the nature of the relationship between the two (Cooney, 2009). Killers have been lynched, brutally killed by outraged mobs, executed by the government, imprisoned for life, banished from the society, fined, scorned, or even admired and rewarded for their violent acts. Different groups in a society may have very different views of the same killing (or killer), with some groups being outraged by the killing and others being delighted that it occurred. Some individuals communicate to others how horrific or brutal they find whatever violence they have witnessed or experienced, while others do what they can to normalize or dismiss it (Six-Hohenbalken & Weiss, 2011).

Centuries ago, Roman holidays involved the slaughter of thousands of combatants in gladiator shows. After Spartacus’s uprising, the crucified bodies of 6,000 slaves lined the road from Rome to Capua like lampposts. In Christian Europe, executions replaced the Roman circuses. Criminals were beheaded publicly; they were hanged, with their intestines drawn out and their bodies quartered; they were elaborately tortured and guillotined in front of enthralled crowds; and their severed heads were exposed on spikes, their bodies hung in chains from gibbets (gallows). The public was amused and excited, more delighted than shocked. An execution was like a fun fair, and for the more spectacular ones, even apprentices got the day off (Alvarez, 1972, pp. 53–54). If an Ashanti woman of West Africa calls a man a fool, it is considered a violent act, and she can be killed for it. However, if an Ashanti child dies before puberty, he or she is given no funeral rites. The body is simply ditched in the community garbage dump. In that culture, the death of a child is no big deal, nor is the killing of an insulting woman; however, insulting a man is a very serious matter indeed (Service, 1963). In slave-owning societies, if a slave kills an owner, it is dealt with harshly. However, if a slave owner kills a slave, it is treated leniently or may even be overlooked (Cooney, 2009).

Wayne Wilson (1991) separated what he called “good” from “bad” murders. The distinction is based on the premise that individuals distinguish those who deserve to die (a good murder) from those who do not but are killed anyway (a bad murder). It seems to be true that the nastier the killer, the more ghastly the killing, and the purer the victim is perceived to be, the greater the likelihood that the killing of the victim will be viewed as bad and
the killing of the offender (if it occurs) as good (p. 2). Some violence may reach the point where it is viewed as so normal and justified that it doesn’t even look like violence anymore. In 1911, an accused rapist was bound on the stage of an opera house in Livermore, Kentucky, and tickets were sold to see him. Ticket holders were allowed to shoot at the rapist as they sat in their seats (Lane, 2003). Decisions about who should live and who should die are fundamentally social decisions that cannot be separated from issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, geography, or organizational dynamics (Baumer & Martin, 2013; Roy, 2009).

No doubt exists that some individuals are prepared to use brutality and violence to get what they want and that they produce untold misery for everybody else. Consider the following account, written by Ms. Kuzmaak, describing the anguish caused by the murder of her daughter Donna. It is an example of a “bad murder” if anything is.

I keep searching for the right descriptive words to convey the emotional impact our daughter’s murder made on us. “Devastating” just doesn’t make it—“ravaged” is closer, engulfed, overwhelmed, drowning in sadness, numb, oblivious to EVERYTHING else, totally immersed in the horror, the why, the who, what she had to go through in the closing minutes of her short life, how terrified she must have been, did she scream for help and no one came, did she fight, the pain, how it felt to be strangled, what her dying thoughts were, how she must have held out hope until the last that she would be rescued, her shock and disbelief that this was happening, and as the information unfolded itself to us in bits and pieces that first day, the anguish of hearing how badly she was beaten, then a couple of hours later crying out when I heard that she had been repeatedly stabbed. Then, the ultimate horror to learn that the cause of death was strangulation. To be deprived of breath—lungs bursting—“Oh, God, oh God,” I would wail, tears streaming, hands clenched and imploring.

That is how I remember the day, March 21, 1979. A decade has passed, but the emotions go on, the anger, the sorrow, and the loss. (Hickey, 1997, pp. 125–126)

If the killer were ever to be caught and executed for murdering Donna, the execution would fit W. Wilson’s (1991) idea of a “good murder” (though it would no longer be called murder because, as noted, murder by definition is an illegal killing). However, a genuine dilemma exists in applying good murder/bad murder definitions to real-world events. The unique qualities of a victim—how innocent, pure, or kind he or she is (or is considered to be)—cannot reasonably be used to determine a killer’s level of criminal responsibility or what his or her penalty should be (Lesser, 1993).
We must be familiar with social context and cultural understandings, or it will be impossible to know what an act means or how it should be understood (Schoon, 2014). Police officers use “roughness” in their jobs, and so do football players, wrestlers, and animal trainers. In Brownstein’s (2000) words, “We do not have any precise or simple measure of violence in our society. We do not even have agreement on how to define violence, or when and how to identify particular acts or actions as violent” (p. 169). Most people commit acts of violence at some point in their lives—most of them more than once—and practically everyone has the opportunity to use violence in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. The boundary that separates violence from nonviolence is fuzzier and more permeable than most people think (Eller, 2006).

The relativity of violence is easy enough to see by examining something that at first blush would seem to be straightforward: figuring out how many individuals died during the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001, and then how to classify them. The number who died as a result of being on the two planes that slammed into the North and South Towers could be accurately determined from both airline records and reports from surviving family members. Figuring out how many died in the Twin Towers, however, proved to be more challenging. On September 24, 2001, the number of casualties was estimated to be 6,453. As the days passed, however, the list got shorter. Some victims had been counted multiple times, which had incorrectly inflated the number of presumed casualties; some people classified as dead (or missing) were actually found to be alive; and some people fraudulently claimed that they had lost family members, hoping to receive survivors’ benefits. A year after the attack, the authoritative list of estimated deaths due to the World Trade Center attack stood at 2,801, less than half of the initial estimate (Best, 2004, pp. 109–111). The FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) for 2001, which also included in its estimate the deaths at the Pentagon and on the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, reported the body count from 9/11 to be 3,047.

If estimating the number of individuals killed was difficult, classifying them was too. The killings fit perfectly the FBI’s definition of murder: They were willful; they were done by human beings; and they were done to human beings. How much clearer could it be that these killings were murders? The FBI (2001), however, decided not to count these approximately 3,000 deaths as murders, so the murder and nonnegligent manslaughter figures for 2001 did not increase at all despite the thousands of killings that occurred the day of the attacks. What is most curious is that the FBI stated that it did not
know what to call the killings because so much disagreement and dispute existed over what they should be called (e.g., an act of war, a local crime, an international conspiracy, or terrorism). The FBI apparently knew enough, however, to decide they weren’t going to be counted as murders.

Some individuals, groups, or organizations will use violence to get what they want (e.g., terrorists using violence to terrorize) (Schinkel, 2010). Individuals, groups, and organizations can also construct narratives or ideas about violence that they then use in their conflicts with others, depicting these others’ attitudes, behaviors, and conditions as forms of violence, and thereby justifying their condemnation and control. Having the authority to decide what and who is violent has great symbolic value (Brownstein, 2000). The violence of professional boxing, hockey, rugby, wrestling, rodeos, or cage fighting is not defined as a social problem, but the violence of school shootings or Halloween sadism is. Some violence that was once viewed as a serious problem (e.g., wilding) has gone the way of the buggy whip, and some violence that was once ignored is now viewed more seriously (e.g., road rage or cruelty to animals). Some groups will manipulate our fears of violence to advance their interests.

**Arbitrary Meanings**

Definitions of deviance, including violence, develop and grow in specific locations or arenas in a society, such as government, mass media, research communities, social action groups, professional organizations (e.g., in medicine and law), and religious organizations. It is at the intersections of these different arenas that notions of risk are created, massaged, and manipulated; they are also where remedies or solutions for the problems we face are constructed and presented for review (Bing, 2010; Ghatak, 2011). Best (1999) refers to media, government, experts (e.g., from medicine or law), and activists as the iron quadrangle, because these four arenas are (or can be) central in promoting an interest in some troubling event in mutually reinforcing ways (even while disagreement can and does exist). Influential politicians and cultural leaders must do the symbolic work necessary for the suffering of individuals to be defined and commemorated as something that is a significant problem for the entire nation (Eyerman, Alexander, & Breese, 2013).

Social reactions to violence can develop into a moral panic in which the response is so extreme that it is disproportionate to the threat posed (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This is what happened when the “devil came to day care” and refused to leave for almost a decade. In the 1980s, individuals (how many is a matter of dispute) in the United States came to believe that
day care centers were the site of horrendous violence against children, done by the very people entrusted to care for them (DeYoung, 2014). The new buzzwords of “satanic ritual abuse” emerged as a shorthand way to describe these terrifying acts, and the McMartin Preschool in Southern California (located in the town of Manhattan Beach) was defined as the epicenter of it all.

In 1983, Judy Johnson was in a bind. She needed affordable, quality child care at the exact point in time when the societal demand was great but the supply was not. She tried to enroll her 2-year-old son at McMartin, but the center was full and no openings were anticipated. Nonetheless, one day she simply dropped the child off at the center and went to work. Employees arrived and found him playing all alone in the center’s yard. They took pity on him (and on his mother) and made room for him. The rest of what happened should be placed in the “no good deed goes unpunished” file, because the staff’s willingness to care for the child and help the mother eventually led to catastrophe for the center and for all the people who owned and worked in it.

