7. Making Sense of Domestic Homicide

Very few intimate human relationships, whether they involve lovers, parents and children, or other family members, end in homicide. Much more prevalent than domestic killings are those interpersonal assaults that produce life-threatening injury. More common still are the everyday physical, sexual, and emotional assaults that do not result in death or potentially fatal injuries but nevertheless evidence deep conflict in interpersonal relationships. As my analysis of the microdynamics of domestic homicide reveals, there is a clear relationship between everyday and life-threatening interpersonal violence on the one hand and domestic homicide on the other. My archival analysis, in concert with other research, demonstrates that the former usually precedes the latter. Other modes of social interaction also accompany the range of violations extending from ordinary interpersonal assault to domestic homicide. Among these modes, I have identified men’s assumption of proprietary rights over women, obsessive-possessive behavior, the negotiated process of escaping conflictual relationships, the resort to potentially supportive state agencies, and the search for respect between family members and others.

These “interrelated antecedents” to intimate-partner homicide also constitute the sinews of patriarchal relations; as such, they present themselves as many intimate relationships, the majority of which do not erupt in homicidal violence.1 Therefore, the interrelated antecedents are not “red flags” for domestic homicide. It is not my purpose here to develop a predictive formula to identify those cases likely to end in death. Nevertheless, the presence of various permutations and combinations of antecedents could still form the basis for proactive intervention in tumultuous domestic relationships. At a minimum, one could say that those domestic cases exhibiting a large number of the interrelated antecedents are probably much closer to a lethal outcome than are the majority of relationships troubled by intimate-partner violence, grinding emotional abuse, or both.

The links between intimacy and death are mediated by culture, social structure, and the various burdensome legacies of the past. Given that all cultures in the United States place a high value on the sanctity of human life, it is hardly surprising that the incidence of domestic homicide is low in all cultural groups.2 However, the fact that domestic homicide is socially and culturally patterned warrants close attention. Two key interrelated findings emerge from my archival analysis. The first is the obvious gendering of all forms of domestic homicide. Clearly, men kill much more often than women, and they do so for different reasons. Second, all forms of domestic homicide, and particularly the Sex Ratio of Killing in intimate-partner homicide, vary by culture. Notwithstanding the relative rarity of domestic homicide, it is apparent that the crime in all its forms is much more common in African-American communities. In particular, black women are much more likely to kill their intimate male partners than are Caucasian or Latino women. As I have noted, such homicides involving Latino women are rare in Florida.

The Gendered Nature of Domestic Homicide

I have used the term “gendered” to indicate not only that more men commit domestic homicide than women, but that men kill for different reasons. Men perpetrated 106 of the 132 intimate-partner homicides (80.3 percent),3 103 of the 141 family homicides (73 percent),4 all 15 of the love triangle killings, and 39 of the 44 suicides (88.6 percent). Notably, no women killed intimate female partners, nor did any kill other women in a love triangle dispute over a man or a woman. Only two women killed other women in family disputes.

Men as Perpetrators Men usually kill their intimate female partners after violently abusing them, often for long periods. Of the 102 male perpetrators of intimate-partner homicide, not one convincingly showed he acted in self-defense or that his resort to lethal violence was precipitated by either the proximal or distal violence of women. Rather, these men typically engaged in a regime of domestic terrorism to attempt to keep their female partners in a subordinate position. Usually this terrorism took the form of woman battering that long preceded the fatal episode. This battering appears to have been accompanied by an oppressive, soul-destroying emotional abuse that gradually eroded the identities of the women.

The attempts to render women more malleable to the wishes of men by
erasing their identities is entirely consistent with the historical tradition of patriarchy. At various times, married women could not divorce, legally refuse their husbands sex, enjoy their own property rights, or vote. Indeed, under this legacy, men had a right to discipline their wives through the use of physical violence. In a sociocultural and historical sense, old habits die hard. These patriarchal beliefs and practices are much more than mere cultural residues from the past. Indeed, the Florida archival materials reveal acute forms of these beliefs, values, and norms deep in the ideological bone marrow of most of the men who killed—they saw their female partners as their property. Men’s sense of proprietary rights was expressed through their obsessive-possessive behavior toward the activities of those women. Many accused their partners, usually falsely, of infidelity. Others voiced these accusations to the point of appearing paranoid. Concerned that women were slipping out from under their grip, a number of men threatened to kill their partners if they left the relationship. Some husbands and boyfriends threatened women’s lives if they had some contact with other men (however fleeting) or appeared to express even a modicum of interest in other persons of either sex. As men exerted ever tighter controls and demanded more from women, their wives and girlfriends often experienced a growing sense of entrapment, mixed with a combination of acute fear, shame, and humiliation. These women were not paralyzed, though. Often they countered the control initiatives of men with new maneuvers of their own. Given the difficulties of finding safe, affordable housing and adequate protections, however, many remained in their abusive relationships. Others devised strategies for leaving, and some finally left.

Whatever women did short of killing men, husbands and boyfriends did not give up their property rights without a fight. The multiagency case files for the multiple and single killings of intimate female partners reveal that in roughly two-thirds to three-quarters of cases the parties were either separated, estranged, or divorced at the time of the fatality. It is safe to assume from the case histories that many men who killed were making good on threats against the lives of their fleeing partners. Documentable male obsessive possessiveness was found in at least half of these deaths. In anywhere from a third to a half of such cases, the archival files reveal that women, their neighbors, or their friends had called police to the residence to deal with domestic violence. Given that some police departments did not log their calls to domestic disturbances, or else coded them as offenses such as drunk and disorderly behavior, it is likely that many more than a third to a half of the batterers had prior contact with police about their use of violence. Fully one-quarter of men had been the objects of court orders of protection before the killing. Combining these observations on earlier contact with the police and the courts, it is clear that a significant number of abusive husbands and boyfriends were not deterred from future violence by formal legal sanctions. These observations are consistent with the fact that a sizable proportion of men had criminal histories of violence. A good number of male perpetrators, especially those who committed single acts of intimate-partner homicide, were socially marginalized by their minority status, by their unemployment or underemployment, or perhaps by not being married. As Lawrence Sherman once put it, men who have a “low stake in conformity” are more difficult to deter from future acts of domestic violence simply by arresting them. Ironically, although these marginalized men realized fewer of the fruits of capitalist patriarchy, they did exercise their property rights over their female partners and at times killed love triangle antagonists. The same population of men figures prominently among those who fought, and sometimes died, to win respect in family feuds.

My analysis indicates that the 102 Florida men used violence against women for a long time before killing them. They did this either to establish control or to reassert control that they felt was ebbing away. In this sense my archival findings are consistent with the work of Jalna Hamner, who observes that male violence against women, whether perpetrated by men known or unknown to them is “designed to control, dominate and express authority and power.” It is also clear from the archival materials that many of the women who were subjected to male violence, including lethal violence, lived in extremely compromised circumstances. Although they may have wished to leave their violent victimization behind, they had neither the resources, support, nor, in some cases, the wherewithal to do so. It is essential, therefore, that the analysis not stop at the level of interpersonal violence and the respective roles played by the parties in negotiating the attendant conflict and pain. Rather, the intimate-partner killing of women is a socially situated phenomenon that exhibits numerous continuities with the political, economic, and social standings of both men and women. In short, killing is but one way that many men keep many women in their place as socially subordinate subjects in a patriarchal order. Lethal violence is no doubt a crude and highly visible way of maintaining the structure of patriarchy. (As Steven Lukes once remarked, the most insidious use of power is that which goes unnoticed.) In other words, killing women because men sense they are losing control, face, or both
is problematic as a long-term strategy of social control. Killing women brings male domination into sharp focus and invites questions about the legitimacy of patriarchy, or at least its more coercive elements. In the final analysis, violence is the last resort of most enduring political regimes. Patterns of domination and subordination are normally reproduced through more insidious and seemingly benign social practices. The patriarchal order is no exception here; as Walby eloquently points out, violence is but one of the panoply of control initiatives. My point is that the numerous links I have identified between killing and intimacy must be viewed in the context of a much broader set of social practices that perpetuate everyday notions of intimacy itself.

