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abstract
Organised crime is a worldwide phenomenon, and yet proves difficult to define. In Ireland, organised crime is centred, for the most part, on gangland activity and related killings. Public perceptions of gangland homicide support a strong link to the drug trade, however the current review discusses the importance of recognising several motivating factors, including the inherent nature of gang mentality, social and economic factors, family factors, psychological and biological factors, and the possibility of psychopathology. Although there is no one theory that can account for gangland killings, social cognitive theory can be used to partially explain this behaviour. However, disentangling these violent crimes from the gangland background is extremely problematic. This is compounded by the paucity of empirical research on Irish gangland activity. Consequently, there is ambiguity surrounding the relative importance of each of these factors, and further research, of a multidisciplinary nature, is thus recommended.

“For me it was just business. I didn’t know the guy. I’d never seen him before. He had to go. That’s all I knew. That’s all I needed to know.”

-Athony ‘Gaspipe’ Casso

Introduction

This paper considers organised crime in Ireland, most pertinently the associated homicides that are committed in Irish gangland activity. The paper provides a short synthesis of the available knowledge that can inform our understanding of the motivation behind these gangland murders, by considering the impact of several elements, including the inherent nature of gangs, the link with drugs, social and economic factors, family upbringing, psychological and biological factors, and psychopathology. In its examination of these factors, this paper
argues that the complex nature of the motivation behind gangland homicide necessitates the development of a similarly complex theoretical model to explain this phenomenon, incorporating the aforementioned elements. Social cognitive theory can be utilised to explain this in part, however certain motivating aspects are neglected. Thus, this paper further argues that research in this area must be multidisciplinary in nature, and cross the traditional boundaries of knowledge disciplines.

Levi (1998) stated “the term ‘organised crime’ is frequently used but difficult to define”, and indeed defining ‘organised crime’ is a challenging task; Thomas Schelling, in his book Choice and Consequence (1984) makes an appropriate point when he discusses how it does not merely refer to ‘crime that is organised’. A more recent attempt to define organised crime was put forward by the European Commission and Europol (2001; as cited in Wright, 2006), where a list of eleven factors associated with organised crime was delineated. In order for organised crime to be considered present, four of these factors were deemed essential: “collaboration of more than two people, for a prolonged or indefinite period of time, suspected of the commission of serious criminal offences, determined by the pursuit of profit and/or power”. Organised crime in Ireland is centred, for the most part, around gangland activity (Davey, 2008; Campbell, 2008). Decker and Van Winkle (1996) define a gang as “an age-graded peer group that exhibits some permanence, engages in criminal activity, and has some symbolic representation of membership”. However, unlike, for example, gangs in North and South America, Irish gangs are not typically based around ethnicity. This makes an understanding of the motivation behind Irish gangland homicide more difficult, as international research cannot be assumed generalisable.

Public Perceptions

In the late 1990s to early 2000s in Ireland, general public consciousness was hyper-aware of gangland activity, in particular murder perpetrated by gang members. Organised crime and its related gangland killings was a very recent introduction to Ireland (Campbell, 2008), and a sense of crisis permeated the fabric of society, spurred on by the escalating nature of the problem. In a two-year period (1994-1996), a 424% increase in the amount of Irish Times articles mentioning ‘organised crime’ was noted (Meade, 2000). This anxiety was reflected not only in media reports, but also by official reports released by political parties; Fine Gael deemed the country “ungovernable” due to “rampant gangland crime” (Fine Gael National Press Office, 2006; as cited in Campbell, 2010), and the Labour Party compared Ireland to Bogota (Labour Press Office, 2005; as cited in Campbell, 2008).
Despite almost two decades of considerable attention from politics, public, and press, a manifestation of which can be seen in the popularity of RTÉ drama Love/Hate, there is no corresponding abundance of academic or empirical research (O’Donnell, 2005; Davey, 2008). The low conviction rates associated with gangland killings are a major reason for this (Campbell, 2008; O’Mahony, 2008).

This dearth of empirical investigations leaves room for speculation and assumption, which thus leads to difficulties in truly understanding the phenomenon, or conducting a reasoned study of motivational factors behind gangland murder. There are various potential motives behind gangland homicide, and this paper aims to address some of the many possible drives behind this phenomenon.