One day in August after her son was back home from school, Johnson decided on the flimsiest of evidence and with little substantiation that her son had been sexually assaulted by someone at the school (in her opinion, the child had a reddened anus). During a drawn-out process of questioning her son, filled with leading questions, repeated again and again, Johnson extracted the kind of information she needed to convince herself that her initial suspicions were true. Her son had been sodomized, and she knew by whom: Raymond Buckey, the only male staff member (and grandson of the founder of the day care center). Though her son had said that Buckey had done nothing to him, Johnson was not convinced. In response to her insistent questioning, the boy eventually relented, claiming that Buckey had taken his temperature. The mother had her smoking gun. She concluded that the “thermometer” was really Buckey’s penis, which he had used to anally penetrate her child.

Johnson had her son examined by a physician (the physical was inconclusive), and she then went to the police. Other parents who had used the day care center learned of the complaint against it, and they started quizzing their children, too. Aggrieved parents were encouraged in letters from the police to take their children to the Children’s International Institute (CII), a nonprofit treatment facility, to be interviewed by the resident social workers. Social workers subsequently talked to more than 400 McMartin youngsters, concluding that 369 of them had been victims of satanic ritual abuse. The way that CII social workers questioned them led the children to realize that truth statements about any conscientious and compassionate care they had received at the center were not what the social workers wanted to hear.
And so they told . . . tales—tales about the ritualistic ingestion of feces, urine, blood, semen, and human flesh; the disinterment and mutilation of corpses; the sacrifices of infants; and the orgies with their day care providers, costumed as devils and witches, in the classrooms, in tunnels under the center, and in car washes, airplanes, mansions, cemeteries, hotels, ranches, gourmet food stores, local gyms, churches, and hot air balloons. (DeYoung, 2014, p. 129)

The greater the degree of strangeness in the children’s tales, the more convinced the social workers—and practically everyone else—became that the children were telling the truth about what had happened. Due process went out the window, along with both truth and reason. The social workers played a central and powerful role in the construction of a reality that they believed they played no role in at all. In February 1984, seven of the day care center’s staff were indicted on multiple charges.

Two trials were held in the McMartin Preschool case, and all charges against the seven defendants were eventually dropped. However, the damage had already been done. The accused individuals had no way to reclaim what they had lost. Judy Johnson had a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized for a time with a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. (She told police detectives that her ex-husband had anally penetrated her son and that an unknown intruder had done the same thing to the family dog.) She died in 1986 of liver failure due to the effects of alcohol, but her legacy lived on as more and more day care centers fell under the suspicion of parents, police, prosecutors, politicians, social workers, and the media. The story was told and retold of a massive network of organized predators who victimize children in day care centers all across the United States. The moral panic ended almost a decade after it started, in 1992, with the arrest and conviction of day care center owner Fran Keller (who owned Fran’s Day Care in Austin, Texas) and her husband (Dan). They were both convicted of aggravated sexual assault on a child and each received a sentence of 48 years for the crime.

Once some event, group, or individual is defined as menacing, this definition and the reactions based on it become part of how the event (or group or individual) is identified and understood (Young, 2011). The process of demonization is furthered often enough by media coverage, which usually offers distorted or even false images of some deviant happening (Bjornstrom, Kaufman, Peterson, & Slater, 2010; Covington, 2010; Farrall, Jackson, & Gray, 2009). It is difficult, if not impossible, to figure out if the social response is reasonable or if it is an exaggerated response to some earlier disproportionate reaction to some event. Moral panics have the ability to create their own reality (Heiner, 2014).
Patterned Violence

Subcultures of Violence

Violence can occur in a variety of ways, depending on the opportunities to learn and express it and the cultural understandings about it (Goetting, 1995). At certain times, violence is both normal and normative: It occurs frequently, is well-integrated with other parts of society and culture, and is defined as legitimate and reasonable. This kind of violence is legal, socially supported, and rational. It is organized violence. Other violence, however, does not flow from any clear or discernible social conditions or cultural issues. It is illegal, antisocial, and irrational (Yablonsky, 1990). This is raw violence. Raw violence is more often done by the kinds of people who are considered immoral, insane, or evil; these individuals will be labeled more often as psychopaths, as sociopaths, or as having antisocial (or dyssocial) personalities. They are usually hostile toward, and suspicious of, others, and their predatory activities usually come from their aberrant or warped personalities or character structures (Kiehl, 2014). The distinction between “raw” and “organized” violence is not a hard and fast one. It is functional for some groups to portray the violence of other groups (or individuals) as rawer than it really is, and people can disagree over the degree of organization in some violent event.

In a society characterized by diversity and heterogeneity (as is found in the United States), a number of subcultures exist. The wealthy may associate primarily with the wealthy, the poor primarily with the poor, and people from different ethnic and racial groups may interact primarily with people who share a similar identity and social history. This diversity of subcultures produces a diversity of life experiences, opportunities, learning experiences, and outcomes. People from some subcultures consistently do better in achieving their dreams than people from other subcultures. They have more money, more control over their lives, and better jobs. They generally feel good about what they do and who they are. In other subcultures, however, there is misery and degradation, and people who live within them are frustrated and angry much of the time (Blau & Blau, 1982). This defective social environment can stimulate interpersonal conflicts and individual tensions from which interpersonal violence can result (Linsky, Bachman, & Strauss, 1995). For example, African American males in U.S. cities are reported to have high levels of anger and defensiveness, mainly because of what they see as their mistreatment at the hands of the police. This is a principal reason that they become involved in riots more often than do other racial and ethnic groups (Santoro & Broidy, 2014).
When a tradition of neighborhood support for violence exists, along with the presence of actual groups that champion aggression, then violence is a subcultural happening (Felson, Liska, South, & McNulty, 1994). A subculture of violence provides opportunities to observe, learn, and act out the kinds of violence that would shock, upset, or baffle individuals from other subcultures (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). In a subculture of violence, it is not some personal defect that explains what happens. Rather, it is the internalization of a subculture’s values and norms that is the principal cause. In some communities, fighting to protect one’s honor is a core value for both males and females (Ness, 2010). Research suggests that those individuals who are the most predisposed to develop an angry, aggressive, hostile view of the world when they are surrounded by brutalizing social conditions are the very same individuals who are most likely to develop a nonviolent, peaceable outlook on life if they are in a serene social environment (Simons et al., 2011).

Dueling is a good example of how violence can become both normative and normalized (Kiernan, 1988). At one time, duels were disorderly gatherings, with witnesses and spectators often joining in the fight. However, duels eventually became more ritualized and formalized. Each duelist selected someone to serve as a second, who ensured that the rules were enforced and the duel was fair. If swords were used, they had to be the same length. If pistols were used, they had to carry the same charge or be of the same caliber. Neither duelist was supposed to be at a disadvantage by, for example, having to face the sun or shoot into the wind. In France and England, the main weapon was the sword, whereas in the United States it was the pistol. In some places, a duel was ended at the drawing of first blood, but in other places, the dueling code required death. Though a large number of incidents, some quite petty, could precipitate a duel—personal insults, arguments over property, affronts to personal honor, cheating at cards—failing to respond to a challenge, no matter how ridiculous it was, meant disgrace and dishonor. Individuals who were arrested by police for dueling (it became a federal crime in the United States in 1877) almost always lacked remorse or shame because they were duty bound to duel if challenged. The participants viewed the violence as both justified and justifiable regardless of its legal status.

Social Inequality, Community Disadvantage, and the Code of the Street

Elijah Anderson (1999) paid attention to a neighborhood characteristic that he believed plays a central role in patterns of African American violence: the code of the street. His code of the street thesis indicates that
violence in African American neighborhoods is caused by a subculture (i.e., a code) that allows those who share its understandings to know how to use violence and when, primarily to maintain personal status and respect. The code is found most often in inner-city areas characterized by poverty, a scarcity of legitimate jobs, unemployment, guns, drugs, crime, declining welfare payments, hopelessness, and despair (Burgason, Thomas, Berthelot, & Burkey, 2014; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). It encourages both a positive evaluation of violence in the abstract (“Tough guys are to be admired”) and a willingness to use violence whenever necessary (“If someone starts trouble, I will finish it”). Youth who adopt the code of the street think that they are more vulnerable to becoming targets of violence, though they generally express fearlessness regarding its use (Baron, 2011; White, 2013). (Not all parents, even in a violent neighborhood, teach their kids to use violence to defend themselves and their honor [Crawford, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2011].)

A study of over 2,500 census tracts in 13 U.S. cities over a 10-year period found reciprocal effects between neighborhood characteristics and violence (Hipp, 2010). Those neighborhoods with the greatest amount of poverty had experienced a long-term increase in crime, and neighborhoods with higher rates of violent crime had experienced the greatest increase in poverty, disadvantage, and normlessness. An increase in crime rates can change a neighborhood’s characteristics (e.g., retail outlets are replaced by bars and liquor stores) and reduce its attractiveness as a place to live. This leads to the influx of lower-income families. “Neighborhoods with more crime tend to experience increasing levels of residential instability, more impoverished residents, a worsening retail environment, and more racial/ethnic minorities and heterogeneity” (p. 224). Some neighborhoods can generate a sense of hopelessness and unhappiness among their residents, so these individuals have no optimism that their situations and opportunities will ever improve (Griffiths, 2013; Peterson & Krivo, 2010). This sense of despair is a factor that leads to both an adoption of the code of the street and involvement in the higher rates of violence that the code reinforces (Contreras, 2013; Drummond, Bolland, & Harris, 2011; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010).

