

[in press, *Evolutionary Psychological Science*, May 2021]

A Glimpse into Murderous Minds. A Review of Russell P. Dobash and Rebecca Emerson

Dobash (2020), *Male-Male Murder* (New York: Routledge).

Madeleine K. Meehan and Todd K. Shackelford

Oakland University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Madeleine K. Meehan, Center for Evolutionary Psychological Science, Oakland University, Department of Psychology, 654 Pioneer Dr., Rochester, Michigan, USA, 48309; email: madeleinemeehan@oakland.edu.

**A Glimpse into Murderous Minds. A Review of Russell P. Dobash and Rebecca Emerson
Dobash (2020), *Male-Male Murder* (New York: Routledge).**

I got a small sort of garden fork, and I stabbed him in his chest with the fork. I did it hard about five or six times to make sure he was dead. Then, one of my pals, I can't remember which one, said, "Let's make sure that he's stopped breathing". Both of them started stomping on him... Then, we went down to the fish shop and got six pickled onions. (Dobash & Dobash, 2020, p. 186).

It may seem unimaginable to kill another human being and then callously go out for a snack with friends. The murderer that recounted this story of stabbing a man with a gardening tool is not an antisocial serial killer; in fact, he was only a teenager at the time of the offense. Contrary to the stories in movies, television shows, podcasts, and novels, most murders are perpetrated by men against other men and the typical murderer is not a sadistic, psychopathic, mass killer. These facts are central to *Male-Male Murder*, a riveting scholarly account of real-life homicides. Russell P. Dobash and Rebecca Emerson Dobash are distinguished criminologists, researchers, and Professors Emeriti at University of Manchester (UK) who compiled evidence from 424 imprisoned male murderers to produce *Male-Male Murder*. Dobash and Dobash draw on data from their wider study of 866 homicide case files and 200 interviews with murderers, narrowing the scope to focus in this book on instances of homicide in which a man murders another man. Dobash and Dobash skillfully integrate chilling firsthand accounts with comprehensive overviews of relevant research. The fusion of gripping narratives with sobering

statistics shatters the misconception that only psychopaths and sadists are capable of intentional killing.

The exhaustive compilation of quantitative and qualitative data in *Male-Male Murder* is achingly amenable to applications of evolutionary psychological theory. Dobash and Dobash begin with an overview of previous homicide research and evolutionarily-informed studies are mostly absent, with the exception of reference to some of the research by evolutionary psychology pioneers Martin Daly and Margo Wilson. Daly and Wilson's (1988) classic contribution to criminology and evolutionary psychology, *Homicide*, is a necessary read for those interested in the distal or evolutionary reasons people kill other people. Daly and Wilson note that homicide research often neglects the perspectives of killers despite the fact that preventing homicide requires understanding the psychology of murderers. Dobash and Dobash categorize the male-male homicides in their study according to the most salient elements of the murders (Dobash & Dobash, 2020, p. 29). They spend the next several chapters describing each category and presenting exemplar homicides from their casefiles. The categorization appears somewhat arbitrary and would benefit from the application of a guiding theoretical framework. Evolution by natural selection is a well-established theory of the nature of life and is (or should be) the bedrock of the life and social sciences (Daly & Wilson, 1988). The non-random differential replication of genes caused the propagation of successful traits in all organisms, including humans. Humans are complex evolved systems exhibiting traits that have been shaped by recurrent adaptive problems over evolutionary history (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Evolutionary psychology explains behaviors such as homicide at a distinct level that is complementary to motivational theories, allowing social scientists to generate testable hypotheses within a coherent framework (Daly & Wilson, 1988). It is through this evolutionary framework that the homicides

described in *Male-Male Murder* might be profitably evaluated (see, for example, Daly & Wilson, 1988).

Chapter four addresses the homicide category “murder between men in the family” and these homicides are divided into five subtypes including “brothers against others” or brothers murdering non-kin and “blood relatives” or the killing of genetic relatives (Dobash & Dobash, 2020). An evolutionary approach suggests there are distinct and specialized psychological mechanisms motivating these two types of homicide and, therefore, that it is tenuous to lump the killing of kin and non-kin into the broad category of family murders. Natural selection creates inclinations to discriminate in favor of kin; humans as other animals expend resources to produce genetic relatives and promote their survival and reproduction (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Brothers are more likely to be co-offenders than victim and offender, as in the case of two brothers who stabbed a man 29 times in the back following a fight in a pub (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 2020, p. 134). The victim injured one of the brothers so the perpetrators sought revenge.

Perceived consanguinity often mutes conflict by reducing the perceived benefit of victory and increasing the perceived cost of defeat (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Nevertheless, contention among relatives is an ironic consequence of familial solidarity (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Families often share resources and spend time together which leads to conflict that sometimes ends in homicide, as in the case of a perpetrator who lived with and was monitored by his grandfather prior to strangling him to death (Dobash & Dobash, 2020, p. 112). The victim was a devout Sikh man who prevented the perpetrator from seeing his friends, believing they would encourage him to drink alcohol and engage in other behaviors not in keeping with a devout religious lifestyle. The actions of loved ones impact people more directly and painfully than the actions of strangers and the behavioral response to pain can be homicidal violence (Daly & Wilson; 1988).