The Nature of Gangs

Violence is an inherent and vital aspect of gang life (Klein & Maxson, 1989; Wright, 2006). There are also factors related to the nature of gangs themselves which are pertinent in terms of motivation; for example, it is likely that the severity of punishment for treachery imparted by fellow members is perceived as much greater than that afforded by the legal system (McCarthy, Hagan, & Cohen, 1998; Reuter, 1983). Conditions of gang membership may include such assumptions as non-compliance with An Garda Síochána (von Lampe & Johansen, 2004). Thus if one is ordered to carry out a murder on behalf of the gang, there may not appear to be a choice in whether this order is executed.

The media attention afforded to Irish gangs has been previously addressed. This attention may result in a certain type of glamour becoming attached to gang membership, and the associated violent crime. It is possible that there may be a motivation to commit violent crimes or homicide in order to gain access to the inner echelons of fame and power within the gang. In Joe Pistone’s famed book, Donnie Brasco: My undercover life in the Mafia, the attitude of Benjamin ‘Lefty’ Ruggiero is outlined: “As a wiseguy you can lie, you can cheat, you can steal, you can kill people – legitimately. You can do any goddamn thing you want, and nobody can say anything about it. Who wouldn’t want to be a wiseguy?” (Pistone & Woodley, 1988). Studies have suggested that, even in young children, the prospect of attaining peer approval or status is a motivating factor behind aggression (Miller, 1958; Buehler, Patterson, & Furniss, 1966; Short, 1968). However, it is clear that this factor is not the sole motivation behind the committing of gangland killings, with factors such as drugs more commonly highlighted as an important influence in the media.

The Drugs and Violent Crime Link

Widespread public belief in Ireland
assumes that there is a strong association between gangland homicide and drugs (Connolly, 2006). Paul O’Mahony (2000, p. 23) posits that increasing rates of drug addiction in Ireland has “translated into a growth in the violence of crime and in the breaking of previously well-established taboos against victimising the vulnerable”. O’Donnell (2005) stated the organisation of the drug trade is a contributing factor in most gangland killings. In the official Irish governmental definition of organised crime, as proposed by the Department of Justice and Equality, a list of activities associated with organised crime is given; it is interesting that murder or manslaughter is not present in this list, however drug trafficking is deemed to be one of three most damaging associated factors (Department of Justice and Equality, 2012). However, in perhaps the most comprehensive empirical examination of the Irish drugs-crime link thus far, a report for the Health Research Board (HRB) by Johnny Connolly (2006), it was concluded that rates of violent crime perpetrated by drug users are not in line with the strong relationship assumed by the Irish public. White and Gorman (2000), in a similar American study, warn that the links between drug use and crime are prone to exaggeration.

There are four main models of the link between drugs and crime; the model which perhaps best addresses this link in terms of gangland violence is the systemic model, which claims that interaction with and within the drugs market itself, and associated factors, results in crime (White & Gorman, 2000). Connolly names the following types of crime as being associated with systemic aspects of the Irish drug trade: “gangland murders and fights over organisational and territorial issues, disputes over transactions or debt collection, and corruption of business and government officials” (Connolly, 2006, p. 26).

Drugs themselves may also have influence on crime, in that it has been suggested that perpetrators may ingest certain drugs, particularly stimulants such as cocaine, prior to the execution of homicide (O’Mahony, 2008; Connolly, 2006). Alcohol, a drug that has particular relevance to Irish culture, has also been shown to have an effect in terms of the committing of violent crime (O’Mahony, 2008). In a meta-analysis conducted by Parker and Auerhahn (1998), a conclusion was made that “when violent behaviour is associated with a substance, that substance is, overwhelmingly, alcohol” (Parker & Auerhahn, 1998, p. 306). However, due to the low conviction rates of gangland killers, as mentioned previously, there is insufficient evidence with regards to the intoxication of perpetrators in these particular circumstances. This dearth of evidence reiterates the importance of consideration of all causal factors.

Social and Economic Factors
Gangland culture is mostly situated in Ireland’s larger cities, including Limerick and the capital Dublin. Urban living has inherent effects on the motivations behind the committing of violent crime and homicide. Antisocial behaviour has been shown to be contingent on three conditions of urban inhabitation: poverty, heterogeneity, and mobility (Blau & Blau, 1982). Similarly, results of a meta-analysis (Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; as cited in Palmer, 2008) suggested that predictors of violence included “being male, low socioeconomic status, poor relationship with parents, involvement in general delinquency and drug use from a young age, a history of aggression and violence, antisocial peers, poor attitudes towards school, and poor school performance”.