Areas characterized by community disadvantage in an unequal society, with subcultures of violence and a code of the street, have an additional liability: weak social capital. Social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) describes the existing network of relationships. When it is strong, it makes it possible for community members to work together to achieve common goals. They will have a sense of community spirit, along with a sense of mutual trust and responsibility. This increases their level of collective efficacy so that community residents are able to control the public space within which they live and move (e.g., streets, street corners, parks, playgrounds).
and maintain order (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). They may call police to report crimes in their communities, or they may even take responsibility themselves for what goes on in the places they live. High levels of social capital and collective efficacy lead to a reduction in rates of crime and delinquency (Dufur, Hoffmann, Braudt, Parcel, & Spence, 2015; Lyons, Vélez, & Santoro, 2013). Even the rates of serious crime (e.g., homicide) go down as collective efficacy goes up (Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001). Most research shows that economic inequality and homicide are positively related (Bernard, Snipes, & Gerould, 2010; Hipp, 2011).

**Dehumanizing Others**

Violence is facilitated by the existence of a socially constructed “other”: an individual who is defined as a legitimate target of aggression and deserving of whatever injury he or she receives. This dehumanization process helps to neutralize any lingering moral inhibitions against violence that might still exist among aggressors, which makes it possible for rather ordinary people to commit acts of extraordinary evil (F. Katz, 1994). People may even develop justifications and excuses for violence that become part of their cultural tradition, being passed on to others. This makes certain kinds of violence seem more necessary, more reasonable, and less in need of correction than other kinds of violence done by other kinds of people. If these excuses and justifications are persuasive enough, some individuals will be able to commit acts of extreme cruelty with very little social prompting, even when they are given many opportunities to renege without penalty or embarrassment (Browning, 1992). The “other” may even be blamed for things over which he or she could have had no control whatsoever. In 1923, thousands of Koreans were massacred by the Japanese in Tokyo because they were held responsible for the earthquake that had occurred that year (Baudrillard, 2002).

Philip Zimbardo (2007) explored how seemingly good people could do seemingly bad things. The *Lucifer effect*—the transformation of ordinary men and women into beings who are capable of committing reprehensible atrocities against their fellows—is something that can occur practically anywhere if the conditions are right. Zimbardo concluded that evil is something of which we are all capable, depending on the time and circumstances. (By evil, Zimbardo means intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent people—or using one’s authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on one’s behalf.) He may have overstated his case: Some people would forfeit their own lives before they would do anything to hurt another living thing, nonhuman
animals included. However, he is on firm ground when he argues that the dividing line between good and bad, between evil and honor, is nebulous and permeable. The cause of the Lucifer effect is found mainly in systems of power and how authorities use propaganda to scapegoat outsiders so that insiders will come to define them as legitimate targets of aggression. Insiders can reach the point where they will not only willingly victimize the dehumanized others, but they are happy to do so.

A study of more than 900 lynchings of black males, between 1882 and 1929 in 10 southern U.S. states, showed that the victims had been at the social margins of the communities that lynched them. They were targeted because of their marginality and separation, not because of their occupational, social, or educational accomplishments (e.g., literacy). Being an “uppity” or successful black man was far less important to lynching mobs than the fact that he was an outsider (Bailey, Tolnay, Beck, & Laird, 2011; Hagen, Makovi, & Bearman, 2013). Lynching became a method of social control of blacks by whites at a point in time when other methods of control were weakening or disappearing altogether. Southern whites were fearful about their economic future, anxious over the fate of southern women in the climate of emancipation, and concerned about the consequences of increasing racial equality. These worries found expression in a lynch culture that targeted blacks more than it did whites (I. Evans, 2011).

Groups will use violence to get what they want, but they develop—or try to—ideologies that legitimate their violent activities as necessary and reasonable, while branding the violence of other people as dangerous and unreasonable. Sometimes, one particular group’s ideology of violence will be internalized by a majority of people in the society; at other times, support for this ideology will be very limited. It is even possible for members of a group to be seduced by their own ideology about the value of violence, coming to believe what it says without question. If an ideology of violence is firmly in place, the violence of the group that adheres to it will appear more normal, more legitimate, more necessary, and less in need of correction than other groups’ violence.

The thugs were a group of violent criminals who lived in India centuries ago. They murdered and robbed their victims in honor of Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction. Her followers believed that if they worshipped her and carried out her bidding, she would bestow great power and riches upon them (Hutton, 1981). The weapons the thugs used in their murders were represented as parts of Kali herself: The pickaxe was imaged as one of her teeth; the knife was imaged as one of her ribs; and the cloth that thugs used to strangle their victims (called a roomal) was imaged as a piece of her garment. The thugs believed that their robberies and murders were not only moral, but also admirable and completely justified (Hollick, 1840).
The favorite victims of the thugs were native soldiers on leave, men of nobility and bearing, and treasure carriers (Ahmad, 1992). Sometimes, the thugs brought along their children, partly so that they could learn how to kill, and partly to help disguise the thugs’ true mission. The thugs would journey along with their intended victim until the time was ripe for the killing. One member of the gang would wrap a rope or cloth several times around the victim's neck and hold one end tightly, and a second thug would hold the other end. The rope or cloth would be drawn tight. The two thugs would push the victim’s head forward to guarantee that suffocation occurred quickly. To make certain that the job was rightly done, the thugs would kick and hit the immobile victim to damage vital organs (Thornton, 1837). Victims were sometimes dispatched with weapons other than a rope or cloth: A pickaxe could be used to bludgeon and disembowel a victim, or a knife could be used to stab and cut. Sometimes, the thugs would travel several days with their intended victim to allay any suspicions.

The thugs believed that if they carefully followed the wishes of Kali, they would receive great riches and earn supernatural points that could pay off in a subsequent life. This is one reason that they showed so little guilt or remorse over their violence. Murder was defined by them as good and necessary, and thugs who did it in the proper way were thought of by their associates as heroes. Their killings were acts of worship and reverence that would allow them one day to attain a state of grace and a close affinity with Kali. However, their murderous ways were not at all acceptable to the British, who began a drive in 1831 to end thuggee. However, what if the thugs had been more successful at spreading their religious beliefs and violent customs to others? What then?

Righteous Slaughter and Violentization

Jack Katz’s (1988) attention to the meanings of crime, its moral and sensual attractions, provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of it. One central feature of the typical murder, which Katz calls nonpredatory, is that the killer views the killing as a reasonable and meaningful act, and the victim is usually a family member, friend, or acquaintance. The killer usually feels comfortable in the setting in which the murder takes place. Nonpredatory murders are not carefully planned, coldly executed acts of violence, such as political assassinations, serial murders, or terrorist attacks. Casual life, Saturday nights out drinking and cruising Main Street, day-to-day activities with family members and friends, and the search for escape from the routines of ordinary life are the cradle for the occurrence of nonpredatory homicidal violence.

The average nonpredatory killing is done by someone who thinks the killing actually supports important and widely held values. Even though the
murder can appear irrational or foolish to everyone else—and may even appear that way to the killer after its completion—it does not seem that way to the killer during its commission or in the events leading up to it. What may appear to be irrational violence to outsiders may seem very reasonable and justified to the person doing it (Black, 1993; Heimer, 1997). In the killer’s view, a righteous slaughter has occurred. Most nonpredatory killers lack premeditation or even a well-developed motive; they really don’t plan on becoming killers until the murders actually occur.

Some killings, however, are cold-blooded predatory murders. Examples (unfortunately) are not hard to find. Predatory murders occurred in Tucson, Arizona, on January 8, 2011, when Jared Loughner, wearing sunglasses and a hoodie, took a taxi to a Safeway grocery store. He went inside to get change to pay the cab driver, and then he calmly proceeded to a parking lot where he used his Glock 19 pistol to kill 6 people and wound 13 others (one of whom was Gabrielle Giffords, Democratic representative). Another example is the mass murder by James Holmes. On July 20, 2012, he entered a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, and used an AR-15-type semiautomatic assault rifle to open fire in the crowded theater. When the smoke had cleared, 12 were dead and another 70 wounded. On December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza killed his mother in her home and then went to Sandy Hook Elementary School (in Newtown, Connecticut). He was heavily armed. Over the span of about 15 minutes, he killed 20 children and 6 adults before taking his own life with a shot to the head. On April 15, 2013, the Tsarnaev brothers (Dzhokhar and Tamerlan) planted two bombs near the finish line of the Boston Marathon. The eventual explosions led to the death of 3 individuals and the injury of over 260 others. Tamerlan, the older brother, was eventually killed in a shootout with police, and the younger brother was arrested and taken into police custody. In 2015, he received the death penalty for his brutal crimes. On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white male, entered a traditionally black church (the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church) in Charleston, South Carolina, and attended a bible study session. After about an hour of sitting calmly with the parishioners, he opened fire, killing three men and six women, all strangers to him. One of the victims was the pastor (Clementa Pinckney), who was also a state senator. On July 16, 2015, Mohammad Yousuf Abdulazeez, who was born in Kuwait but was a naturalized U.S. citizen, killed four marines in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and wounded three others. He then traveled about 7 miles and fired on individuals at a U.S. Navy facility. Abdulazeez himself was killed by police officers. On October 1, 2015, Chris Harper Mercer went to Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, in body armor and with six firearms. He ended up killing nine people at the college and wounding eight others, eventually taking his own life. On December 2, 2015, the husband and wife team of Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen
Malik armed themselves—they had previously dropped off their 6-month-old daughter at her grandmother’s—and entered the Inland Regional Center at San Bernardino, California. The pair opened fired on people attending an employee banquet, killing 14 and injuring an additional 22. (Farook had been at the party himself earlier but left abruptly, returning with his wife so they could do the killings.) The two killers fled the scene in their vehicle and were killed hours later in a shootout with police officers.