The psychological mechanisms that motivate some of the homicides in *Male-Male Murder* may be products of sexual selection. Sexual asymmetries in human reproduction include greater energetic investment in offspring by women than men and, in consequence, women are choosier than men in selecting a mate. Male reproduction is constrained by access to fertile and willing women whereas female reproduction is constrained by the requirements of gestating and nursing offspring. Human males invest more in offspring than other primates and high status men can and do secure multiple female mates, leaving low status males with no mating prospects, given the typical 1:1 sex ratio of reproductive age men and women. It is in the reproductive interests of women to select as mates men who can contribute high-quality genes and provision sufficient resources to her and their offspring. These recurrent adaptive problems faced by men provide insight into some of the findings reported in *Male-Male Murder*. Of the 424 male murderers, 72% reported being usually unemployed, 70% were not involved in a romantic intimate relationship at the time of their offense, and 24% had never been in a romantic intimate relationship (Dobash & Dobash, 2020, p. 253). Ancestral men without status or resources to attract sexual partners or long-term mates risked reproductive oblivion. To avoid this fate, low status men today engage in desperate and dangerous acts to achieve status and resources, including killing other men, especially those who have some status or resources.

Violent male status competitions (e.g., physical fights) are an enduring feature of human evolutionary history (Daly & Wilson, 1988). A large proportion of the seemingly “trivial altercations” resulting in homicide recounted in *Male-Male Murder* can be understood as the fatal consequences of a pervasive competitive struggle among men for status and respect (Daly & Wilson, 1988). An evolutionary psychological perspective suggests that a man who can fight well may be seen by prospective mates as more likely to sire offspring capable of surviving

childhood and reaching reproductive age. Conversely, losing a fight or refusing to fight may be viewed as signaling low-quality genes or poor prospects for access to resources. Refusal to fight may lower a man's status, dishonor his family, and render him a social outcast and an object of derision (Fiske & Rai, 2016). Going into combat and dying is perceived as more honorable than refusing to fight and surviving (Fiske & Rai, 2015). Many of the murderers in Dobash and Dobash's (2020) casefiles display extraordinary rage in response to a perceived insult or challenge by another man. Chapter two presents the case of two perpetrators leaving a pub and observing two male strangers across the street staring at them. Infuriated by the offense and potential challenge of men daring to look at them, the perpetrators beat one of the men to death. Although this slight may seem trivial to observers, the murdering men interpreted this as an egregious offense and if they failed to execute retributive violence their dignity and status may be irreparably damaged (Daly & Wilson, 1988). In some subcultures, a disrespect or challenge is sufficient to motivate homicide (Fiske & Rai, 2015). Such male-male contests of dominance and status are among the deadliest of human physical altercations (Pinker, 2011).

Murderers often perceive that they or their associates have been harmed and are therefore disposed to inflict bodily injuries on the offending party or others they perceive to be collectively responsible (Fiske & Rai, 2015). The desire to punish transgressors is universal and usually intense (Fiske & Rai, 2015). In most cultures, punitive corporal violence is an intuitive, natural, and satisfying punishment for grave transgressions such as homicide (Fiske & Rai, 2015). Dobash and Dobash (2020) describe a case in which a member of a group of men vying for a contract to work as bouncers at a pub stabbed a member of a rival group that was awarded the contract. In this case, the murderer was avenging a perceived wrong; he had morally-inspired motives and believed he was doing the right thing. In chapter five, Dobash and Dobash (2020)

report the case of a man who as a child was imprisoned, sexually abused, and forced into prostitution by a pedophile. As an adult, the man returned to the pedophile's home and bludgeoned him to death with a wrench. In the eyes of the man who was severely exploited and abused as a child by the victim, this homicide brings retributive justice, both criminal and moral. Vengeance is an urge that is not only present in murderers; in laboratory studies, participants can be easily induced to avenge a humiliation (Pinker, 2011). An evolutionary psychological perspective suggests that the motivation for revenge is not a malfunction or disease, but instead it serves the function of deterrence.

Homicide can function as a warning to community members that a perpetrator is willing to kill in response to transgressions. Revenge can only work as a deterrent if the avenger has a reputation for being willing to exact vengeance, even if it is costly to do so (Pinker, 2011). The primary way to persuasively demonstrate a willingness to use violence is to consistently behave violently (Fiske & Rai, 2015). Apparently arbitrary violence can be especially useful for persuading others to maintain a positive relationship with the perpetrator (Fiske & Rai, 2015). Homicide enforces a credible threat to associates that no one will get away with transgressing against the killer. In chapter three, Dobash and Dobash (2020) report the case of a thief that killed his accomplice in a dispute over stolen money. This probably was not a purely instrumental murder for financial gain; only a minority of homicides are committed exclusively as a means to a practical end (Pinker, 2011). By murdering his accomplice the perpetrator signaled to his community that he is not to be transgressed against, simultaneously exacting revenge on the man who cheated him. Cheaters have been a recurrent adaptive problem over human evolutionary history and vengeance is a component of the evolution of human cooperation—it prevents cooperative partners from being exploited by cheaters (Pinker, 2011).

An evolutionary approach to the material presented in *Male-Male Murder* overturns many dogmas about homicide, particularly that it is perpetrated by males that are devoid of morality. On the contrary, the majority of the homicides discussed by Dobash and Dobash (2020) are steeped in moralization. The engrossing and revolting tales of murderous violence may seem unimaginable in the current context of internalized norms of self-restraint; it is more common today for people to reject their violent impulses than in the brutal past of slavery, omnipresent war, and widespread homicide (Pinker, 2011). Evolutionary psychology provides the insight that homicide is a recurrent feature of human evolutionary history, whereas the pacification of humanity is a relatively recent phenomenon (Pinker, 2011). Scientists interested in testing theoretically derived propositions about human conflicts and homicide are afforded a uniquely valuable set of data in *Male-Male Murder* and an evolutionary psychological framework can provide a rich interpretation of the data presented by Dobash and Dobash (2020).

References

Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1988). *Homicide*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Dobash, R.P., & Dobash, R.E. (2020). *Male-male murder*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Fiske, A.P., & Rai, T.A. (2015). *Virtuous violence: Hurting and killing to create, sustain, end, and honor social relationships*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.