Men also kill male competitors whom they perceive to be usurping their rights of ownership over women. As I have indicated, these killings often take place as a relationship is breaking up and the woman is moving on to a new lover. These examples are reminders that patriarchy is not just characterized by men's subordination of women. Rather, patriarchal relations involve a fierce competition between men for access to women. Indeed, the competitive ethics of patriarchy are continuous with and homologous to the competitive and alienating effects of industrial capitalism. Just as wage workers find themselves competing against each other, so too do men struggle between themselves to lay claim to the bodies of women. Indeed, it may be significant that intimate-partner killings were much more likely to be perpetrated by men who had enjoyed less success in accumulating the material trappings of a capitalist society. Put differently, do "less successful" men use sublethal and lethal violence against women to compensate somehow for their perceived lack of economic success, social esteem, and (formal) political advantage in a capitalist democracy?

None of this should be taken to mean that poverty and unemployment are the basic reasons for intimate-partner killings. Rather, I suggest that batterers' assertion of power and control is often intensified by their perceptions that they have failed to gather the desired material and status trappings required by a dominant value system that celebrates individual achievement. If the respective sets of fundamental principles of patriarchy and capitalism do converge, it is around the issues of ownership and control. Consequently, one should not be surprised that those men at the margins of capitalist production are more likely to engage in coercive acts of control in their interpersonal relationships. Indeed, at the point of intersection of class and gender relations lies the socially constructed and situated impulse to covet. The perceived failure of men deeply wounded by their dearth of material and status trappings in the capitalist marketplace may, quite literally, bleed over into their interpersonal relationships.

Male perpetrators also commit most family homicides. Indeed, if the killing of children is excluded, all but two of them were perpetrated by men. Caucasian and African-American men committed equal numbers of family homicides, meaning the latter are heavily overrepresented compared with their presence in the population; this mirrors their disproportionate perpetration of homicide in general. Men who commit family homicide are usually acting to preserve their honor or social standing in the face of a perceived threat. In the Florida sample, this display of puffery as a defense of masculinity is typically steeped in economic marginality. These killings cannot be explained solely by culture; rather, one must recognize the intersection of culture and broader social structural phenomena to form the context behind many of them.

There are a number of cultural continuities between family killings and the struggle for respect between men on the street. In most of these homicides, men refused to back down from a dispute with another male family member or relative. In the case of younger men, and younger black men in particular, Elijah Anderson traces the inclination to violence to the diminished life chances of the ghetto poor and to "the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future.” The willingness to resort to violence—and the public recognition of that willingness—are essential elements in gaining the sense of respect that is so difficult to obtain through more socially approved methods. Unfortunately, having laid out the intimate links between economic and cultural factors, Anderson lapses into a culturalist explanation by observing that "the code of the streets is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system. The police are most often seen as representing the dominant white society and not caring to protect inner-city residents." I would argue that the code of the streets is born from the intersection of economic and cultural phenomena. These are inextricably linked in a way that renders either/or explanations incomplete and rather misleading.

That family members other than those linked by the bonds of sexual intimacy or the parent-child relationship kill each other reminds one that the argument that the family is primarily a social site of harmony, nurturing, and love is at best incomplete and at worst deceptive. The etiological similarities and continuities between family homicides and street killings involving young,
marginalized men are a reminder that hegemonic masculinities operate in both the private and public spheres. Indeed, the obvious resemblances between the two styles of homicide call into question the efficacy of distinguishing between public- and private-sphere violence. In fact, it is noteworthy that a number of family killings involving men occurred during disputes in which friends were present, often in the family home of one or more of the parties to the homicide.

In Chapter 5, I discussed the killing of Buster Newman by his brother Joe Newman, which stemmed from a dispute during a card game. Both men had extensive criminal histories, including involvement in the illegal drug trade, and both lived in a particularly poor neighborhood. I had a number of conversations with criminal justice professionals in Florida who described such killings as “meaningless” or as stemming from “trivial motives.” These professionals would tell me “life tends to be cheaper” in the neighborhoods where such honor contests are more likely to take place. However, as criminologists of homicide note, these standoffs are anything but trivial to the parties involved. When the status of the participants is devoid of the trappings of established family life, breadwinner standing, and other material signs of achievement, personal honor is often all they have. Given the code of the streets, defending their honor and their masculinity was, for the economically marginalized men in the Florida sample, likely a matter of survival.

If men kill their intimate female partners out of their proprietary rights in a patriarchal society, their love triangle antagonists out of competition, and other male family members or relatives out of a desire to protect their masculine honor, then why do men kill children? The cross-cultural studies of infanticide reveal greater tendencies for girls and boys to be killed if they are not the biological offspring of one or both involved parents; if infants are somehow malformed or unlikely to survive; and if the parents, particularly the mother’s, life circumstances and material resources are not conducive to raising the child.

Biological fathers and stepfathers (including mother’s boyfriends) killed similar numbers of children in the Florida sample (24 and 23, respectively). Eight boys and girls died at the hands of biological fathers during the commission of multiple domestic homicides. Although these children were not known to child protection agencies before the killings, one cannot assume the fathers had not abused them. This means that perhaps 16 children were killed by biological fathers in what might be called “child abuse deaths.” In concert with other investigators, my research indicates that stepfathers committed child homicides in the course of abusive episodes to a slightly greater degree than biological fathers. Without data on the percentage of children in Florida living with stepfathers, it is impossible to arrive at any precise estimate of the risk of lethal child victimization from stepfathers as opposed to biological fathers. However, given that children more often live with biological fathers than stepfathers, the elevated risk from stepfathers is likely much higher. As I pointed out in Chapter 6, stepfathers often killed boys and girls during periods of extreme rage in which they had become exasperated with them. It seems as if some stepfathers have a lower tolerance for children and less willingness to invest in relationships with them than do natural fathers. Given that stepfathers do not have the same history of bonding with the children from birth, this is understandable. In fact, the case studies clearly reveal that in a number of instances stepfathers saw a youngster as a hindrance to developing their relationships with the child’s mother. It is biological mothers who are much more likely to have custody of their children in the event of a divorce or separation from the natural father. Consequently, it is stepfathers, not stepmothers, who are likely to represent the bulk of the threat to children’s lives from substitute parents. Daly and Wilson suggest that the mother is much less likely to forsake the child if he or she is older. Put differently, with older children from previous relationships, maternal bonds have formed and are presumably more difficult to break, or at least compromise. New male lovers will likely be less successful in trying to drive a wedge between mothers and their older children. Specifically, in cases where girls and boys are abused or killed by stepfathers, Daly and Wilson observe that “the natural mother is often implicated in—or at least turns a blind eye to—the violence and neglect. . . . [T]he baby is a resented impediment to the new relationship, and the mother has to make a choice.”

The Florida findings regarding woman battering and its links to child killing point out that fear is also an important reason that some mothers are unable to intervene in the killing of their own children by either biological fathers or stepfathers. The presence of woman battering greatly complicates the development of a new relationship between the male lover, the mother, and the child. This is not simply a matter of the stepfather killing the child because she or he compromises the establishment of a new intimate relationship with the mother. Rather, one must ask what kind of relationship the stepfather is trying to establish with the mother. If the would-be stepfather is attempting to set up a coercive regime of patriarchal control within the new family, then it is perhaps this context, rather than the mere selective advantage conferred by not wasting
valuable time and resources on another man’s offspring, that provides a more comprehensive frame of reference for making sense of at least some of the killings by stepfathers.