It is easy to understand why an immediate response to the horrific violence these murders embody is that the perpetrator is insane, mentally ill, or the embodiment of evil. (Roof’s murders had clear racial overtones, and Mercer’s murders targeted Christians, making them easier to portray as signs of wickedness than of illness. The FBI declared the San Bernardino killings to be an act of terrorism, carefully planned and efficiently executed.) Murders like these seem to have been done without rhyme or reason, bringing the killer no advantage, and so they are likely to be called “insane” (unless they can be classified as domestic terrorism or as racially motivated). This claim that the killers are insane, however, is almost always an incorrect assessment of most predatory murders (Declercq & Audenaert, 2011; J. Katz, 1988; Leyton, 1986).

Multiple murderers, Leyton (1986) concludes, are not insane. They kill others to make a statement through the fundamental insult of killing the innocent. They are individuals who have no interest in continuing the dull lives that they see no way of escaping. Their killings alleviate both their alienation and their boredom by giving them a cornucopia of rewards: revenge on what they view as an uncaring society, celebrity status, a new identity, and a measure of excitement and pleasure. The killings are a way for the killer to get attention while transforming himself or herself into something that he or she desperately wants to be: a ferocious individual who must be taken seriously.

Predisposing factors to mass murder exist: having a personal history of violence; having been the victim of bullying (if the killer is an adolescent) or having been rejected by female intimate partners, family members, or people at work (if the killer is an adult); preoccupation with firearms and war; and a fantasy life revolving around violence and revenge. Adolescent mass murderers turn “hot shame into cold anger” (Meloy et al., 2004, p. 297). The bullying and accompanying humiliation that they experienced lies dormant as these killers-to-be try to manage the intolerable shame and loss of self-respect by withdrawing into a fantasy world. Adult mass murderers embody a compensatory fantasy that culminates in a “warrior mentality,” which promotes an inflated sense of power and superiority.

Rarely is mass murder an eruption of an act of excited, agitated fury. It is almost always an unemotional, intentional, premeditated act that is methodically executed. Mass murderers are inclined to externalize responsibility for their real or imagined failures, placing the blame squarely on the shoulders...
of others. Not only do they long to escape this world that they believe has hurt them deeply, but they also seek to overcome their feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy by being remembered for their cunning and boldness in being able to carry out a massacre of individuals who have hurt them so much (Murray, 2015). The principal emotions of the killer are relief and exhilaration, and the principal outcome is a sense of peace or calm (Declercq & Audenaert, 2011).

To predatory murderers, conformity is the real problem, especially what they view as a numbing conformity, and their extreme violence is their road to salvation and moral transcendence. Cold-blooded killing gives the killer an edge. According to J. Katz (1988), “As the deviant increasingly appreciates the moral dangers of conformity to conventional rules and reasons, he may simultaneously appreciate the transcendent power he might attain through a ‘senseless’ killing” (p. 297). A primary anxiety of cold-blooded killers is that they are—or will be viewed by others as—individuals who go straight because they are afraid to be deviant. Cold-blooded killings establish killers as individuals who are like no others, people who are so much in control of their lives and so powerful that it is unnecessary for them to follow even rudimentary principles of human decency.

Lonnie Athens (1980) theorizes that some violent men and women have gone through a developmental process of violentization in childhood during which they were brutalized by adults in their families, and so were their siblings (and even their friends). At some point, an individual decides to stop being a victim and takes command of situations whenever possible, both violently and definitively. The individual develops the capacity to be comfortable using violence in different situations to get what he or she wants (e.g., using a weapon to intimidate others). If successes come from using violence, the individual’s self-concept and personal identity both change. He or she is increasingly defined by others and also by himself or herself as a violent person. As the individual plays this role more and more, he or she becomes increasingly engulfed by the new identity and comfortable with it. The individual is now ready, willing, and able to use violence in all kinds of situations and for all kinds of reasons: as protection, to defend personal honor, to get something of value, or to punish someone defined as deserving it. The individual has become someone—and is viewed this way by others—who is fully capable of committing barbaric violence with little provocation (Athens, 2015).

Vocabularies of Motive and Interpersonal Accounts

Motives are usually treated as inner factors that cause individuals to act in certain ways. “He hit his brother because he was angry” identifies anger as the
motive for the assault. Motives, however, are more than this. They are vocabularies or verbal statements used by people in a social encounter to explain, define, and interpret social action as it unfolds and develops (Mills, 1940). Motives are provided in response to the question, “Why did you do that?” (p. 907). People use motives to understand and sometimes to explain what they do; they also use motives to interpret and make sense of what others do. Motives are themselves part of a social scene, and they can determine how social relationships unfold and how they are understood by others.

Just as individuals learn the proper ways of acting, they also learn a finite number of proper motives for acting. In some instances, individuals will abandon entirely what they plan to do, or they will choose a different course of action, if they are unable to find appropriate motives for their planned activities (or motives that others will accept). Individuals can disagree over which motives are operating in a particular situation, and they can be confused over what motivated others just as they can be unsure over their own motives. They may offer motives for their actions that are disbelieved and challenged by others. A corrupt politician may insist that he or she was forced to go above the written law for the good of the country. Others may believe it was the politician’s greed, arrogance, or stupidity—not the good of the country—that was the real motivating factor. Self-defense is a motive for violence that is easier for most people to accept than is the claim that violence is being used to serve the goddess Kali. If the motives seem reasonable enough, the activity may not even be defined as a form of violence in the first place.

How does it help us to know that motives are verbal constructions that are situationally specific? Let us consider an example. Professional killers—individuals who are paid money to kill other people—have a vocabulary of motive that makes it possible for them to kill people with neither guilt nor regret. They organize their murders in such a way that their violence appears routine and necessary, and their victims appear deserving of whatever happens to them. “Routine kill of targets for money” is a motive that allows professional killers to ignore the fact that they are ruthlessly killing real human beings; this motive helps them to maintain the degree of coldness, detachment, and daring required by their professional activities (Levi, 1989). Accounts (see Chapter 2) are interjected into social relationships by individuals who want to influence perceptions about their motives. If an individual who did a violent act successfully uses an account, he or she has been able to convince others that the violence that occurred is excusable (unintentional) or justified (necessary and unavoidable). Accounts are sometimes so standardized within specific cultures or subcultures that they are routinely expected when conduct departs too much from what is supposed to happen. For example, a police officer may handcuff a suspect without
offering any account. Handcuffing is part of the job, and it is expected. However, if a suspect is brought to the police station bruised and battered, some account will have to be offered by the arresting officer. He or she might give the “standardized account” that the suspect was “resisting arrest.” If this account is believed by others, it will convince them that the police officer did not really want to hurt the suspect but was forced to by the suspect’s failure to comply with the officer’s commands.

A study of 73 incarcerated felons (in 11 different correctional facilities in Colorado) who were found guilty of gun-related crimes that produced either death or injury for their victims reveals the power of accounts (Pogrebin, Stretesky, & Unnithan, 2009). These inmates offered either excuses to deflect responsibility for the violence from themselves (e.g., by blaming external factors) or justifications (in which responsibility was accepted for the crime, but its deviancy was discounted by insisting that violence was necessary). The most common excuse offered by members of the sample for using their guns was that they were not thinking clearly or were forced to act violently by others. The most common justification used by members of the sample was denial of the victim, embodied in their claim that the victims deserved to be shot. These prisoners used many different excuses or justifications, sometimes simultaneously, to account for their gun violence.

Research indicates that in cases of domestic violence, “intimacy repels law” (i.e., familiarity between offender and offended leads to some confusion for police about what to do) (Black, 1980). The likelihood of an offender being arrested for assaulting another individual is lower if the victim and victimizer are romantically involved or related by family ties than if they are acquaintances or strangers. Factors that operate to change this association between intimacy and the likelihood of arrest are drug use by the perpetrator, a perpetrator’s use of a weapon, or physical injury to a victim. Males who assault females, regardless of relational distance (i.e., stranger, acquaintance, or family/intimate), are more likely to be arrested than are males who assault males (or than females who assault others). What seems to be operating is that the closer the relationship, the greater is the inclination of police to conclude that other mechanisms of informal control and regulation will kick in and start working. They believe they do not have to arrest an assaulter in incidents of intimate partner violence unless clear indicators are present that show the situation might get worse rather than better. The “amount of formal control, in this case enforcement, applied in any given situation is inversely proportional to the amount of informal control perceived present” (Lally & DeMaris, 2012, p. 116). While some women do assault or even kill their male partners, most violence in intimate relationships is done by men (DeKeseredy, 2011).
A worldwide shift in attitudes toward intimate partner violence has occurred. It is increasingly rejected as a correct or proper way for males and females to relate to one another. These changing attitudes have been associated with greater public attention to domestic violence, as well as greater media coverage of it. A dramatic increase has occurred in the number of countries that implemented legislation to stop violence against women (Pierotti, 2013). (The passage in the U.S. Violence Against Women Act of 1994 and its recertification in subsequent years showed police officers who needed to learn it that spousal violence is a matter for them to take seriously.)

