

Causative Factors in Violence

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The human capacities for love and learning are rooted in the first eighteen months of life. This fact is well documented in the literature on early emotional and cognitive development.¹⁻⁶ An understanding of developmental psychology is necessary to comprehend the individual who later becomes violent, as it is to understand the development of any person.

In the last two decades, clinical and developmental research in early infancy have developed a tremendous and valuable body of knowledge to aid in the understanding of psychopathology in adult life.⁷ We know now that human needs must be met in infancy for a person to become an adequately functioning adult. The number of psychologically imperiled infants in any community is far greater than any of us realizes. Unfortunately, in our present system a child is usually not defined as a person with problems until he approaches school age and announces, by wetting his pants or attacking his neighbors, that he has a problem. Until then, relatives or friends typically say that this or that problem will go away by the time the baby gets his teeth or is toilet-trained or "gets older." Yet, in the first few months of life there are prominent signals of severe future problems if, e.g., the mother cannot hold the baby or if there are other signs of interference with the bonding between the baby and the parents. Human attachment reciprocity should be present at two weeks and easily noticeable at three months. Some signs of lack of attachment are lack of eye contact, no smiles toward the parent, minimal vocalizing toward the parent, no outstretching of arms toward the parent, and, as the child develops more locomotor ability, failure to come to the parent for comfort.⁸

Even in homes where there is no tendency on the part of the parents to be violent towards the child, major problems can still develop later if nurturing needs of the infant are not met. The child's problems are much compounded if, in addition, there is violent behavior on the part of the parent toward the child, either physically or verbally. The one most consistent product of research on the underlying causes of murder is the repeated finding that, in the early home backgrounds of the homicidal offenders, they themselves were the victims of violence. In a study of homicidal offenders examined before they went to trial, Emanuel Tanay found that 60%-70% were victims of child abuse during their formative years.⁹

In the present author's study of 200 murderers selected at random from a total of 2,000 seen over a 21-year period in the Michigan penal system, 25% remembered a history of violent child rearing and another 43% remembered a history of damaging early environment characterized by discounting through verbal abuse and neglect.¹⁰ This study suffered from the limitations of any study in which the data of childhood events is obtained from adults relying upon their ability to remember and not to repress significant events in their early home situations. Because of anxiety and conflict in recalling extremely frightening events from childhood, there is a tendency to repress these as well as to repress murderous fantasies towards the parents. Therefore, many such individuals will not in all honesty be able to recall the true details of their early lives.

The most thorough study in progress in this area is probably by S.H. Frazier, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Since 1951 he has been studying 200 white males who committed premeditated murder and were later imprisoned or hos-

pitalized for treatment.¹¹ In this study, the families of the murderers and others related to the experience were also studied—each individual by a different investigator—with an average of 50 hours spent on each family. Enough data has been analyzed on 65 of the murderers to date to allow the development of some conclusions. Frazier and associates found that repeated brutalization during childhood, by parents or parent surrogates, was a finding in most of those murderers who later strangled immediate family members or relatives. Another frequent finding in these murderers was long periods of social isolation and loneliness in childhood. The murderers had also suffered repetitious incidents of shame and humiliation as children. They had developed feelings of worthlessness and self-negation. Many had thought of suicide and had actually planned it. Those murderers who were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the murder were excluded from Frazier's study.

Actually, including those murderers who were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the times of the murders appears to have very little effect on the findings. In the present author's own study, 34% recalled and admitted being under the influence of alcohol at the time of the act. Reports based upon findings by police officers and other officials who had almost immediate contact with the murderers at the times of the arrests show that 70% of the murderers were under the influence of alcohol at the time they committed the homicides. In Wolfgang's study of 588 cases of homicide, alcohol was described as significant to 55% of the offenders.¹² McDonald found that the percentage of homicidal offenders who used alcohol prior to the murders ranged from 19% to 83% with a median of 54%.¹³ Although not a basically causative factor in the homicide, alcohol helps the event take place when the person is predisposed to violence.

In those cases where the victim is one of the parents, the history generally reveals a long conflictual relationship between the father and son and between the father and mother or stepmother, involving either physical or verbal abuse. There was a history of over-protectiveness or overindulgence during childhood, associated with lack of any emotional warmth or true caring on the part of the parent. Sometimes victims were selected because of some chance resemblance to the hated parents or step-parents.