Women as Perpetrators As I have noted, women did not kill female love triangle antagonists, did not kill lesbian partners, did not commit femicide, and, except in two instances, did not kill adult family members other than intimate partners. Those who did commit domestic homicide therefore fell into two major categories. First, 24 women killed their intimate male partners. Second, 30 women were deemed to be responsible for the deaths of their children. The two groups warrant close attention.

The Sex Ratio of Killing in the Florida intimate-partner homicide cases is 25:5. This means that, on average, for every four men who kill female intimates, one woman kills an intimate male partner. The archival findings clearly show that nearly all the male victims precipitated their own demise through the use of proximal and distal acts of violence. Although the precipitating violence, and especially its more enduring distal manifestations, did not always emerge from formal police archival sources such as homicide reports, interviews with various social actors close to the case usually uncovered it. Through case narratives I situated coercive male violence within an overall array of patriarchal control tactics. Regardless of race or ethnicity, the women who killed intimate male partners were profoundly trapped in their relationships. In contrast to the female intimates who were killed by men, entrapped women who killed men were far less likely to be separated or estranged from their abusive partners. They also appear to have been far less likely to have used the police, courts, and shelters as sources of support or as part of an overall resistive strategy. These results are entirely consistent with the central findings of the archival analysis that women, in various ways, were essentially defending themselves, their children, or both as a matter of last resort when they killed their intimate male partners.

Although the women who committed homicide had typically been violently victimized by men, often over long periods, I documented cases where women killed without apparently being under threat of proximal violence. For example, Erin Newcombe is currently serving a life term for killing her husband by shooting him dead while he was talking with someone on his mail route. I also introduced two cases where the archival materials present conflicting accounts of the possible existence and extent of precipitating male violence.

In these homicides committed by Marion Brown and Alison Murray, it is possible to read the evidence and reach the conclusion that these two women either “gave as good as they got,” as one attorney I interviewed put it, or that they were the long-term aggressors in the relationship. Although I did not discuss the case at length, Kelly Krish killed her boyfriend without any apparent history of either proximal or distal precipitating violence.

Although criminal justice personnel have told me that they saw women as overall aggressors in two or three cases, advocates for battered women typically explain the female-perpetrated killings by using the language of self-defense. Given the available evidence, I would not rule out the possibility that one or more women in the Florida sample were the aggressors of sorts in their relationships and did kill in the absence of proximal and distal precipitating violence. However, one must look at this small number of cases in the context of patriarchal violence. Men are not systematically victimized by women in any way approaching the regime of violence they direct at women. Women's interpersonal violence is usually isolated, episodic, mostly defensive or preemptive, and not continuous with the more extensive network of coercive and consensual social controls that characterize patriarchal societies. Even in the small number of cases where women can be construed as acting as aggressors, one would do well to examine their biographies. Amidst these life stories there is likely a history of male violence or abuse directed at them or at other female family members.

After having examined thousands of pages of archival materials documenting men's previous violence against women, I am amazed that more women do not kill their intimate male partners. This reaction is consistent with Meda Chesnay-Lind’s recent thoughts on women's criminal and violent behavior in general. She, too, sees women's violence as a socially situated response to the power relations of patriarchy.

The work on women's entry into criminal behavior, taken altogether, illuminates the ways in which the injuries of girlhood produce problems that young women often solve on the streets of poor neighborhoods... In addition, it is evident that violence is a part of life in these communities, that women have always been exposed to large amounts of violence, and that women are capable of responding in ways that can be categorized as "violent." Generally, it has served the interests of the powerful to ignore or minimize women's ability to engage in violence... Given the amount
of violence women suffer at male hands, the remarkable story is that women are not more violent.\textsuperscript{22}

Chesney-Lind’s observations recall the work of bell hooks, who talks of the dangers inherent in seeing social spaces where anger can be expressed as being the preserve of men. Her comments are further reminders not to shy away from recognizing the volatile, aggressive, and potentially powerful meaning of women’s anger. hooks eloquently expresses her fear of the social construction of difference, which makes it appear that there is some space of rage and anger that men inhabit, that is alien to us women. Even though we know that men’s rage may take the form of murder (we certainly know that men murder women more than women murder men; that men commit most of the domestic violence in our lives), it’s easy to slip into imagining that those are “male” spaces, rather than ask the question, “What do we do as women with our rage?”\textsuperscript{23}

The possibility that women may kill men without proximal or distal precipitating violence does not negate the existence of a patriarchal order. Only if it is assumed that such a patriarchal order is rooted in sexual rather than gender differences do women’s rare killings of male intimate partners that were not brought on by the victims undermine the notion that intimate-partner homicide arises out of patriarchal power-control imperatives. Put differently, a patriarchal order refers to the existence of a historically enduring social pattern of oppression. Not every single intimate relationship needs to exhibit these dynamics. Nor does every act of offensive violence between intimate partners have to emanate from men for the patriarchal pattern to be upheld.

Women were found responsible, although not necessarily criminally culpable, in 30 of the 83 child deaths. In at least 4 of these cases women were being battered by male partners before the killing. In 6 other cases girls and boys lost their lives to mothers during multiple domestic killings.\textsuperscript{24} As noted in Chapter 3, these mothers were deeply depressed, in dire straits generally, and had apparently not abused the children prior to killing them.\textsuperscript{25} In all but 1 of these 6 deaths the mother subsequently committed suicide. Even though the psychiatric literature may make reference to delusional altruism to describe their states of mind, it is more appropriate to try to make sense of these killings as the rational actions of loving mothers in a patriarchal society that has not provided

for them or their children. In a sense, such homicides are the logical endpoint for some women in a society which socially prescribes that mothers be the ones ultimately responsible for the care and well-being of children.

In general, women who killed younger boys and girls seemed overwhelmed by the burdens of child care and the other difficulties in their lives. Few of them set out to deliberately kill children. One woman suffocated her child and attempted to blame the fatality on sudden infant death syndrome. It later turned out that she had killed another mother’s child whom she was babysitting a year before killing her own child. Another woman knifed her nine-year-old son to death because he had been mean to his younger brother. These cases aside, most of the other female-perpetrated child homicides fall into the categories of excessive discipline, inappropriate care and handling, or neglect.

Chapter 6 addressed some of the interconnections between woman battering and the deaths of children. Doubtless these are even more substantial and complex than the archival material documents. Many child protection workers and police officers do not see intimate-partner violence as an important factor to include when writing up cases of child deaths, or indeed when investigating child abuse. It is necessary to learn more about these interconnections between intimate-partner violence and child deaths, because the power dynamics involved may offer rich insights into instances where men, and for seemingly different reasons women, take the lives of children. Recognizing parental or caretaker violence as a context for child killing might also provide multiple points of intervention into families that hitherto only dealt with agencies involved in child protection and criminal justice.

Only five women in the Florida sample took their own lives. In just one of these cases was there clear evidence of woman battering preceding the suicide. However, it would be a mistake to think that this single case is the only female suicide traceable to woman battering. Clearly, as I noted in earlier chapters, a large number of women who attempt or succeed in committing suicide do so because of their violent interpersonal victimization and the accompanying entrapment. In Chapter 3, I narrated the case of Beth Colhurst, a profoundly depressed battered woman of long standing who finally killed her abusive husband, Roger, before taking her own life. In general, neither male nor female suicides are classified as domestic homicides. This is a mistake, because often these deaths stem from the same dynamics as many of the killings I have discussed. The failure to include female suicides arising from battering among the ranks of domestic homicides leads to an underestimation of the destructiveness.
TABLE 7.1
Intraracial/intra-ethnic SROKs between sexual intimates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perpetrator</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Married SROK</th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
<th>Unmarried SROK</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Overall SROK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WM</td>
<td>WF</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM</td>
<td>WF</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM</td>
<td>BF</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BF</td>
<td>BM</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LM</td>
<td>LF</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LF</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Code: W = White; B = Black; L = Latino; M = Male; F = Female

of patriarchal relationships and, as a consequence, feeds into the notion that the threat of homicide from strangers is greater than it actually is.