Peralta and Cruz (2006) were interested in how a sample of university students viewed and interpreted (i.e., attached meanings to) alcohol-related violence. It is clear from their study that drinking a lot and often is viewed as both an indicator of masculinity and as a way to justify and excuse some of the violent things that drinking men are inclined to do.

The general belief some males “naturally” become violent after drinking helps to shape and inform the gendered world of drinking behavior within the context of college culture. What is more, these common expectations may reduce a student’s ability to recognize harmful behavior as damaging and undesirable if these behaviors are assumed to be natural byproducts of gender. (p. 117)

From their interviews with 78 respondents, the authors found that these individuals were inclined to believe that alcohol plays a major role in patterns of violence, especially for young males, and that alcohol-related violence represents a form of “macho” behavior (“beer muscles”). These definitions and understandings normalize violent behavior while they motivate it. It seems clear from a wealth of data that alcohol use and interpersonal violence are related, and drinking patterns and risk of victimization are, too. Simply put, in areas where alcohol is both available and accessible, higher rates of youth violence exist, and one’s chance of becoming either a victim or a victim increases (Berthelot, Brown, Drawve, & Burgason, 2015; Parker & McCaffree, 2013).

A study by Faris and Felmlee (2011) of high school students’ violent behavior shows that violence is not necessarily the province of marginal, psychologically deranged, out-of-control individuals. In fact, these researchers uncovered a link between relatively high levels of status in a social hierarchy and aggressive behaviors. Moving up in status in the school hierarchy and being able to maintain it requires a willingness to use violence when necessary. Students at the very bottom of the status hierarchy lack a capacity...
for using violence to increase their status, and those at the very top refrain from using it because they have no reason to employ it. However, “for the vast majority of adolescents, increases in status are, over time, accompanied by increases in aggression toward their peers” (p. 67). The researchers also found evidence of an expressive use of violence, especially with same-sex aggression. Some individuals torment others only because they find it pleasurable to hurt them and think that they can get away with it. Other studies indicate that violence occurs, at least in online college relationships (i.e., those that aren’t face-to-face), because it is defined by its perpetrators as a form of entertainment (Rafferty & Ven, 2014).

The Curious Case of Jack the Ripper

Murder Most Foul

In 1888, a killer who came to be known as Jack the Ripper prowled the streets of London’s East End. Although the identity of this killer was never uncovered in a court of law, a consensus view evolved that the killer was a male who acted alone to murder five women (known as the “canonical five”), all of whom were prostitutes, from the end of August until the beginning of November. He killed his victims through asphyxiation and/or cutting and stabbing. The loss of blood was extensive. Robbery did not seem to be a primary motive, and body cavities had been cut open and body parts removed for some specific reason by the killer. All but the last known victim (Mary Jane Kelly) were killed and mutilated on the street, probably close to where they met their killer. Except for one killing that occurred in the City of London (Catherine Eddowes), the rest were confined to districts in the East End known as Whitechapel and Spitalfields, which lay just outside the city’s northeastern boundary. The identity of the killer was a matter of speculation and dispute in 1888 and still is to this very day.

Douglas and Olshaker (2001) claim that when it comes to serial killers, Jack the Ripper is ground zero, the point at which both history and discussion begin. In fact, curiosity about the killings, the killer, and the victims has increased with the passage of time.

Interest in the Jack the Ripper murders is probably greater today than at any time since the killer himself actually stalked the streets of London’s East End. In recent years we have been all but deluged in a swelling tide of books, articles, films, plays and comics inspired by the case, and aficionados can now debate their theories and exchange views via Internet sites, at annual conferences and in the columns of specialist magazines. (Sugden, 2002, p. xi)
The murders and murderer continue to be the object of investigative reports, board games, computer games, wax museum exhibits, trading cards, songs, operas, comic books, movies, television shows, baseball caps, and even alcoholic drinks (e.g., the Ripper Tipple, containing blood-red spirits). One of the most interesting features of the Ripper’s killings is the enduring interest in the case.

It is not hard to accept as truth some of what contemporaries of the killer believed. He had physical strength, both daring and coolness, and perhaps special knowledge and skill to be able to do what he did. He probably acted alone and was either very lucky or very accomplished to be able to vanish without leaving any trace of evidence as to who he was. In fact, it is probably Scotland Yard’s most famous unsolved crime. The number of suspects remains large, and nobody is widely accepted as the killer. Russo’s (2004) examination of 71 possible suspects led him to conclude that we are no wiser about the true identity of Jack the Ripper than we ever were. Even Lewis Carroll (whose real name was Charles Dodgson), famous author of children’s books like Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, was included on the list, supposedly killing in tandem with a lifelong friend from Oxford, Thomas Bayne (Wallace, 1996). Other suspects who were suggested at the time of the murders are a “sunstroked” physician, a cattle drover, a Malay, a slaughterhouse employee, a Frenchman who dabbled in the supernatural, and an American anatomist (Fisher, 1997, p. 213). Eddie Victor (the Duke of Clarence), grandson of Queen Victoria, has also been identified as possibly being the infamous killer (Abrahamsen, 1992; Russo, 2004). In 2014, DNA testing was conducted on bloodstains on the shawl of Catherine Eddowes, the fourth Ripper victim. Two strands of DNA from the shawl were tested against a descendant of the sister of a man named Aaron Kosminski, a long-time favorite among many Ripperologists as Jack the Ripper. One of the strands was a perfect match, and the second was a 99.2% match (Fox News, 2014).

**Folk Devils and Moral Panics**

Jack the Ripper has become larger than life, a concrete example of a folk devil. Folk devils embody evil, and they symbolize in a clear and consistent way, free from distractions and ambiguities, something despicable and ugly (S. Cohen, 1972). They are “unambiguously unfavorable symbols,” stripped of any positive qualities and imbued with the ultimate evil (p. 41).

London has been, in its time, the largest city in the world. It is well over two thousand years old, and has stood at the heart of an empire that spanned the
globe. Of all the blood that has been shed, the violence and the secrecy, the rise and fall of dynasties, five murders in the autumn of 1888 have cut more deeply into the memory of horror than any others. (Perry, 2006, p. 182)

Importantly, in such a symbolization process, “images are made much sharper than reality” (S. Cohen, 1972, p. 43).

Newspapers (of which there were hundreds in the area) did what they could to promote or even inflame residents’ fears and anxieties at the time of the killings. The media either improvised rumors or manipulated and massaged the available ones to make each murder seem more sensational and barbaric than the previous one. Because fear sold more newspapers, editors and reporters had a vested interest in making the crimes look as horrific as possible and the theories as outlandish as they could (Fisher, 1997).

Moral panics—and the public reaction in 1888 to the Ripper’s killings is a good example—by their very nature identify, condemn, and work to eliminate folk devils (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). A moral panic involves forecasts about possible disasters, increased sensitivity to signs of danger, exaggerated reactions, rumors, false alarms, and possibly even mass delusions (S. Cohen, 1972). As Fisher (1997) says,

A community will attempt to contain the threat by attributing it to an outsider or someone from another part of society, or by ultimately finding the victims themselves responsible for their own misfortune. Social distancing, finding fault, and laying blame are a community’s classic defense. (pp. 217–218)

The Ripper’s killings chipped away at the structure of the community, at least temporarily, weakening whatever bonds might have existed and intensifying ethnic and religious animosities. Residents became less trusting and more suspicious of one another. With each murder, the level of police patrol went up and citizen presence on the streets of the East End went down. Sporadic violence broke out in which groups of vigilantes would beat up any man walking the streets of Whitechapel who brought suspicion upon himself.

A roaming, brutal, relentless murderer, killing at will and with impunity, was perfectly fit to demonstrate to residents of the East End in 1888—and people elsewhere forevermore—the dangers of public life and the risks of trusting others. “The blacker the villain,” A. Cohen (1974) instructs, “the more useful he is to the ordinary man, who might otherwise be hard put to produce the desired contrast effect” (p. 17). The tale of Jack the Ripper was spread by newspapers and word of mouth, and given substance by letters to
The social construction of the Ripper as a folk devil rests on three “planks.” None of them is necessarily true, and each one is open to dispute. If any one of them were to be proven false, it would change substantially how this classic example of predatory violence is understood.

