



## **Homicide: Foundations of Human Behavior**

*Martin Daly , Margo Wilson*

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## **Homicide: Foundations of Human Behavior** Martin Daly , Margo Wilson

The human race spends a disproportionate amount of attention, money, and expertise in solving, trying, and reporting homicides, as compared to other social problems. The public avidly consumes accounts of real-life homicide cases, and murder fiction is more popular still. Nevertheless, we have only the most rudimentary scientific understanding of who is likely to kill whom and why. Martin Daly and Margo Wilson apply contemporary evolutionary theory to analysis of human motives and perceptions of self-interest, considering where and why individual interests conflict, using well-documented murder cases. This book attempts to understand normal social motives in murder as products of the process of evolution by natural selection. They note that the implications for psychology are many and profound, touching on such matters as parental affection and rejection, sibling rivalry, sex differences in interests and inclinations, social comparison and achievement motives, our sense of justice, lifespan developmental changes in attitudes, and the phenomenology of the self. This is the first volume of its kind to analyze homicides in the light of a theory of interpersonal conflict. Before this study, no one had compared an observed distribution of victim-killer relationships to "expected" distribution, nor asked about the patterns of killer-victim age disparities in familial killings. This evolutionary psychological approach affords a deeper view and understanding of homicidal violence.

## **Homicide: Foundations of Human Behavior Details**

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# From Reader Review **Homicide: Foundations of Human Behavior** for online ebook

**Artur Olczyk says**

Every field of research consists of sets of essential writings that constitute a referential framework and provide a basis for other scientists' future inquiry. For evolutionary psychology, one such writing is *Homicide* (1988) by Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, in which the authors administer selection thinking (interchangeable with a term 'evolutionary psychology') to study matters like

parental affection and rejection, sibling rivalry, sex differences in interests and inclinations, social comparison and achievement motives, our sense of justice, lifespan developmental changes in attitudes, and the phenomenology of the self.

In other words, they apply evolutionary psychology, that is, the attempt to understand social motives as products of the process of evolution by natural selection (vide: *The Adapted Mind* and *Human Evolutionary Psychology*), to

generate new ideas about human social psychology and behavior.

At first glance, it may seem like it is too much to cover in a book of less than 350 pages. Careful reading, though, proves the opposite, for Daly and Wilson managed to write a comprehensible and thorough study that is now essential to a field of evolutionary psychology.

In essence, every chapter in the book tackles different subtopic, although they are all interconnected with one another. The authors focus on such matters as applicability of criminological records to studying of evolutionary bases of killing, infanticide, parricide, altercations as sources of violence in so-called cultures of honor, sexual selection, causes of same-sex conflicts, bloodfeuds, responsibility of killers and cultural variance in homicide.

The authors acknowledge social scientists' explanations why people kill one another, such as envy engendered in social inequities, abuse in childhood, brain tumors, alcohol-induced psychoses, the violence on TV etc., but instead of focusing on particulars, they try to create a cohesive perspective

that will account for violence within the framework of a well-founded general theory of human nature.

In the study, Daly and Wilson comply with a methodological rigour of any scientific research and consider existing alternative theories within a subject they tackle. For instance, they mention, still prevalent these days, creationism, which describes that organisms are adaptively constructed because someone made them that way, be it God or other supernatural entity. In a cool-headed manner, the authors simply remark that

the problem is that creationism is simply devoid of empirical implications. Whatever turns up must be the will of the creator(s). Implications for the practical investigation of the natural world are nil.

They are quick to notice that creationism strips its followers of natural curiosity (which, needless to say, is a cause of development), and therefore deem it **worthless**.

Next, they proceed to explain that an often-demonized word *determinism* does not limit humans to

mindlessly-driven genetic automata and is not exclusive to biological sciences. Instead, they logically remark that

biologist and sociologist alike are committed to the belief that the phenomena under study have knowable causes. We chip away at 'unexplained variance' within our various paradigms, trying to better understand what makes the creatures we study do what they do. The entire enterprise is predicated upon 'determinism'.

The authors also explain probably one of the most commonly misunderstood terms: *survival of the fittest*. Counterintuitively, personal survival is not the expected end on the natural selective ledger. What really matters, are successful traits that depend not only upon the longevity of individuals carrying the trait, but also upon the abundance of their progeny. Likewise,

it is reproductive success, not bodily condition, that the evolutionist refers to as 'fitness'.

Daly and Wilson employ selection thinking to put forth several interesting hypotheses and provide sometimes startling well-documented facts, each and every one of them assisted with available statistical data and historical records. Their suggestion that wife-murder is the tip of the iceberg of the coercive violence that men employ to control the most reproductively valuable women has already been proven by other studies (vide: *Natural Selection and Social Theory* and *Sexual Nature/Sexual Culture*). The authors give an answer to a somewhat puzzling question:

If the motivational mechanisms of all creatures have evolved to generate behavior that is effectively nepotistic, then what on earth are we doing killing relatives?

This is, indeed, confusing, considering that the end goal of the evolved psychological mechanisms of any creature should be the enhancement of the individual's *inclusive fitness* (vide: *Adaptation and Natural Selection*), that is, the proliferation of copies of his/her genes, which can be promoted both by personal reproduction or that of genetic relatives'.

In a chapter dedicated to a practice of infanticide, Daly and Wilson interestingly examine cross-cultural similarities between foraging groups, agricultural tribes and modern societies. In every control group for which a valid record exists, women, in overall, tend to perceive killing their child as a taboo, and are reluctant to talk about this. Also, they are more often unmarried and lack support from their relatives (For an extensive study of mother-child relationships see: *Mother Nature*) Moreover, the authors suggest,

Infanticide can be the desperate decision of a rational strategist allocating scarce resources. There is no reason to suppose that an evolved parental psychology should be such as to value every offspring equally and indiscriminately.