Intimate-Partner Homicide, History, and Culture: Some Reflections

Blacks are disproportionately overrepresented in intimate-partner homicides and family homicides compared with their presence in the population. The rates of intimate-partner homicide per 100,000 for African Americans, Latinos, and Caucasians are 2.67, 1.11, and 0.45, respectively.26 Put differently, the black intimate-partner homicide rate is six times that of whites, and two and a half times that of Latinos. In tandem with findings from other research, in the Florida sample 1.58 black women per 100,000 kill their intimate black male partners, compared with 0.15 white women and 0.23 Latino women who kill their male partners. The apparent cultural variation in overall rates of intimate-partner homicide and the SROKs warrants careful attention. I will address these issues separately, although clearly they are interrelated.

The High Black Intimate-Partner Homicide Rate

Families are one of the principal means through which persons learn their values, beliefs, norms, ideas, and behavior—in short, their culture. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that social scientists should seek explanations for socially patterned behavior such as violence and homicide amidst the rich tapestry of family life and broader cultural matrices. As noted, the Moynihan Report attributes much of the crime and violence in the African-American community to the "tangle of pathology" centered in the black family and, by implication, in broader black cultural mores. Moynihan argues that slavery broke up the black family and set in motion a series of historical events that resulted in the relatively large numbers of households headed by women in the black community. Such households were poorly equipped for socializing children. They were also at odds with mainstream white culture, where households headed by men were the order of the day. At one point, Moynihan remarks: "Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. . . . The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern is placed at a distinct disadvantage."27 Borrowing from the language and logic of biology, Moynihan argues: "The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. Indeed, in 19th century America, a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male. The 'sassy nigger' was lynched."28 Although Moynihan emphasizes that urbanization, segregation, unemployment, and underemployment exacerbated the pathogenic character of the black female-headed family, the "matriarchal" character of many African-American families remains at the center of his explanatory rationale.29

For my purposes, the Moynihan Report not only attributes the failure of African Americans to thrive economically to the matriarchal family, but also argues that the failure to properly instill cultural norms led to more antisocial behavior in the black community. Specifically, the report identifies the tangle of pathology as the "principal source of aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that perpetuates the cycle of poverty and deprivation."30 Put another way, the absence of black men creates poverty by reducing family income. This absence means that women must work for wages to support the family, or become dependent upon welfare. The absence of men in the family also means that black boys and younger black men do not benefit from the presence of a
male role model. According to Moynihan, young black men have lower self-esteem, do less well in school and drop out more than their white peers, and suffer much higher rates of delinquency. Alvin Poussaint argues that the subculture of violence in the black ghetto derives in part from self-hatred, especially among young black males. The excessive violence results in the increased incarceration of younger black men, thus depleting the pool of those eligible to be marriage partners.

The arguments embedded in the Moynihan Report, and the subsequent attempts to explain differential rates of black violence by familial or cultural pathology, are not convincing for a number of reasons. My archival analysis, like numerous other studies, rejects the notion that it is the pathology of black families or black culture that produces more per capita intimate-partner homicide.

One simply cannot uncouple culture and society in the way that social science in the Moynihan genre assumes. Persons’ values, beliefs, and, particularly, adherence to mainstream behavioral expectations embodied in social codes such as the law cannot be divorced from their broader social situation, especially their respective life chances. As I noted in my discussion of the role of poverty in child deaths, it is relative poverty and how social actors negotiate it—rather than the dollar levels of their income, wealth, and so on—that seem to provide important insights into the possible role of poverty in domestic homicide. This does not mean that being objectively poor plays no direct role. Rather, it means that material conditions are mediated by human agency, particularly collective human agency, at both familial and cultural levels. It is the cultural meaning of poverty that is important, a fact that inextricably couples culture to society. Whatever the machinations of the statisticians in controlling for such social forces as objective poverty, unemployment, and class, their effects cannot be isolated from race and ethnicity in anything but the crudest of ways. When statisticians allegedly control for objective poverty, unemployment, and what they term social class, they resort to an abstracted empiricism that essentially robs social phenomena of their socially situated meaning. One can no more easily control for class and identify the effects of race on domestic homicide than one can exclude “external” influences on the black community and somehow talk of black culture in the abstract, as if it were an island in a sea of Caucasian mores. African Americans have always been uniquely disadvantaged in the American capitalist economy, variously used as cheap sources of labor, strikebreakers, and potential threats to white labor. The archival mater-

ials and my own fieldwork in Florida convince me that it is impossible to read a person’s income from his or her tax returns, stated income in surveys, or other quantitative measures. Persons in disadvantaged positions may struggle to survive, but they do so creatively by exploiting all kinds of opportunities to make money, cut a deal, return a favor, and the like. To think these tactics are readily quantifiable reveals one of the several fault lines in abstracted empiricism: it is often out of touch with what people do.

The historical record, as I have already pointed out, contradicts the argument that slavery destroyed the fabric of the African-American family, paving the way historically for female-headed forms. As a number of researchers have shown, most black girls and boys were raised in two-parent families during slavery and after its abolition. The rise in black households headed by women is a recent historical phenomenon. Indeed, the vibrancy of black family life during and after slavery is a testament to cultural resistance rather than a manifestation of cultural pathology. I have already discussed the contributions of Herbert Gutman and bell hooks to this debate about the enduring historical character of the primarily nuclear black family. Other authors reach similar conclusions. For example, in his analysis of slave letters, autobiographies, plantation records, and other archival material, Blessingame points to the rich sense of community and family life among African Americans. Specifically, he observes that slavery was not “an all powerful, monolithic institution which stripped the slave of any meaningful distinctive culture, family life, religion or manhood.”

My archival analysis does not indicate that female-headed households, psychologically emasculated black men, or any combination thereof led to intimate-partner homicide. Many black families are indeed headed by women, but very few experience intimate-partner homicide. In fact, if the case studies show anything, it is that the presence of a controlling patriarch who sees his female partner as his property and backs up that perception with violence is the most significant correlate to domestic killing. The etiology of woman battering, male proprietary rights, and female entrapment emerge similarly in all racial groups and are wholly at odds with the notion of a black matriarchy.

In a related vein, the contention of Moynihan and others that the African-American family is somehow pathological relies upon an idealized understanding of the white middle-class family as harmonious and stable. Such a position is itself a form of patriarchal ideology masquerading as social science. To presume that the white middle-class family is successful and harmonious, and to
tut it as the building block of a stable and cohesive social order, is to ignore the immense amounts of conflict, violence, subordination, and oppression within many families. Although black families experience higher rates of marital dissolution, and black women report higher levels of intimate violence, the differences between white and black families are ones of degree and not of kind, and are doubtless associated with the social disadvantage and diminished life chances of African Americans in general. Again, as the case studies of intimate-partner homicide revealed, intimate relationships that ended in death were riddled with consistent patterns of conflict, antagonism, entrapment, and despair that were confined by no racial or ethnic boundaries.

