

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

TERANCE D. MIETHE and WENDY C. REGOECZI, *Rethinking Homicide: Exploring the Structure and Process Underlying Deadly Situations*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 320 p. No price indicated, cloth.

Miethé and Regoeczi have constructed an extremely well-organized, systematic account of homicides using primarily the United States Supplementary Homicide Reports, as well as additional state-level, city-level, and narrative accounts from several locales and previous studies. The monograph offers a welcomed analytic shift by examining “deadly situations” or cases as the unit of analysis rather than the traditional foci either on individuals or homicide rates. In particular, the authors utilize Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to study “the convergence of victim, offender, and offense elements that structure violent events” (p.1). Their single most important contribution, in fact, involves the application of QCA to an enormously rich and complex dataset. The book offers an innovative and interesting approach to the study of homicide through the identification of the common structural and situational factors underlying lethal violence in the United States over several decades.

The first chapter introduces the logic of the analytic strategy, followed by a chapter that reviews some of the macro- and micro-theories of homicides. The third chapter presents the data and methodology of the research study, including an extremely helpful explanation of the QCA approach. Those who may be unfamiliar with the analytic strategy will benefit greatly from the authors’ detailed discussion. The empirical meat of the book consists of six chapters devoted to the analysis of specific homicidal patterns over time, as the authors attempt to tease out dominant trends and correlates underlying homicidal situations.

The authors provide an aggregate analysis of the most common offender, victim and offense elements associated with homicide, a comparison of instrumental and expressive motives in homicide situations, and chapters focusing on gender differences, youth homicides, and racial differences. Each chapter has been organized in a systematic fashion, commencing with the dominant homicidal patterns and situational contexts. The chapters then proceed with a review of theory and methods for assessing the comparisons in previous research, the key analytic results, narrative accounts to enrich or elaborate upon the main findings, and an excellent section on the conclusions and implications of these results.

The authors provide a timely contribution to the debate about the variable nature of homicides, which tend to be associated with different situational contexts. Their distinction between expressive and instrumental homicides parallels the broader sociological discussion regarding types of violence, which various

analysts have described as “moralistic” versus “predatory” or “situational violence” versus “coercive control.” The analysis thus provides further confirmatory evidence of the gendered nature of much homicidal violence, with males more likely to kill others of similar social standing in more public contexts, even while accounting for the majority of lethal intimate partner violence. The predominant pattern among women involves killing family members and intimate partners in private locations. In their analyses of gender, racial characteristics, youth homicides, and victim-offender relationships, the authors convincingly demonstrate the utility of the QCA approach to determining the most common “signatures” associated with homicidal contexts.

The main weakness of the approach, though, involves the limited assessment and evaluation of criminological theories beyond the conventional theories dealing with offender motivations and opportunities. For example, the authors do not consider life course theories (e.g., Sampson and Laub’s work) or the Blackian approach to homicide (e.g., Cooney’s work), perhaps because of the limitations of available measures in their datasets. Whatever the reason, contemporary theoretical work has moved beyond traditional theories of strain, routine activities, rational choice, and subculture of violence approaches. Sophisticated methodological analyses such as Miethe’s and Regoeczi’s work expectedly should offer some insights as to the relevance of their work to other innovative theoretical approaches.

Despite the aforementioned shortcoming, the book should be considered essential reading for scholars studying homicide and violence in general, as well as graduate students in criminology and related courses. The authors have succeeded at least in part of their mission to compel readers to “rethink” homicide by highlighting important structural and processual elements that underlies general patterns of homicidal encounters. The emphasis on “conjunctive thinking,” wherein multiple causal pathways are modeled rather than treating each variable’s impact as linear and invariant across contexts, should stimulate further discussion and research. The scholarly focus and attention to technical and methodological details, however, will discourage the consumption of the work by the general public and will not likely be popular in undergraduate courses.

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