The following case history is typical of many taken from the author's files. Bob was a 28-year-old Caucasian who had been divorced twice. In his early 20's he was sentenced to life for second degree murder. The victim was a 39-year-old woman with whom he became acquainted through a boyfriend. After strangling her, Bob (who was drunk at the time) proceeded to have sexual intercourse with her, and then mutilated her vagina with a knife. Bob described the victim as a sexually promiscuous drunkard. He described his mother in the same terms. Bob's father, age 52, lived in a distant state. He was employed as a construction foreman with a chemical company in Texas, and his job was such that he was away from home much of the time. The subject last saw his father one year prior to the murder, when he visited him and found employment nearby. He was planning to live with his father, and his father had given more or less tacit approval to his staying there, but later rejected him, stating that he could not live there. Apparently the stepmother did not want Bob there. When the subject spoke of this rejection, he broke into tears.

Between ages 16 to 23, the subject had not seen his father. When the subject finished the ninth grade, he moved to Michigan and started high school there. He then returned to his previous state and found that his father and first stepmother had been divorced. He then lived with the first stepmother for another period of time.

Bob seems to feel very strongly toward his father. He greatly desires the father's affection but apparently was constantly rejected by him. Due to the father's employment, he was home only on weekends, and the subject recalls that the only time his father talked with him during his childhood was when he was punishing him. The subject's wife reports that she always has been suspicious of the subject's paternity, questioning whether or not the man alleged to be his father was actually his natural father.

She states that there was little physical resemblance and that, since the father seemed to reject him constantly, she became suspicious.

The subject relates that his mother and father were separated when he was approximately 18 months of age. He has revealed that his mother was an alcoholic, and others also have indicated that she spent most of her free time in bars drinking and "feeling sorry for herself." Bob relates that he did not see his mother from the age of 18 months until he was four. When he was four or five, he was required to move from the house of the father and stepmother to that of the mother and stepfather, and he thought then that his real mother was his stepmother. He states that he was forced to live with his mother, and that this was a traumatic episode in his life. His mother had only an eighth grade education. She was in poor health because of cirrhosis of the liver. She also was a hypochondriac and constantly talked about her various ailments, some of which were imaginary. Bob claims that when his mother was sober, she was "a wonderful woman." He believes that she may blame herself for the death of a sister who allegedly died of pneumonia because the subject's mother did not care for her properly. Bob states that he has heard a number of stories about his mother regarding her lack of moral character but he did not know of their authenticity.

The subject was about 14 or 15 years old when his father and first stepmother separated. He states that he "hated her but I later realized much of her behavior was due to an inferiority complex." He remembers that she would pick on him constantly and that he "couldn't do nothing right." According to him, his stepmother would alienate him from his friends, telling them how bad he was. His alienation progressed to the point where his only outlet was talking to the horse which his grandfather had given to him. He states that his stepmother tried to keep him from riding his horse. Essentially, his stepmother brought him up, because of his father's absences. His stepmother would not let him date girls and was always trying to keep him busy working. On one occasion he stole his stepmother's car and took \$10.00 from her purse. He was subsequently involved in an accident and for a time he was placed in a foster home. He has related many instances of what he considered to be unfair treatment by his stepmother. For example, his stepmother had a pet dog which she would allow to sleep in the house at night, but his own dog could not stay in the house. Consequently, his dog developed distemper and had to be killed. Another time, his stepmother told him to get a shotgun and kill a snake in the chicken coop. He did not want to go into the chicken coop because the snake was in the rafters and he was extremely fearful of it. His stepmother insisted that he do so, and he went into the chicken coop and shot the snake. A hole was put in the roof as a result of the affair, and his stepmother blamed him for this. He indicates that there was no other way he could kill the snake inside the chicken coop without putting a hole in the roof. He was forced into the action by his stepmother, who still blamed him for the hole in the roof which he later had to repair. This is a classical example of a double bind as described by Watzlavich, Beavin and Jackson.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that he indicates that the victim in the present case reminded him somewhat of his stepmother.