Another reason for not uncoupling culture and society is that police response to violence within the black community has likely shaped beliefs about what is and is not acceptable and sanctionable interpersonal behavior. The criminal justice system has never been rooted in black culture or the black community, and even today is not accountable to that community. Due to traditional police reluctance to intervene in the black community, Hawkins notes the existence of something approaching “vigilante justice” in which persons have learned to settle their own scores rather than rely on the whims of the police and the courts. If such a system of vigilante justice has evolved among some African Americans, Hawkins and others rightly trace the accompanying high homicide rates to the historic inaction and passivity of the criminal justice system. This long-standing pattern of police passivity toward violence among black persons likely served to drive up the intimate-partner homicide rate. Domestic disputants could not rely on law enforcement officers to intervene. Consequently, disputes escalated to the point of lethal violence.

If the historic failure of emergency medical services to permeate the black community is added to this, one sees yet another reason that violent interpersonal assaults were more likely to result in death.

The notion that violence is normative among African Americans, or that black men in particular behave as “normal primitives,” has important implications for my study of intimate-partner homicide. Without effective intervention and protection early on in conflictual domestic relationships, the parties may resort to settling their own scores. If interpersonal vigilantism is one reason that black intimates, and particularly black women, resort to violent forms of dispute resolution, then, as Hawkins puts it, such resort only reinforces the stereotypical belief that violence is normative among black persons. Yet this expression of violence cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be seen as a cultural or subcultural product. Rather, one must look to the interface of dominant white culture and disadvantaged sectors of the black community, and the acquiescence of the former in the illegality of the latter. Gunnar Myrdal locates the stereotypical beliefs about black disorderliness amidst broader American cultural mores:

It is part of the Southern tradition to assume that Negroes are disorderly and lack elementary morals, and to show great indulgence toward Negro violence and disorderliness “when they are among themselves.” They should, however, not act it out in the presence of whites, “not right out on the street.” As long as only Negroes are concerned and no whites are disturbed, great leniency will be shown in most cases.35

Marginalized black subcultures have been created in part out of interaction with dominant social institutions such as the criminal justice system. From the earliest days of slave-based agricultural production, slave patrols policed African Americans on and off the plantations.36 After the end of Reconstruction, huge numbers of younger black men were criminalized through the use of disorderly conduct codes, vagrancy statutes, and loitering ordinances. These and similar laws served, in part, to socially demarcate the territory available to black persons, and they helped create rigid patterns of racial segregation, especially in fast-expanding urban areas.37 Blacks who migrated north in hope of bettering their social and economic lot found themselves segregated into neighborhoods either bordering or within traditional red-light districts. Once black citizens had been isolated in these areas, police largely failed to offer protection, instead monitoring them for inappropriate incursions into white social space or for cultural activities inconsistent with dominant white mores. Nearly all of the major urban disturbances of the twentieth century were triggered by the overzealous and brutal policing of African Americans.38 The U.S. Supreme Court gradually became aware of the regular use of torture to extract confessions from black suspects. In Brown v. Mississippi (1936), the Court threw out the convictions of three black men who had confessed to a homicide after being tortured. One was hung from a tree by his neck; the other two were beaten on their bare backs with metal-studded belts by sheriff’s deputies.39 This legacy of hostility between the police and the black community is a deeply embedded one. It is culturally reinforced every time police use excessive force, harass a young black man on the street, or routinely employ racist epithets.40

During my fieldwork in Florida I talked with many social actors who are
involved in responding to domestic violence. Most of them, including law enforcement officers, health professionals, judges, attorneys, and advocates for battered women, acknowledged that 20 years ago violence in the black community was either not policed at all, policed passively, or only policed when it spilled over or had other deleterious effects upon dominant white culture. In this sense, the monitoring of the black community had changed little in a century or more. However, this passivity, acquiescence, and indifference to violence so long as it involved only African Americans seems to have changed. Most informants argued that the housing projects in Florida are policed much more closely nowadays. They also argued that whereas two decades ago the delivery of medical services to the black community mirrored the delivery of police services, emergency medical service delivery today is as swift as it is in the white community. These observations on policing and the delivery of emergency medical services are at least superficially borne out by the log data from the homicide files. I could discern no differences between racial or ethnic communities’ receipt of police or medical services.

If my observations and those of key informants in Florida are accurate, they are consistent with other studies which show that with the advent of community policing black neighborhoods have been policed and surveyed far more closely than ever before.\(^{31}\) The motives for this change are often less than admirable, and they likely have a lot to do with perpetuating the criminal justice industry through the dubious arrest and subsequent incarceration of politically vulnerable young black men. In particular, one might note the massive arrest and incarceration of young African-American men for crack cocaine offenses. Nevertheless, one by-product of this more enthusiastic policing may be the well-documented reduction of domestic homicide among black men and women.\(^{42}\) It is not my argument that with the advent of community policing the law enforcement agencies of the state suddenly became more attuned to and concerned with the plight of African Americans. Rather, through more intense policing, it is likely that the state has invented yet another way to punish young black males. Indeed, one notes that the massive increase in their incarceration corresponds with the rise of community policing initiatives and the decline of black intimate-partner killings.

The cultural sense that police have rather passively managed domestic violence in the black community is, as Hawkins suggests, an important factor contributing to the disproportionately high rates of black intimate-partner homicide. If one adds to this the long-standing perception, particularly on the part of African-American women, that there is little institutional support to assist them in fleeing violent men, one can see how an interpersonal vigilantism, rooted in male violence, may have come to flourish in the black community. Although for black women as a whole these perceptions of the delivery of state services may be changing, the archival data suggest that for a significant number of black women, entrapped to the point of using resistive lethal violence, traditional beliefs and perceptions of vulnerability die hard.

However, there are perhaps several ways that the new policing initiatives may have prevented some black partners from committing intimate homicide. First, the policing initiatives of the last 20 years have taken large numbers of African-American men out of families and off the streets, thus lessening their opportunities to engage in domestic violence. Conversely, it could be argued that when these often-incarcerated men return to their families, partners, and children, they are more experienced, angrier, and meaner than before and hence more, not less, likely to kill. Second, with increasing police intervention in domestic violence in the black community, the message about the potential consequences of intimate violence may have begun to circulate. Third, heightened police responsiveness to violence in black households may have augmented and intensified beliefs and values regarding the inappropriateness of this behavior. Fourth, growing police enthusiasm for responding to disorder involving black persons means officers arrive more quickly, thus nipping potentially lethal violence in the bud. Many criminal justice personnel made the point that the difference between aggravated assault and homicide can be the speed and effectiveness with which police and medical services are delivered in the first hour after an assault. It is likely that such enhanced responses, which are associated with developments in community policing, saved the lives of some black domestic disputants.