The reason behind this is,

every child that is reared represents a significant fraction of its mother's life span and labor [...]. The 'predictors' of a child's eventual fitness that might influence a mother could be characteristics of the child - whether robust or sickly, for example - but they might also be characteristics of the circumstance, such as the season.

As for infanticidal males, their potential actions against a child might be caused by child's illegitimacy and the risk of cuckoldry, when they cannot be sure who is the parent of child (vide: *Infanticide by Males and Its Implications*).

The most interesting point (although, not the only interesting) the authors make on parent-offspring conflict is that in a situation with siblings, a conflict might arise simply because the parent values the two equally. Evolutionarily, a child values itself above its sibling and the nonidentity of fitness (the fact that we are not the same) interests suggests that selection will incline offspring to exaggerate their need, often at the expense of the sibling (vide: *The Biology of Moral Systems*).

Further analysis of parent-offspring conflict leads Daly and Wilson to examine the famous Freudian Oedipal Conflict. In Freud's own words,

It is the fate of all of us to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father.

Later, the father of psychoanalysis elaborated on his theory and added that the urge to kill one's father and copulate with one's mother had retained well into adulthood, and was acted upon. Daly and Wilson discarded methodological foundations of psychoanalysis, saying that

One consequence of this failure [misunderstanding of the natural selection] was a misconception of the adaptive functions of evolved psychological mechanisms: Freud supposed that they had evolved merely to achieve 'mental relief'. Now, such relief might well be the proximal goal in an evolved motivational mechanism but such mechanism could not arise by natural selection unless the means of achieving mental relief happened also to be means to the end of fitness.

As for altercations as sources of violence, the authors rightly observe that a man's reputation depends in part upon the maintenance of a credible threat of violence. Several recent studies confirm that (vide: *Becoming Evil* and *Culture of Honor*). Daly and Wilson make a convincing point when they hypothesize that in a game of reproductive success even the lethal exercise of violence does not have to be disadvantageous to the killer.

Chapter that deserves a proper level of attention facilitates sexual selection, in essence, a process that occurs whenever some attribute contributes to success either in wooing the opposite sex or in vanquishing members of one's own sex in competition for mates. They treat a subject of sex differences in parental investment with great care, although it is a shame they chose not to mention *The Handicap Principle*, proposed in 1970s by Israeli biologist Amotz Zehavi. The principle states that animals (humans, too) have characteristics that do not necessarily help them survive but can contribute to their overall reproductive success. For instance, a peacock's tail is a costly and potentially risky sexual ornament. Therefore, every peacock with a big and colorful tail is considered by a peahen to be strong enough to expose itself to hazardous situations with predators.

Insofar as lethal retribution and blood feuds, the authors validly observe that

they have evidently increased in likelihood and in intensity since the invention of agriculture.

What is more, blood revenge assumes the status of a sacred obligation. A killer cannot just take a trip and expect other people to forget about his doings. Tempers eventually cool, but duty and hatred remains (vide: *Blood Revenge*). In the end, feuds ultimately have to do with material and reproductive rivalry.

The constant specter confronting each fraternal interest group is defeat or extermination by rivals: the theft of one's women, the loss of one's lands, the end of one's line.

Contrary to what it may seem with a book entirely dedicated to a subject of killing, at the end of it, Daly and Wilson point out that the rates of homicides, in fact, have declined throughout the centuries (vide: *The Better Angels of Our Nature*). And even though there has always been a market in declamations of social disintegration and doom,

twentieth-century, industrial man may well have a better chance of dying peacefully in his bed than any of his predecessors.

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### **Jonathan says**

This has some very interesting insights into human behavior. While it specifically discusses evolutionary psychology as it relates to homicide, the authors show that the same evolutionary conflicts of interest that lead to homicide shape day-to-day conflicts that all humans experience. For its age this book is still very relevant to anyone who wants to better understand evolution, psychology, social science, criminology, or human nature.

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### **Rachel says**

This seems to be *the* book about homicide. It is full of interesting data. I am glad I read it. But part of me really, really hates this book.

Here is a sentence that I hate: *Our theoretical approach in this book is to use Darwin's discovery that the properties of organisms have been shaped by a history of selection as an heuristic for the generation of models and hypotheses about the sorts of psychological mechanisms that an animal like Homo sapiens might be expected to have evolved.*

Does this make any sense? I can't figure out if the authors' theory isn't really much of a theory at all, or if I am just really stupid.

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### **David Gross says**

Applied sociobiology — in this case, applied to the problem of homicide. Why do people kill other people? Well, there are many reasons, and if you look at the statistics, most of them conform to some degree at least with predictions that would be made from applying sociobiological concepts to the problem.

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### **joshua grothaus says**

good book but wouldnt read it again.

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## **Sara says**

A look at interpersonal violence (specifically murder) among humans and its evolutionary history. Interesting, but I think as a theory, their ideas can be expanded on. "Demonic Males" is a more recent address of the same issues which I think does a better job of covering the incredibly complex issues of human agency and biological evolution.

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## **Leonardo says**

datos estadísticos, antropológicos e históricos para demostrar que los hombres jóvenes se esfuerzan en conseguir y mantener un estatus social lo más alto posible porque de ellos depende en gran parte su éxito en la competición sexual.

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## **S says**

Absolutely fascinating.

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