1. One man was responsible for the series of murders in the East End in 1888. The belief that one individual was responsible for each and every murder of the “canonical five” (Nichols, Chapman, Stride, Eddowes, and Kelly) is the core of the social construction of the Ripper. However, this may just be smoke and mirrors, a belief generated more by official responses and media attention than by any characteristics of the killings themselves. Street thugs and ruffians prowled the East End in search of cash and valuables. Some of the victims blamed on the Ripper could just as easily have been killed by these marauding gangs. These crooks used violence both to make prostitutes pay extortion money and to punish them if they refused. This sent a clear message to any others who might have been inclined to keep the money they had earned for themselves (Cornwell, 2002; Fido, 1993; Rumbelow, 1988). Stride, mainly because her murder was different from that of the other victims (i.e., no mutilations and no parallel incisions in the throat), is a good candidate as someone who was killed by a gang. In fact, one police...
view, eventually rejected for reasons that are unclear, was that a gang of blackmailing ruffians was responsible for the string of murders in 1888 (Jackson, 2008).

During their lives, the canonical five had interpersonal difficulties (i.e., fights and disagreements) with husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends, adult children, bosses, apartment owners, acquaintances, and friends. Where life is miserable, nasty, and brutish, little reluctance exists to act violently toward others. Even the fear of arrest and incarceration is an insufficient deterrent to override the brutalizing impact of desperate social conditions. Moreover, cutting throats was not an unusual way to murder people in 1888, especially in cases of domestic violence (Cornwell, 2002, p. 126). Furthermore, it is almost an article of faith among criminal profilers that stabbing a person multiple times in the region of the face is a very personal act. When it is found, it is taken as strong circumstantial evidence by police and medical examiners that victim and killer knew each other. More than one killer could have been operating in the area, and the canonical five could have been slain by other than a canonical one Jack the Ripper.

2. The Ripper killed many women. Estimates of the number of Ripper victims fluctuate over time and from writer to writer, going as low as 2 and as high as 11 (or higher in some accounts). These are widely divergent estimates and produce very different images of this nineteenth-century murderer. In fact, if it were to be true that the Ripper killed but two women—the consensus definition of serial killing requires that three or more people be killed with a lengthy cooling-off period after each murder (Homant & Kennedy, 2006, p. 190)—it would mean that Jack the Ripper, the most famous serial killer in the annals of crime, was not a serial killer at all (though the FBI [2013] defines serial murder as the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s) in separate events).

S. Evans and Rumbelow (2006) consider but then reject the prevailing view that Jack the Ripper killed five and only five women. They note that there is very little hard evidence and no certainty available about which killings were done by whom. Because no murderer was arrested and convicted for the crimes, they concluded that it is impossible to know which victims fell to the Ripper. They whittle the list down to three on the basis of how the killings were done. Nichols (victim #1), Chapman (victim #2), and Eddowes (victim #4), they conclude, were victims of the same killer. It is less likely that Stride (victim #3) and Kelly (victim #5) were (p. 260). This probably should have been the end of the discussion, but it was not. On page 268, in the “Authors’ Epilogues,” Rumbelow states the following: “Here I find myself agreeing with Superintendent Arnold that there were only four victims.”
The press at the time of the killings concluded that a series of murders was occurring, when it was no series at all. Two women had been killed in the general vicinity of Whitechapel, Emma Smith in April and Martha Tabram in August. When Mary Ann Nichols was also slain in August, the three deaths were lumped together and blamed on the same person. “The three Whitechapel murders were immediately identified as a ‘series’ and the press proclaimed that a homicidal maniac was on the loose” (S. Evans & Skinner, 2001, pp. 2–3). This conclusion was reached in spite of the fact that very few people in the area actually believed that the three victims were killed by the same hand. The seriality was established on the flimsiest of evidence: All three women had been cut and stabbed, and murder was not common in the district.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation coined the term linkage blindness to describe the failure of members of the public to recognize that the same killer is responsible for multiple murders occurring at different places and times (Jenkins, 1994, p. 6). This is a legitimate concern with killers like Theodore “Ted” Bundy, executed in Florida by electric chair on January 24, 1989, for killing a preteen female by the name of Kimberly Diane Leach. When the killer is mobile and the victims are many—Bundy killed women in many different states—linkage blindness may impede both efforts to nab the killer and efforts to understand all that happened. With Jack the Ripper, however, we may have a mirror image of this phenomenon, a linkage quest. This term describes the inclination to link murders together that are neither connected nor done by the same individual. This usually leads to a perception that a surge has occurred in the actual rate of serial murder rather than what it really is: an artifact of how the data are being reported and understood.

3. The Ripper was a sexually sadistic killer. If these murders were, in fact, sexually motivated, they were unusual. Not a lot of evidence of sexual mutilation existed in the 1888 murders, as most of the damage was done to the throat, abdomen, and internal organs. C. Wilson’s (1988) proof for his claim that Jack the Ripper inaugurated the age of sex crime is no proof at all. The only objective indicator he offers for classifying the killings the way he does is that “nightmarish mutilations” were inflicted upon the victims on their genital areas (p. 2). Just because the killer stabbed women in body parts that can be used for reproduction does not mean he was a sex criminal any more than the idea that because he stabbed victims in their abdomens, he had a sexual attraction to stomachs (called alvinolagnia). A quest to sexualize violence against women, when nothing comparable is done with violence against men, may impair our ability to understand serial murder (Monckton-Smith, 2010). The victim who comes closest to having been
assaulted by a sexually sadistic killer is Emma Smith. She was assaulted on April 3 with a blunt object that was inserted into her vaginal vault, dying a day later in the London Hospital. She has been discounted, however, as a Ripper victim.

Researchers at the FBI (Morton, Tillman, & Gaines, 2014) compiled a document to assist in the investigation of serial murders and the apprehension of individuals who commit them. It was based on 480 cases of serial murder in the United States (committed by 92 offenders), spanning the 46-year time period from 1960 to 2006. A majority of these killers (91.6%), all of whom were male, had killed three or more victims. A killing was classified as sexually motivated if any type of sexual interaction whatsoever had occurred between victim and killer. Even the presence of sexual fantasies alone—it is unclear how the FBI determined their existence—was sufficient for a murder to be defined as sexually motivated (p. 10). It is no surprise that when the brush sweeps this wide, a lot of sexually motivated murders will be found. The FBI concluded that sex was the principal motivation in 81.5% of the murders (p. 18) and that 69% of the victims (329 of the 480) were killed by someone who was deemed to have been sexually motivated (p. 43). Though their numbers don’t agree, the mistake doesn’t change their overall conclusion that most of the serial murder cases that law enforcement officers investigate are sexually motivated.

Medical specialists in 1888 could find no evidence of any sexual contact between the killer and the killed when they autopsied the victims. For example, Dr. Frederick Gordon Brown, the surgeon for the City of London police, reported at the inquest to determine the cause of death of Catherine Eddowes that no secretions of any kind were on the deceased’s thighs, leading him to conclude that no traces of recent “connection” existed. Fido (1993) finds this conclusion significant. It indicates that nineteenth-century medical men seem to have been well aware that a serial murderer like Jack the Ripper might copulate with his victims (or masturbate on the body). The medical examiner looked for evidence of this but could find none. It is true that forensic science in 1888 was in its infancy and had not yet developed tests for crime scene investigators to determine the presence of semen in or on a victim’s body. It is not true, however, that they were ignorant of the possibility that murders were sometimes done for sexual reasons.

None of the indicators used by Warren, Hazelwood, and Dietz (1996) in their study of 20 sexually sadistic serial killers was found in any of the Ripper murders. These researchers found binding, blindfolding, or gagging in 100% of the 20 murders studied; none of these occurred in the Ripper murders. They found torture in 100% of the 20 murders; no torture
occurred in the Ripper murders. They found careful planning of the offenses in 95% of the 20 murders. The murders in the East End in 1888 were more a product of luck or opportunity than of careful planning. These researchers found sexual bondage in 95% of the 20 murders; no sexual bondage was found in the Ripper murders. They found evidence of penile penetration in 95% of the 20 murders; no evidence of sexual connection was uncovered by medical examiners in any of the Ripper murders. They found evidence of sodomy (e.g., anal or oral sex) or object penetration in 90% of the 20 murders; nothing like this occurred in the Ripper murders.

Some evidence—or more than was found—should have been present at the crime scenes or uncovered at the autopsies if Jack the Ripper was, in fact, a sexually sadistic serial killer. The Ripper may simply have wanted to generate as much fear and outrage as possible in the general public and concluded that brutal murders and horrific mutilations were the way to do it. It would probably be wise to err on the side of caution and not assert confidently that Jack the Ripper was a sexually sadistic serial killer, inaugurating the age of sex crime. One thing certainly is true: Not all serial murderers are sexually sadistic murderers (Holmes & Holmes, 2010; Ioannou, 2010; Purcell & Arrigo, 2006). Serial murderers are motivated by things other than, or in addition to, sex, such as attention seeking, anger, thrills, or even financial gain (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008).

The Radford/Florida Gulf Coast University serial killer database (Radford/FGCU) gives information on 3,873 serial killers, each of whom had killed 2 or more victims from 1992 until September 6, 2014 (Aamodt, 2014). It reports that 46% of the killings were for lust, thrill, or power, while the remainder were for financial gain (32%), anger (8%), gang activities (3%), to avoid arrest (1.21%), to get attention (0.62%), for convenience (0.73%), due to hallucinations (0.41%), or as part of cult violence (0.21%). This database was put together by Radford University students from a survey of the Internet, prison records, court transcripts, media sources, and true crime books. It seems true that serial murderers search for victims who are vulnerable and thus easier to isolate and control, even while some of their killings seem to reflect a compulsive, aberrational quality (Alvarez & Bachman, 2008; Beard, Hunter, Kern, & Kiley, 2014; Vronsky, 2004).