If the decrease in the black intimate-partner homicide rate over the last two decades is due in part to increased law enforcement presence and responsiveness, then it suggests that the much longer historical legacy of police passivity may have been profoundly important in sending a message that black life was more expendable than white life. Regardless of the degree to which the factors mentioned above contributed toward a reduction in domestic homicide, it is clear that in 1994 black women, and, to a much lesser extent, black men, are at least as willing as their white and Latino peers to summon the police during or after a domestic dispute. These observations in Florida are mirrored by the latest Bureau of Justice Statistics Report on intimate-partner
violence and policing, which reveals not only that black women are more victimized by domestic violence than their white and Latino counterparts, but that black women are more likely to call the police.43

I have argued against seeing the black family and black culture as pathological and as the source of disproportionate rates of intimate-partner homicide. Rather, I contend that the legacy of oppression, discrimination, disadvantage, and social despair plays a major part in producing violent interpersonal relationships. One cannot disaggregate these historical burdens and contemporary sources of disenchantment from the commission of interpersonal violence. Many brutalized persons do not engage in violent, brutal acts themselves. Many children who witness violence between their parents do not become batterers themselves. Put simply, people negotiate their use of violence in interpersonal relationships, and many men do not have to use violence to realize the fruits of patriarchy. However, the idea that black life has been devalued strikes me as a real reason for expecting that intimate violence and homicide would be higher in the African-American community. Indeed, some social scientists have framed this long-standing differential police response to the black community as part of a much broader cultural and historically enduring contempt for black persons. Under this way of thinking, the fact that blacks have higher rates of domestic homicide, or indeed violent crime in general, comes as no surprise. Some writers have argued that the increased propensity for violence among black disputants stems from the legacy of racial oppression in the United States and from black cultural roots in Africa.44 Others point to the way in which African Americans were socialized into violence through the brutalizing effects of slavery.45 These perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some researchers attach more importance to how white culture, and particularly the criminal justice apparatus, devalues blacks.46 Darnell Hawkins points out that this cultural contempt for black men and women, and particularly the devaluation of black life, is so pervasive that it also permeates the black community. It is for this reason, among others, that black-on-black violence is so pronounced. Hawkins also argues that the historical legacy of devaluing black life has had specific effects in the arena of domestic violence. He argues that because black life is valued less than white life, the consequences for black men and women who commit acts of domestic violence, and indeed domestic homicide, have traditionally been less severe than for white persons who injure or kill their intimate partners.47

At the same time, African-American culture has been variously and inaccurately essentialized as criminogenic, a drain on welfare funds, drug infested, and, to use Moynihan’s phrase, a “tangle of pathology.” My point is that black culture, whatever it is or was, is inextricably tied up with broader social structures: patterns and is laced with a plethora of dominant value prescriptions concerning religious beliefs, families, education, and community. Put differently, one cannot talk of culture as if it were an adjunct to social structure or some kind of epiphenomenon. Values, beliefs, and norms do not stand alone, detached from social patterns such as class relations. The art of social intercourse mediates and is itself shaped by patterns of employment, experiences of formal social control mechanisms, and the collective memories of the past. To ignore these intersections between culture, structure, and history is to do a grave disservice to the complex and multifaceted social phenomenon of domestic homicide. Likewise, to talk of subcultures as if they were bounded off from mainstream cultural formations, or immune to the machinations of the capitalist marketplace or patriarchal structures, is to deny the historical fluidity of social life itself. Bearing these comments in mind, I now proceed to explore the intersection of gender, culture, and history as a possible means of making sense of how the Sex Ratios of Killing vary among blacks, Latinos, and Caucasians.

SROK Not only do rates of domestic homicide differ by culture, but the sex ratios of intimate-partner killing exhibit distinctive cultural variations as well. For blacks and whites the SROKs also differ by the marital status of the parties. As Table 7.1 reveals, the SROKs for blacks, whites, and Latinos are 41.7, 20.9, and 11.8, respectively. Among blacks there is a significant difference between the SROKs for married (33.3) and unmarried (47.6) partners. In contrast, the SROK for white married partners (25) is considerably higher than that for unmarried partners (15.8). For Latinos, the SROKs do not seem to differ for married and unmarried partners, with both being significantly lower than the figure for white and, especially, black couples.

Any attempt to explain variations in SROKs must, at a minimum, explore historically embedded patriarchal formations in different cultural settings. The anthropological evidence strongly suggests that where women have at least some political and economic clout vis-à-vis men they are likely to be better insulated from cruder and more coercive patriarchal controls.48 The Florida findings are consistent with this anthropological research. The SROKs are highest in matrilocal and matrifocal familial systems (e.g., among blacks), where women have traditionally worked outside the home and have been more
likely to be the sole or more-substantial economic provider. In those families, and for a variety of reasons, men are more likely to be physically absent from the home. The SROKs are lowest among families where women are less likely to work for wages outside the home and where men tend to be physically present to a greater degree (e.g., among Latinos). I will focus first upon the low numbers among Latinos before exploring the high numbers among African Americans.

Latin women in Florida come from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations, and they have distinct histories. All I can do here is to introduce some historical, cultural, and social structural phenomena that may help explain why only a small number of Latino women commit intimate-partner homicide. Upon presenting the low Latino SROKs to audiences in Florida, as well as to the numerous players I came into contact with during the course of my research, the reply was almost always the same: "Latin women are respectful of their male partners"; "Latin women are more subordinate than Caucasian and black women because of their culture, family structure, and the influence of Catholicism." At the same time, Latino women in particular are quick to point out that their compromised position as a group varies among Mexicans, Central and South American Latinos, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. In what follows, I discuss those aspects of Cuban and Mexican-American social and cultural history that offer an entrance into making sense of the low Latino SROKs.

Migration from Cuba to the United States began in small numbers in the 1830s and accelerated after a protracted insurrection against Spanish colonists began in 1868. As Perez points out, prominent among the early migrants were cigar manufacturers; they set up traditional Cuban enclaves on the outskirts of Tampa in Ybor City and also in Key West. Many of these households were multigenerational, with men forming the center of patrilocal socialization patterns. Among these early immigrants who set up what were essentially company towns, Perez notes the cultural importance of the double standard with regard to the behavior of males and females: "The double standard of morality formed part of a strong patriarchal tradition that Cuban immigrants brought with them from the island's colonial society. It was a tradition that was reflected in, and protected by, the Spanish civil code, which was in effect in Cuba even after the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1898."50

The legally, but not factually, subordinate status of Cuban women was modified in 1940 by the addition of a constitutional clause that "reaffirmed a married woman's full civil status."51 A number of other progressive changes in family law put Cuban women's status ahead of that of others in Latin America.52 Indeed, Perez notes the higher rate of "marital conflict and divorce" among Cuban couples compared with other Latino groups in the contemporary United States. In her view,

[i]t is likely that definitions of the male role have not totally adjusted to the realities of female employment so as to permit greater sharing of household tasks. Consequently, Cuban women have the double burden of employment and domestic responsibilities. This situation, of course, is not unique to Cubans. But it is likely that, compared with the norms in the dominant society, the male role has remained somewhat more traditional among Cubans, whereas the expectations of the performance of women in domestic tasks has remained fairly high.53

However, these changes, as they may have been, came much later than comparable changes in U.S. laws extending formal civil rights to white American women with regard to owning businesses, enjoying custody of children, administering wills, and the like. Put differently, the lingering cultural effects of acute patriarchal controls are likely to be felt more intensely among Cuban women than among other American women of comparable social class.

Maxine Baca-Zinn suggests that "family is one of the strongest areas of life, more important for Mexicans than for Anglos. This pertains not only to the nuclear family but also to a wider circle of relatives that includes aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, in-laws, and even compadres."54 She argues that compadrazgo (a system of fictive kin, such as godparents and coparents) is another important component of family life, also less well developed in Anglo family systems. Mosqueda notes that compadrazgo is nominally rooted in Catholic religious ceremony and serves as a means of extending the boundaries of family to incorporate nonblood kin.55 Historically, this system was one way of staying off the threat of poverty by widening the circle of social support around families. As Mosqueda points out through his interview work, compadres feel honored to be called upon to enter this circle and morally obliged to commit to it.

