

Born to Kill?

Evaluating Evolutionary Explanations of Homicide

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Homicide Adaptation Theory

“ . . . my theory is that humans have evolved powerful psychological adaptations that impel us to murder as a means of solving specific problems we encounter during the evolutionary battles for survival and reproduction” (Buss, 2005, p. 34)

“ . . . the most penetrating, comprehensive, and scientifically sound theory of murder ever proposed”
(Buss, 2005, p. 18)



Key Sources

Buss, D. M. (2005). *The murderer next door: Why the mind is designed to kill*. New York: Penguin.

Duntley, J. D., & Buss, D. M. (2008). The origins of homicide. In J. D. Duntley & T. K. Shackelford (Eds.), *Evolutionary forensic psychology: Darwinian foundations of crime and law* (pp. 41-64). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goertz, A. T. et al. (2008). Punishment, proprietariness, and paternity: Men's violence against women from an evolutionary perspective. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 13, 481-489.



Why should we be interested in evolutionary explanations of homicide?

- The importance of theory
- The emergence of “evolutionary forensic psychology”

TWO Key Questions will be Addressed:

1. How plausible is Homicide Adaptation Theory?
2. What is the role of evolutionary explanations in the development of a comprehensive theoretical model of violence/homicide?

Focus on (male) intimate partner homicide



Intimate Partner Homicide (IPH) – What needs to be explained?

1. Men are more likely to kill their intimate partner than are women
2. Rates of IPH vary both historically and cross-nationally
3. The risk of IPH for women declines with age (and increases with greater male-female age discrepancy)
4. The risk of IPH is greater for women in de facto compared to married relationships
5. The risk of IPH for women is related to a number of situational factors relating to the relationship:
 - separation (especially first 3 months)
 - attempts to leave/end the relationship
 - actual or perceived infidelity
 - relationship conflict



Intimate Partner Homicide (IPH) – What needs to be explained?

5. Individual and social level factors include:
 - history of violence by the perpetrator against the victim
 - extreme possessiveness/controlling behaviour of perpetrator
 - poverty/unemployment
 - alcohol/drug abuse
6. Important situation specific factors include:
 - access to and use of firearms
 - alcohol/drug use



Intimate Partner Homicide (IPH) – What needs to be explained?

7. Individual and situational risk factors for IPH are similar to (but also differ) from those for non-lethal domestic violence (and also for male-male homicide)
Perpetrators of IPH (Dobash et al., 2004; Dobash et al., 2007) :
 - may be less likely to have typical criminogenic risk factors than either men who commit non-lethal violence against women or who commit homicides in other contexts
 - are more likely to have a history of violence against previous partners and experience separation and possessiveness at the event
8. IPH is rare relative to IPV



Homicide Adaptation Theory (HAT)

- HAT proposes that natural selection has shaped a number of specific psychological mechanisms for homicide that have ‘solved’ specific adaptive problems
- One such psychological adaptation relates to male IPH: “many spousal homicides results from evolved male mechanisms **specifically** designed by natural selection to motivate killing under certain circumstances”
(Shackelford et al., 2003, p. 138)
- In specific contexts the ‘benefits’ of killing a spouse would have outweighed the ‘costs’ and hence mate killing adaptations would have evolved



Homicide Adaptation Theory

- Specific contexts include sexual infidelity and permanent defection from the relationship
(especially when the wife is reproductively valuable, close kin of the wife are not present, and there are no biological children of the couple present)
- Evolutionary benefits of IPH include (Shackelford et al., 2003, p. 138) :
 - “depriving an intrasexual rival of access to a reproductively valuable resource”
 - “deterring polygynous [and future] wives from defecting”
 - “cultivating a social reputation that would deter other rivals”
- “According to evolved homicide theory, many wife killings are intentional and designed outputs of evolved male psychology, not slipups or epiphenomenon”. (Shackelford et al., 2003, p. 138)



Evolutionary By-product Theory

- According to Daly and Wilson (1988, 1996) IPH is a by-product of evolved mechanisms underlying **male sexual proprietariness**
- Male sexual proprietariness is a motivational-emotional cognitive system that is triggered by specific situational contexts (especially infidelity and desertion) and functions to reduce the likelihood that a mate will desert or be unfaithful
- Involves a range of controlling behaviours including violence and the threat of violence
- IPH can be viewed as a 'slip-up' or by product of these mechanisms



Evaluating Evolutionary Explanations of Homicide

- How well do they explain what we know about IPH?
 - both evolutionary hypotheses can (potentially) explain gender differences, demographic risk factors, and specific situational risk factors (separation, actual/perceived infidelity)
- Both theories demonstrate good explanatory breadth
- What evidence is there to support specific adaptationist claims?
 - adaptive thinking and cost-benefit analysis
 - special design features
 - comparative evidence



Problems with HAT

- Cost-benefit analysis is imprecise and unclear
- No clear evidence for “special design features” for homicide
- Comparative evidence is used haphazardly and does not actually support HAT with respect to IPH
- HAT lacks internal consistency