The Ripper’s Legacy

If some doubt exists that the Victorians actually gave us the first sexually sadistic serial killer, no doubt should exist that an important legacy
originated in the fog-shrouded streets of the East End in 1888. The crimes and the Victorians’ treatment of them gave concrete meaning to the idea of *seriality*. These five killings (related or not) gave sustenance and nourishment to the developing view that separate crimes *could* be linked together. “Serial” came to mean something other than *repeated*. It indicated sinister characteristics of an offender, such as irrationality, compulsiveness, and extreme violence. Actual killers could draw inspiration from the idea of seriality and pattern their murders on the idea of stalking and repetition.

Some individuals in the United States during the time of the murders devoured reports from abroad about the killings (Larson, 2003). A Whitechapel Club formed in Chicago. The club’s president held the title of “The Ripper,” and members, mostly journalists, both revered and sensationalized murder and mayhem. Their meetings consisted of a sharing of tales about murders that had occurred on the streets of Chicago. Weapons used in actual murders, supplied by the police, adorned the walls of the clubhouse. Skulls supplied by a nearby asylum did, too (pp. 31–32).

The Ripper murders established—or seemed to—that serial killers’ level of violence escalates over time. Sugden (2002) shows this way of thinking when he describes the murder of Mary Jane Kelly, generally believed to be the last victim of the series, as “certainly his [the Ripper’s] most extensively mutilated victim” (p. 112). The only way, however, that escalating violence could be confirmed in the East End killings is if they were all done by the same individual, and if the slow, methodical, private killing of Mary Kelly could be scientifically proven to be more violent than the savage blitz attack and frenzied mutilations, done in the open, of Catherine Eddowes. The claims about how many women Jack the Ripper killed, still a matter of dispute, get hopelessly confused with claims about whether the violence went up, went down, or stayed about the same.

The Ripper and his murders were a watershed event for the study of predatory violence. Not only was the East End in the nineteenth century perfectly suited to produce a killer like Jack the Ripper, but it was also perfectly suited to socially construct the murders in the way that they have been understood and remembered. Social context always matters. A good explanation of the Ripper would give a convincing account of why he killed whom he did, how he was able to escape again and again, and why he stopped killing when he did (Fisher, 1997). An even better explanation would give convincing evidence about the *meanings* these murders had for the killer, as well as the role played by social organization and cultural dynamics in how these murders have been conceptualized and why interest in Jack the Ripper has persisted for so long.
Variable Violence

Killing the Young

The prevailing standards in the United States today with regard to when life begins and when it can be taken away, though ambiguous, are clear in one respect: It is totally unacceptable for anybody to intentionally kill or abuse an infant or child. Even the most adamant proabortionist believes that once a child is born, he or she is a person and has the right to live and grow, and antiabortionists would no doubt agree. The killing or abuse of an infant or child is viewed as inexcusable—a monstrous act by either a very sick or a very sadistic individual (Kantrowitz, 1998). However, infanticide—killing of babies and small children—has not always been considered a heinous act.

Infanticide occurs among nonhuman primates (Rees, 2009), and it was once a fairly common human practice (deMause, 1974). Childhood used to be considered a brief period of development during which children were expected to acquire adult skills and capabilities as quickly as possible, and they were viewed as ungrateful dependents or even as parasites (McCoy, 1992). Middle- and upper-class parents believed that having too many children interfered with their lifestyles and their pursuit of pleasure. Working- and lower-class families also had their reasons for not wanting too many children. A new child meant another mouth to feed and another person to care for in a family where resources were limited. Time spent in the birth and care of a child pulled the mother away from important duties that contributed to the survival of the entire family. Prior to the late 1800s, as the American Medical Association formed in 1847, regular physicians still suffered from much ignorance about how to deliver healthy babies. If the mother were to die in childbirth—a distinct possibility given the low level of medical knowledge and skill—a valuable family member would be gone. Illegitimate children, deformed children, babies born to parents who did not want them, and infants born to families who were too poor to afford them were regularly killed outright or simply allowed to die through abandonment or neglect.

Improvement in economic conditions, new civil liberties for all people, healthier living conditions, and better medical care served to change attitudes about children and childhood. Children came to be seen as more valuable. By the late 1600s and early 1700s, child-rearing practices were already starting to change throughout the world. The Puritans, for example, elevated the status of children to new heights. They believed strongly in the value of the family, especially family cohesion and integration (Pleck, 1987). By the late 1700s, more women had access to birth control techniques, allowing
some choice in regard to pregnancy. Because having a child was more voluntary, it meant that more parents had children because they wanted them. Children came to be defined more as rewards than as burdens, and a new closeness developed between parents and their children. Parents were more affectionate toward children and more indulgent of them than they had ever been (Zelizer, 1994).

Children came to be increasingly viewed as persons who needed to be protected from the risks and hazards of life. Child labor laws were passed in most Western nations to ensure that youngsters were no longer economically exploited by adults. During the twentieth century in the United States, children came to be viewed less as economic assets and more as priceless human beings. Their principal value was found in the pleasure that they brought to others and their capacity for learning and future success. Children had attained a sentimental value in the Western world that was unheard of and unimaginable at other times and places. New laws, new criminal procedures, and new criminal justice institutions were crafted in 1899 in the United States just for them, largely as a result of a group in Chicago, Illinois, called the Child Savers. These reformers wanted youthful offenders removed from the corrupting influences of urban life and put into places that were supervised by people who cared enough to teach them right from wrong (Platt, 2009; Ward, 2012).

At times, in some places, infanticide has been defined as an expression of parental duty and love, not a retreat from it. The Netsilik Eskimo (Inuit) are a native group who live on the Arctic coast of North America. They hunt seals, caribou, and salmon with harpoons and spears. They were once nomadic and lived in tents in the summer and snow houses (igloos) in the winter that were heated by soapstone lamps. They were well-known for their custom of infanticide (Balikci, 1970/1989).

Once when there was a famine Nagtok gave birth to a child, while people lay around about her dying of hunger. What did that child want here? How could it live, when its mother, who should give it life, was herself dried up and starving? So she strangled it and allowed it to freeze and later on ate it. (Rasmussen, as quoted in Balikci, p. 151)

The Netsilik considered infanticide as a way to increase their chances of survival in a harsh environment.

Female children were killed more often than male children. Why kill girls instead of boys? The Netsilik defined females as both poor hunters and big eaters, so their loss from society was considered less objectionable than the loss of males. They believed that female infanticide increased the entire
community’s chances for survival by reducing the number of people who ate food but were deemed less able to hunt for it. If a woman gave birth to a daughter and cared for her, it was considered time poorly spent; the mother could have given birth to a son and raised him in an equal amount of time. Thus, a daughter might be killed to make it possible for the family to bring forth a son.

Infants were killed in several ways. If a birth occurred during the winter, the newborn was placed at the entrance to the igloo. The child’s screams only lasted a few minutes because the infant froze to death. In summer, a newborn was placed in a small grave, dug near the family’s dwelling. The infant usually cried several hours before dying. A third method was used for all seasons: A furry skin was placed over the infant’s face until the baby suffocated.

The Netsilik were either unconcerned with, or unaware of, the grave dangers that female infanticide posed to community survival. The custom produced powerful tensions and a great deal of disharmony. It caused an imbalance in the sex ratio, thereby reducing the number of marriageable females. This increased the pressure on men to find and hold mates. The community divided itself into many small, mutually suspicious groups. Sometimes, husbands were murdered by envious men who coveted their wives.

In 1936, a Catholic missionary established a mission near the Netsilik. As a result of his preaching and ongoing personal involvement with them, he was able to suppress the practice of female infanticide. This eventually restored the balance in the sex ratio. Men were able to find wives more easily, and they were less likely to murder each other to obtain mates. Monogamy became the rule. Very quickly, according to Balikci (1970/1989), the Netsilik started acting like “good Christians” (p. 250).

**Killing the Not-So-Young**

In some places, the idea of killing a person who is legally determined to “deserve it” because of some injury he or she has visited on the community receives great support. Such a killing—called *capital punishment* or the *death penalty*—may not even be viewed as an unnecessarily violent act because of its legitimacy in the eyes of the beholders. Unlike dueling violence, which skirted the official apparatus of control, the killings produced by capital punishment occur according to strict rules and formalized procedures and are carried out by representatives of the government itself. Specific due-process requirements must be followed for an individual to be sentenced to death and then executed, and the convict is legally permitted to appeal the sentence, many times in the usual case.
Amnesty International (2014) reported that 22 nations executed a total of 778 criminals in 2013 (China is excluded because it refuses to divulge any information about its executions.). This represented a decrease from a decade earlier when 31 countries carried out executions. Amnesty International concluded that the worldwide trend is toward abolition of use of the death penalty with over two-thirds of the world’s countries terminating its use in law, in practice, or both. (Almost 80% of the executions in 2013 were confined to three countries: Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran.) A more recent report (Amnesty International, 2015) indicates that the same number of countries executed people in 2014 as in 2013 (22 countries). However, the number of executions worldwide, 607 (excluding China, once again), was 22% lower than the 2013 figures. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran were responsible for over 70% of the reported executions in 2014.