Baca-Zinn argues that although male domination is present in Mexican families it is not as acute as it was depicted to be in some of the early studies of them. Blea makes the same point, observing that the picture of the Mexican woman as "docile, passive, uncomplaining, all-suffering, all-forgiving and
hard-working” is a well-documented stereotype, along with other notions that she is the “victim of a violent, unfaithful male.” She goes on to say that because Mexican-American women earn far less than Anglo women, they are forced into a relationship of greater interdependence with men. Here again one sees the simultaneous influence of cultural and social structural factors on patriarchal family forms. As Mexican migration proceeded, gender power relations were mediated by broader structural, especially economic, conditions. In particular, Blea notes the role of women’s work outside the family as one mechanism that has sometimes empowered Mexican women vis-à-vis their husbands. However, this outside work cuts both ways. If Mexican women earn well, their wage work may be empowering. As Blea points out, though, Mexican-American women typically earn a lot less than their Anglo counterparts. Such low wages, in combination with responsibilities for household and child care, may actually increase Mexican-American women’s stress and their dependence upon men. Zavala’s study of Chicano families in the Santa Clara Valley revealed women’s employment as cannery workers was part-time and seasonal. Men saw women’s wage labor as an extension of their household responsibilities. As such, it did not transform their relationship with men in the patriarchal family, but in the end only accentuated their dependence.

Unlike Cuban-American families, those of Mexican Americans tend to be poorer and have much higher birthrates. Both factors compound the compromised position of women in Chicano families. Domestic violence is more prevalent in poorer families, and it is also the case that the burdens of child care are borne excessively, and at times exclusively, by women. Blea traces the subordination of women in modern Mexican families back to the Spanish Conquest. Other researchers stress how the traditional power of the Mexican woman and her links with her family of origin were eroded after the Mexican-American War of 1848. Griswold del Castillo observes that although Mexican women were valued primarily for their “domesticity,” they suffered an erosion of their traditional property rights enjoyed under Spanish and Mexican civil codes. He notes a number of court rulings that served to “strengthen the property rights of the husband at the expense of his wife and children.” Of contemporary gender power issues, Blea remarks: “Even at birth Chicano females and males do not start out the same. Boy babies are still preferred.”

My thumbnail sketch of some features of Cuban-American and Mexican-American families points to the diversity among Latino groups. However, they share a cultural legacy dating back to the Spanish Conquest, a history mediated by migration patterns to the United States, and the experience of negotiating the rigors of a dominant Anglo culture. Although Latino family forms are heavily patriarchal, they are differentially impacted by economic conditions. With higher incomes and fewer children, Cuban-American women seem less vulnerable to male domination than do poorer Mexican-American women. As Dois Wilkinson points out, however, regardless of differences stemming from poverty, migration patterns, occupational opportunities, immigrant status, family customs, and regional variation, families of Spanish descent in the United States seem committed to certain core “solidifying beliefs.” Among them is a commitment to “the functional dominance of males, complemented by a positive and traditional role for women . . . the reinforcement of sex role distinctions through child-rearing practices . . . the repression of feminine attributes in males, and a precedent for the male as head of the household.” It is this “functional dominance” and the traditional cultural ascendancy of men, accompanied by a strong norm toward respecting them as heads of household, that provides the most likely key to understanding why very few Latino women kill men, compared with the number of Latino men who kill women. Male dominance is likely enhanced when kin networks are patrilocally and women are isolated from their own families. Domination and entrapment appear to be particularly acute among some migrant farmworker families. However, the archival material revealed that these entrapped Latino women have not resorted to lethal violence as a resistive strategy, perhaps in part because of their lack of citizenship and fear of losing their children.

The archival analysis of the female-perpetrated killings reveals that African-American women, in contrast to their Caucasian and especially Latino counterparts, are much more likely to kill their intimate male partners. I have already alluded to the historic failure of police to intervene in violence in the black community. However, there is no way of knowing precisely how the willingness of black women in Florida in 1994 to summon the police was associated with their higher rates of intimate-partner homicide. The latest BJS study and my field observations suggest black women are at least as likely to call police and as likely to have their homes reached by emergency services as are white and Latino women. However, for a variety of reasons, acutely entrapped and isolated African-American battered women still appear reluctant to call the police. It is from among their ranks that the female-perpetrated killing of male intimates is most likely to come. Other field research suggests that black battered women, for various reasons, are less willing to use domestic-violence shel-
criminal justice and other state agencies. Their partners were often obsessively possessive, and a good number of these violent men had threatened to kill them. These are the continuities in the cases where women kill men, and these continuities transcend racial lines. The only reasonable conclusion is that more black women than Caucasian and Latino women appear to be entrapped to the point that they have to kill their intimate partners.

What, then, should be made of the convincing anthropological evidence which shows that where women’s labor is valued and where women have increased political clout relative to men, they are less likely to be violently victimized? For example, Levinson, in a cross-cultural analysis of family violence, found that “women’s economic power or solidarity with other women is a powerful predictor of the absence of wife beating.”

Although I have argued against the existence of a black matriarchy, it is evident from the available research that there appears to be a higher degree of networking among black women than among Caucasian or Latino women. As Carol Stack has argued, this networking is in part an adaptive response to the pressures of poverty. Does this seemingly more extensive networking among at least some women in the black community somehow provide a means for understanding the high African-American SROKs? Is there something about this networking that empowers black women vis-à-vis black men to the point that higher numbers of them are able to kill their abusers? There is no archival evidence that such a multifocal network, if it does exist, works in this way. Indeed, the archival material shows no examples among the 24 cases of women killing men where women somehow planned, somehow drew support from each other, or somehow conspired to kill abusers. One ought not confuse a seeming solidarity among the disadvantaged with an empowerment to commit homicide. On the contrary, the African-American women who killed seemed at least as isolated as their Latino or Caucasian counterparts. Nor did the black women appear any more economically independent of their intimate partners. Indeed, in most cases both black men and black women were poor. Unlike the situation with Caucasians and Latinos, black women have more job opportunities, earn higher wages, and have higher levels of formal education than do their male intimates. However, this does not mean that they occupy ascendant positions in their intimate relationships with black men or suffer less battering than other women.

Even though the number of cases is small and the archival information on personal income is limited, black women in Florida in 1994 did not kill black men within what appeared to be the context of a relationship in
which they were economically privileged compared with those men. Nor ought it to be assumed that if black women do earn more than their intimate male partners they will actually control the distribution of income within the family.

Concluding Remarks: Social Policy Initiatives

My archival analysis provides insights into the microdynamics of domestic homicide. Men perpetrated most domestic killings, including the majority of family homicides. When women commit family homicide, they almost always kill their children. In most cases these child deaths involve abuse, neglect, or both. The fact that women do kill their children points up the tenuousness of trying to explain all domestic homicides through the power or control maneuvers of men.

Men perpetrated most intimate-partner homicides. They kill their intimate female partners as part of a stylized patriarchal pattern of increasingly controlling interpersonal behavior that usually involves battering. These homicides are typically crimes of cumulation, steeped in a multitude of tensions, discord, and violence. Women kill men mostly in self-defense. They typically do not act out of envy, to gain insurance money, or to assert their power and control. Indeed, it is one of the great travesties of our time that women who commit these offenses end up serving long prison sentences.

The microdynamics of intimate-partner homicide tend to transcend race, ethnicity, social class, age, and neighborhood characteristics. However, one should not take this to mean that women in different cultural settings understand entrapment to be the same thing. Likewise, women differ in their reactions to entrapment. The pervasiveness of these microdynamics, and their presence as at least contextual factors in some instances of domestic child homicide, might provide a rationale for screening out potentially lethal domestic-violence cases. As I have stated, it was not my intent in writing this book to produce a predictive matrix in any scientific sense. However, given all of the intimate-partner assaults, roughly half of which come to the attention of the police, the situational antecedents I identify might be a way of beginning to appreciate those cases at higher risk of lethality. Situations where agencies know men have beaten women for years, where men have threatened to kill women and communicated those threats to others, where abusers are obsessively possessive of their female partners, where men remain undeterred by criminal justice or other agency interventions, and where men have histories of criminal violence warrant the very closest attention. This scrutiny ought to be further amplified in cases where the woman is attempting to escape. However, it is not my conclusion that the instances of domestic homicide differ qualitatively from other cases involving violent domestic discord. Many batterers are obsessively possessive, and most feel that they have been betrayed by their victims in one way or another. Rather, the archival material suggests there are differences of degree, frequency, and intensity that may help to identify some of the pre-lethal situations.