Bob was rejected by his father, mother, and stepmother. Out of his own frustrated needs, he maintained an illusion of an affectionate relationship with the father, who was seldom with him at home. His real caretakers, his mother and stepmother, were frankly rejecting of him. His mother was seldom sober and her interests were elsewhere. He developed an image of women as immoral creatures without feelings, a pattern set by the mother. The stepmother was frankly cruel to a sadistic degree, and she built up tremendous hostilities within the subject. These finally were released in his sadistic murder of a female victim who fitted quite closely his description of his own mother and stepmother. The victim was 39, alcoholic and sexually promiscuous like the mother, and "bitchy" like the stepmother. The fact that he felt impelled to mutilate her vagina (to castrate the victim), indicated his desire to avenge his own feelings of castration as

a boy helplessly caught in the control of the promiscuous and rejecting mother and the sadistic stepmother who humiliated him at every opportunity. He was also unable to make an adequate marriage adjustment. There was considerable emotional distance between himself and his wife. He seldom had intercourse with her. Bob's feelings are well described by his statement, "I love women, but I guess you could say deep down that I hate them." Unlike most murderers, he had had many conscious waking fantasies of committing an act of murder (always on a woman after he had raped her) prior to actually committing such a crime. In the author's experience, it is only in cases of truly sadistic murderers that conscious fantasies of committing acts of murder were entertained, tolerated and even enjoyed, prior to committing acts of homicide.

It takes a great amount of hurt to stifle the natural love of a child for its mother, but it appears that this person endured a sufficient number of injurious experiences to accomplish this stifling thoroughly. Without the moderating influence of the libidinal forces (of love), the aggressive feelings broke out eventually in a completely uncontrolled fashion. The murdered person was substituted for the originally hated objects (mother, stepmother). Fantasies of genital contact in the form of forcible rape replaced fantasies of consenting sexual relations between partners who are capable of loving each other.

The provocative findings of two other investigators, Tanay and Toch,¹⁵ on the interchange which takes place between the victim and the murderer preceding the homicide, led the present author to direct a major interest of this study in the same direction. In addition to the fact that in 62% of the cases in the author's study the victim was either a spouse, relative, friend or acquaintance, there was a very significant preceding interaction between the perpetrator and the victim in 66% of the cases. The balance comprises the cases of "street crimes," in which the chance victim is one of some holdup attempt or burglary.

In the preceding interaction which took place between perpetrator and victim, there was a quarrel immediately before the act in 50% of the cases and a quarrel within three days prior to the act in the other 16%. In the latter instance, the perpetrator would characteristically brood about some wrong or imagined wrong, often drinking for 2 to 3 days to develop enough courage to carry out some act of retaliatory violence.

The 149 homicides most often resulted from quarrels, love triangles, drunken arguments between friends, arguments over gambling debts, revenge, or recent threats to the life or integrity of the assassin. As Toch¹⁶ points out, ". . . the intensity of a person's violence varies with the extent to which his integrity has been compromised. . . . Ultimately, violence arises because some person feels that he must resort to a physical act, that a problem he faces calls for a destructive solution. The problem a violent person perceives is rarely the situation as we see it, but rather some dilemma he feels he finds himself in. . . . To understand violence, it is necessary to focus on the chain of interactions between aggressor and victim."

Many of the murders were related in various ways to threats upon the masculinity of the assailant, exemplified by rivalry in love relationships, and threats of object loss, such as loss of the love partner. Twenty-nine of the victims were killed because of extreme jealousy and/or anger as part of love triangles. In one of these cases, the victim was a woman who was viewed as the competitor because she was carrying on a homosexual relationship with the subject's wife. In this group it was noted that in 12 instances the victim was the rival, and in 17 instances the victim was the assassin's own sexual partner.

Very often, these homicides occurred after the masculinity or the personal security of the assassins was threatened by a lover's preference for another partner or a threat to desert the subject for the other love object. Most often the murderers were people who grew up in very disturbed home situations, with their need for love as children unmet, or supplied in a most marginal and often ambivalent fashion by the mother. The fatal quarrel was often the culmination of several weeks or months of increasing disruption

of the current love relationship. The fear of the permanent loss of the love partner represented an intolerable threat. It mobilized years of pent-up anger and ambivalent feelings originally directed toward the mother and later toward the adult sexual object.

Thus, the final victim of the attack may be a sexual victim or a murder victim without sexual assault. That choice appears related to possible displacement of the sexual urges as well as the aggressive drives from the parent or other original object.

Although trained in psychoanalysis, the author makes no attempt at psychoanalytic interpretations in Bob's case, as he did not have this subject in therapy, and any such interpretations would be merely speculative. Rather, this paper is intended to demonstrate socio-cultural factors as a determinant in homicidal behavior, with an emphasis on early developmental factors. Although derived from entirely different data, my conclusions substantiate those expressed by Fraiberg: "In the course of development, the child modifies his aggressive urges through love by his human partners. If a child, for one or another reason becomes deprived of human partners or of the conditions for attachment, the result may be a lack of inhibitions of aggressive impulses or of the capacity to regulate aggression."¹⁷

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