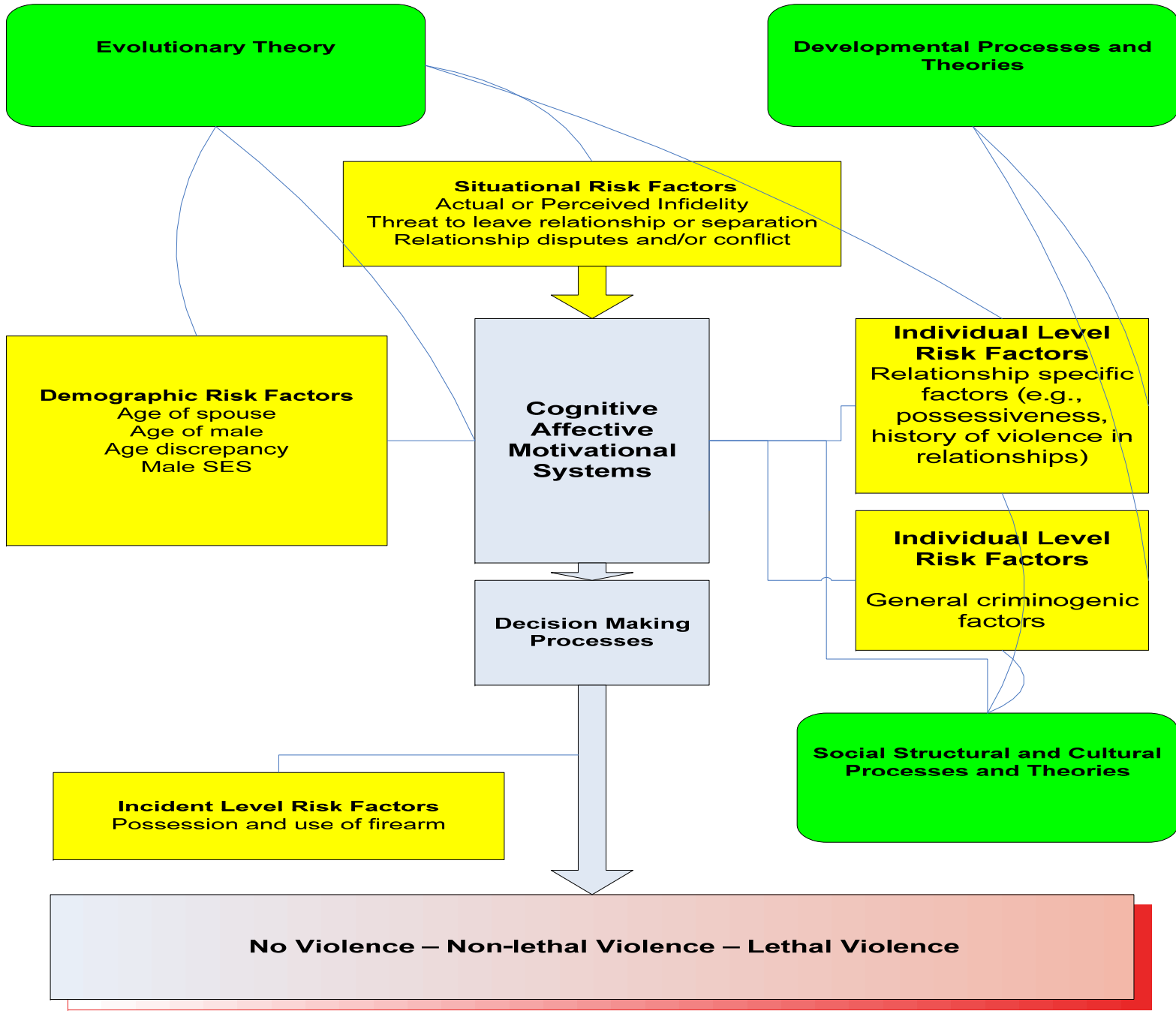
Major outstanding issues for any theory of homicide:

- Why is violence against partners (relatively) common, but intimate partner homicide (relatively) rare?
- HAT less parsimonious
- Why do key situational triggers such as (actual/perceived) infidelity, relationship conflict, and separation not always (or mostly) result in violence/homicide?
- Predictive value

The Role of Evolutionary Explanations of IPH

- HAT is not currently our best evolutionary theory of IPH
- Evolutionary explanations have a role to play in understanding why IPH occurs
- However, they must be fully integrated with:
 - cultural and social-structural explanations
 - proximate social, psychological, and physiological explanations
 - situation specific explanations

In order to provide a comprehensive explanation of IPH



Summary

- Theory development in the area of IPH is an important task
- HAT is not (given the currently available evidence) our best evolutionary explanation for IPH
- Evolutionary explanations have a role to play in accounting for IPH, but need to be integrated with other kinds of explanations