My archival analysis is essentially a social postmortem on the deaths of family members. Its veracity is therefore shaped by the archival materials and the numerous and varied leads I have developed and pursued from those materials. In this sense, I have had at my disposal the same bodies of information, and have had access to the same microcircuits of knowledge, that parties from multiple state agencies tap into. Key players in those agencies, especially ones closer to the street, such as homicide detectives, doubtless had many more sources than I could muster in a somewhat cursory analysis of the 319 domestic deaths. Put differently, criminal justice players, judges, and social service providers have remarkable access to the daily details of people’s lives. This degree of access is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, civil libertarians warn of the loss of privacy. They complain, rightly in my opinion, of the insidious erosion of Fourth Amendment rights. However, in the arena of domestic violence it is the privacy of the family in the home, among other things, that enables violence to escalate to lethal levels. Nevertheless, orchestrating state agencies to intervene on behalf of family members borders on the politically impermissible for some. To drop the debate about domestic homicide at the door of legal and civil rights, however, risks individualizing the problems and missing the patterns that, as my archival analysis has shown, far transcend particular persons and their broken relationships. I suggest, then, that if orchestrated, humane state intervention in domestic violence is to proceed to check and further reduce the incidence of domestic homicide, such state incursions should be informed by the kinds of microdynamics I have tried to elucidate through the archival sources.

There is an assumption here that agency intervention can save lives. I have already argued that the heightened availability of police services in African-American neighborhoods is one reason for the drop in domestic homicide rates in those communities across the country. It is not my reading of the archival files that it was solely the power and control of men in the family that led to
the killing. Rather, the patriarchal order is a social one, extending beyond the boundaries of family life, blurring distinctions between the public and private spheres. As such, this patriarchal order is also articulated and reproduced through certain styles of policing that do not take woman battering seriously, through judicial dispositions that blame women for their own victimization, and the like. It is because of the social ubiquity of patriarchy that focusing on service providers may bear rich fruit in reducing domestic homicide. On the other hand, the history of social control is the history of oppression and subjugation; ironically, it is also the history of resistance, unanticipated outcomes, and unintended effects. Recommending greater surveillance and intervention in the family by state agencies runs the risk of feeding into the ludicrous buildup of the enormous criminal justice apparatus that increasingly permeates social life. Instead of swelling the growing army of the incarcerated, it would be wiser social policy to back away from the tendency to criminalize behaviors such as drug offenses while upgrading the criminal justice response to violence in families.

Rather than focusing here on policy possibilities at the level of individual agencies, I close by highlighting an emerging statewide policy initiative in Florida. Funded through the U.S. Department of Justice, it is designed to better understand, intervene in, and perhaps prevent domestic killings. I refer to the attempt to set up domestic-violence fatality review teams. These teams, currently being established in four jurisdictions in the state, bring players from multiple agencies together to review domestic-violence fatalities and to ask this question: What, as service providers in this community, could we have done differently to have prevented this death? Team members then collectively develop ideas about how best to change the policies and procedures within member agencies, how to better coordinate existing strategies, and how to create new ones. With the central purpose of prevention in mind, it is essential that the teams be composed of agency members who possess the political clout to effect policy and procedural changes. At a philosophical level, the idea is to ask the "how could we have prevented it" question without lapsing into blaming particular agencies or individuals for errors of judgment, malfeasance, and so on that may have contributed in some way to the homicide. At the same time, the review process remains cognizant of the need for accountability on the part of service agencies. By using an approach that does not assign blame and shame within an ethos of accountability, agency members are encouraged to share information and strategies. The approach involves multiple agencies and multiple disciplines. It recognizes that domestic violence and domestic homicide are social problems that involve many service providers, among them the police, courts and corrections, public health workers (broadly conceived), and advocates for battered women. Alongside these general suggestions about how domestic-violence-fatality review teams might operate, it also must be recognized that state agencies differ by region, funding levels, commitment to issues, bureaucratic organization, and the nature of their individual employees. Consequently, any attempts to standardize the review process beyond introducing basic philosophical premises, addressing etiologic patterns, and the like may be counterproductive.

Police departments can be sued for their failure to handle domestic cases properly. Many other criminal justice professionals, including sheriffs and judges, are elected to office. Due to these concerns about liability and election, and for other reasons, some states have enacted laws to guarantee the confidentiality of the information shared at domestic-violence fatality reviews. The idea behind such legislation is to safeguard team members and their respective agencies from legal liability, thus encouraging them to share information more openly. The possible downside to confidentiality guarantees is that they might create the sense that information is being hidden from the people, to whom these agencies are perceived to be ultimately responsible. This is a thorny policy issue. Those working in the field of child-fatality reviews in Florida have told me that confidentiality guarantees are an essential accompaniment to the open discussion of agency involvement in the deaths of girls and boys. At the time of writing, the State of Florida has not passed legislation either to set up fatality-review teams or to guarantee the confidentiality of death reviews. In a related vein, it remains to be seen whether reporters, primarily newspaper journalists, will be involved in deliberations about domestic fatalities. The power of the mass media is immense. In the case of domestic homicides, as I have written elsewhere, news organizations tend to fail to situate the deaths of domestic disputants within the broader power relations of gender. For instance, in the case of homicide-suicides, research shows that a history of woman battering usually precedes the fatal episode. Yet, it is unusual to see press reports of these events address the gendering of perpetration and motives. There is a need for more news coverage that addresses the social context of domestic killings.

Looking at homicide photographs showing the blood-soaked corpses of adults and the charred remains of babies, reading suicide notes, talking with
persons who knew the deceased, and poring over the transcripts of interviews with those who have taken life are strange research activities. One becomes somewhat inured to the pain through a series of emotional maneuvers. At times, the horror caught up with me, but not very often. On occasion, I even glimpsed the potential virtues of abstracted empiricism! As I became increasingly familiar with the cases and with some of the players, I realized yet another aspect of the relationship between death and intimacy. To paraphrase Nietzsche, as one scrutinizes the abyss, the abyss looks back with an alarming gaze. As we as a society try to make sense of domestic homicide, we cannot escape or deny our relationship with it and our involvement in it. All the more reason to prevent it.

### Appendix 1

Synopses of the Prior Criminal Histories (Including Assaults on Partners) of the Male Perpetrators of Single Intimate-Partner Homicides in Florida, 1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offender's Pseudonym</th>
<th>Prior Woman Battering</th>
<th>Synopsis of Offender's Criminal History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Forbes Reese, B, 47</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
<td>Aggravated assault on a stranger (stabbing) (date unknown).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Pat Crenard, B, 40</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
<td>Robbery; narcotics trafficking; homicide (two weeks before he killed his intimate partner) (dates unknown).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Jack Ruben, 39, unknown race or ethnicity</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
<td>Robbery; attempted burglary; prior domestic-violence offenses (dates unknown).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Chuck Bradshaw, B, 46</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
<td>Aggravated assault (domestic violence) (date unknown).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Ron Gemmil, B, 26</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
<td>Numerous domestic-violence offenses, including aggravated battery (dates unknown).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Rod Clements, W, 22</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
<td>Drug dealing (date unknown).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Alfred Simpson, W, 23</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
<td>Habitual felony offender; includes aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, aggravated assault with a knife, aggravated battery, and burglary and theft (dates unknown).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Code: W = white; B = black; L = Latino*