Not all states in the United States have the death penalty, and different people have different opinions about its propriety, especially with subpopulations, such as juveniles, those with mental retardations (i.e., intellectual disabilities), the insane, or the mentally ill (Koch, Wark, & Galliher, 2012; Kubiak & Allen, 2011). Attitudes about capital punishment in the United States have shifted during the last 45 years or so from weak support (42% favored it as a punishment for murder in 1966) to the strong support of the 1980s and 1990s (71% favored it in 1996) (Maguire & Pastore, 1998, p. 141). Support for capital punishment declined a bit as the United States moved into the twenty-first century (60% favored it as a punishment for murder in 2013 [Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013, Table 2.51]). However, a survey of college freshmen shows that they have become more supportive of the death penalty with the passage of time. In 1969, a total of 56% of them agreed (“strongly” or “somewhat”) that the death penalty should be abolished; in 2006, only 35% of them felt the same way (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006, Table 2.93).

Ancient executions were savage affairs, characterized by a great deal of community rage and anger, in which the offender was expected to die slowly and in great misery. The entire community participated, either as executioners or as witnesses (Johnson, 1990). The bodily organs of some offenders were mutilated to increase their punishment even more. Intestines, hearts, and kidneys have been ripped out of condemned criminals by angry crowds, sometimes while the condemned was still alive, and their hands, noses, tongues, and ears have been either cut off or mutilated. In some cases, it was done because the body parts were viewed as the organs
responsible for the crimes. Other times, offenders were mutilated simply to hurt them more or to humiliate them further (Newman, 1978).

The identifying features of modern, government executions, at least in the United States, are their bureaucratic nature and their isolation from the community. Community feelings of rage are supposed to be absent or at least suppressed. What was once an act by a community on its own behalf has become the province of prison officials, who are expected to approach executions with professionalism and detachment. The last government-sponsored public execution in the United States occurred in Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1937, where a young black man (named Rainey Bethea) was hanged for assaulting a 70-year-old woman. Twenty thousand people attended, and they were a coarse, unruly crowd (Prejean, 1989, p. 101).

Murderers not only take lives needlessly and ravage the families and friends of the victim, but also violate the sentiments of trust and affiliation that serve as the foundation of social life. The anger, the hurt, and the desire for revenge are easy enough to understand (Berns, 1982). However, not everyone who has had a family member murdered is in favor of the death penalty.

I was eight years old when my father was murdered. It is almost impossible to describe the pain of losing a parent to a senseless murder. And in the aftermath, it is similarly impossible to quiet the confusion: “Why him? Why this? Why me?” But even as a child one thing was clear to me: I didn’t want the killer, in turn, to be killed. . . . I saw nothing that could be accomplished in the loss of one life being answered with the loss of another. And I knew, far too vividly, the anguish that would spread through another family—another set of parents, children, brothers, and sisters thrown into grief. (M. K. Kennedy, 1989, p. 1)

The author of this statement is M. Kerry Kennedy, the daughter of Robert F. Kennedy. Her father was gunned down in Los Angeles in June 1968 during his bid for the Democratic nomination for the presidency of the United States. Why was Ms. Kennedy so strongly opposed to capital punishment, even as a child, and even after the murder of her father, when other people, whose lives have not been as dramatically changed by a violent crime, are in favor of it? Do they have greater concern for the victims of violence than does Ms. Kennedy, or is something else operating?

Elements can be found in an execution of a convicted felon to suggest that it is—or could be interpreted as—a premeditated, violent act. Johnson (1990) describes an execution he witnessed of a felon named Jones. The man
was strapped into the electric chair, electrodes were attached to his head and leg, and a tight mask was placed over his face. Only his nose was visible. At the legally designated time, the electric switch was thrown, and 2,500 volts of electricity, at 5 to 7 amps, coursed through Jones’s body, starting at his head and ending at the electrode on his ankle. Here, Johnson describes the details:

Jones sat perfectly still for what seemed an eternity but was in fact no more than thirty seconds. Finally, the electricity hit him. His body stiffened spasmodically, though only briefly. A thin swirl of smoke trailed away from his head, then dissipated quickly. (People outside the witness room could hear crackling and burning; a faint smell of burned flesh lingered in the air, mildly nauseating some people.) The body remained taut, with the right foot raised slightly at the heel, seemingly frozen there. A brief pause, then another minute of shock. When it was over, the body was inert. (p. 111)

An execution is characterized by harm (death of the convicted felon), intent to kill (the execution is meticulously planned and carefully rehearsed to ensure a smooth and successful operation), and a deliberate taking of an individual’s life by state representatives. In all those characteristics, a “murder” and an “execution” are identical (M. C. Kennedy, 1976). M. C. Kennedy argues that it is one group’s superior power that creates and sustains the belief that punishment and crime are different from one another, belonging to mutually exclusive categories. It is peculiar, he thinks, that some groups will go to great lengths to stop the violence of murder but will allow, or even encourage, the violence of capital punishment.

Most people view executions as less violent than the killings that offenders committed that got them sent to the death chamber in the first place. Executions seem to be activated by proper motives, such as retribution and protection of innocent victims. Executioners are able to portray their acts as necessary and beneficial for protection of social order, both a professional duty and a legal obligation. It is widely believed that individuals who cannot live peacefully in an open, free, and prosperous society, deserve what they get, even if it is the death penalty. The heightened fear of violent crime, coupled with media coverage of criminal violence, no doubt plays a role when people’s support for capital punishment increases (Mandery, 2012; Rankin, 1979). The U.S. Supreme Court, along with a majority of state legislatures, reformed the death penalty in the 1970s so that it seemed moral enough to justify its continued use—less arbitrary, less racist, and less brutal (because lethal injections replaced electrocutions and gassings) (Garland, 2005).
One thing that has made some difference in how executions are viewed is that the U.S. Supreme Court rendered decisions that restricted their use with certain populations. In *Atkins v. Virginia* (2002), the Court declared that individuals with mental retardation (i.e., intellectual disabilities) could no longer be executed (due primarily to the diminished capacity that can accompany such a disability). In *Roper v. Simmons* (2005), which extended similar logic about capacity to the young, the Court ruled by a vote of 5 to 4 that executing individuals who at the time of their offense were juveniles (anyone under the age of 18) was in violation of the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments. Executions of juveniles were declared to be cruel and unusual punishments. (Repeal of the death penalty for juveniles has had no impact on rates of murder committed by them because its use had no deterrent effect on murder for offenders under age 18 anyway [Flexon, Stolzenberg, & D’Alessio, 2011].)

Supporters of the death penalty are traditionally more conservative than liberal, more concerned with public safety than with individual rights, and more focused on the malevolence of humans than on their benevolence or possibility for redemption (Garland, 2005). Curiously, some extreme supporters of the death penalty express their rage over violent crime by wanting murderers killed—as painfully as possible—along with anyone who opposes the death penalty (and the opponents’ families, too) (Vandiver, Giacopassi, & Gathje, 2002). For individuals who see an execution as a reasonable, or even necessary, retribution for serious crimes, the desirability of the death penalty is a core value, and core values are unlikely to change much if at all (Mandery, 2012).

Public attitudes about the death penalty do change, however. Just as many factors work together to determine the likelihood of an individual being executed (Petrie & Coverdill, 2010), so do many factors work together to determine public opinions about the death penalty. Evidence of the conviction and execution of innocent individuals, political decisions to commute sentences, examples that the penalty is racist and discriminatory, and growing awareness that the United States is out of step with other countries in the global environment—all of these can intensify pressures to change the law to abolish the practice. Public support for the death penalty seems to rise when the public is convinced that it is administered fairly, free from prejudice and discrimination, and where innocent individuals are unlikely to be executed (Mandery, 2012). Changes in the actual use of capital punishment, as well as public attitudes about it, are influenced by changing views of its morality, constitutionality, reliability, irrevocability, and fairness (Garland, 2005; Mbionwu, 2010; Walker, 2011).
Conclusions

Violence—or social acts called violence—is a regular feature of most societies, and much of it is done by ordinary people who view their use of violence as practical and necessary, a form of self-help when legal authorities either will not or cannot help. These individuals seek their own brand of justice, and they seem to care little that they might be arrested and imprisoned for what they have done. Some of the individuals who commit murder may even wait for police to arrive or report the crime themselves. Important factors in the relativity of violence are the ability to offer appropriate motives for what one has done and to offer accounts if one’s rationale for using violence is called into question.

Infanticide, capital punishment, dueling, thuggee, mass murder, predatory violence, and serial murder are not individual random events, precipitated by stress and frustration. They are socially created and socially sustained, reflecting patterns of social organization rather than negations of it. What are the differences among the deaths caused by capital punishment, dueling, thuggee, predatory murder, nonpredatory murder, or infanticide and other violent happenings in some society? Are there any objective, intrinsic, or inherent qualities of killings themselves that would allow a dispassionate observer to know which deaths are legitimate and which are not? Even serious deviances, like the different kinds of violence described in this chapter, vary a great deal from place to place, time to time, and situation to situation. Individual motives and intentions are important to know about to understand predatory violence, as are social dynamics and cultural meanings.

References


CHAPTER 5: Predatory Violence