Tuvblad and colleagues (2006) report extremely interesting results from their longitudinal study of Swedish twins. 2,133 twins participated in this research, which examined the heritability of antisocial behaviour. It was demonstrated that genetic effects on antisocial behaviour were higher for adolescents from areas of socioeconomic advantage; environmental influences did not have as strong an effect. The opposite was true for those with a low socioeconomic background, for whom environment was a critical factor in the development of antisocial tendencies. Thus we can see that social factors are most influential in urban, low socioeconomic areas – precisely those that are home to Ireland’s ganglands. In the words of Ian O’Donnell (2005, p. 112), “…an unequal society creates a context for violent crime”.

Some gangland killings may be economically motivated, as the crime may be committed, for example, on the promise of remission of debt (Connolly, 2006). Connolly (2006) also suggests that when legitimate employment is available, levels of drug-related crime should drop. However, this line of thought should then imply that gangland crime should increase due to economic motives in the context of unemployment in recessionary times; conversely, gangland crime spiked during the Celtic Tiger years and has dropped dramatically in the recession (Lally, 2012).

It is, of course, crucial to note that not all individuals who grow up in similar social and economic circumstances become gang members or commit gang-related murder, which supports the existence of other individuating factors – one of the most prominent being family upbringing.

Family Factors

It is possible, and widely perceived, that many Irish gangs are composed to a large extent of various members of the same extended family. Thus, issues surrounding the family environment both in the present and during development most likely have a part to play in the motivation to commit violent crime. Similarities in
aggressive and antisocial tendencies have been found between members of the same family (Miles & Carey, 1997).

Social cognitive theory and earlier theories of operant learning are crucial factors in the family setting. Research has shown that in a family environment where there are encouraging or tolerant attitudes toward aggression, this can act as instruction in aggression for children (Bandura & Walter, 1959; Hollenberg & Sperry, 1951). For example, Mafia crime boss Lefty Ruggero, when presenting his grandson with a toy gun, said “Now you can be a tough guy like your granddad. You can be a shooter when you grow up, just like me” (Abadinsky, 2010). International research consistently supports that criminal behaviour can be predicted by a parental background in crime, as reported by Jamel (2008).

Parental discipline of either extreme, either excessively authoritarian or permissive, or inconsistent disciplinary measures, has also been shown to have negative effects on child development, particularly with regards to aggression (Abadinsky, 2010; Miles & Carey, 1997; Palmer, 2008). Childhood abuse, or bearing witness to domestic abuse, has also been shown to have long-lasting effects on attitudes towards committing violent crime (Palmer, 2008). Aggression may thus be normalised, especially that which takes place in the presence or at the behest of family members – such as when contracted to commit gangland killings. It is likely however that in order for such social learning to take place, a psychological predisposition towards violence is perhaps already present.

Psychological Factors

Although the evidence is clear that certain environments and family situations are associated with involvement in violent crime, as previously stated it cannot be said that every individual situated in such circumstances goes on to engage in crime (Abadinsky, 2010). Therefore, it is likely that individual psychological factors also play a role in gangland murder motivation.

Several psychological factors have been proposed to motivate violent crime. Historically, psychological assessments of criminals were concerned with phrenology and its apparent ability to discern criminals from the general population due to the shape of each individual’s skull (Jamel, 2008). Phrenological theories have long since been disproved, but one of the most consistent contemporary findings regarding the psychology of crime concerns low self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Other contributing factors that have been posited include a need for immediate gratification, depression and high fearfulness (Palmer, 2008), which may lend themselves to a psychological profile likely to commit murder. Personality theories have demonstrated support that criminal
offenders typically rate highly in terms of psychoticism and neuroticism (Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989). These general theories of crime serve to supplement the other motivating elements of gangland homicide in particular, supporting the hypothesis that the causal factors are complex.

**Biological Factors**

Although environmental and personality factors such as those examined above have been shown to play a role in the development of criminally violent behaviour, these factors have been shown to account for only a tiny portion of the variance involved (Tuvblad, Grann, & Lichtenstein, 2006). Biological and genetic factors are also worth consideration, especially given the fact that perpetrators of violent crime are predominantly male, giving strong evidence for possible biological underpinnings (Howitt, 2009). It has been demonstrated that the link between testosterone and aggression is related to reduced neural activity in the orbitofrontal cortex, the brain area that is associated with self-regulation (Menta & Beer, 2009). This shows a possible link with the psychological construct of low self-control as mentioned above.

Early 21st century evidence from the literature suggested that the link between brain dysfunction and extreme violence is negligible (Coleman & Norris, 2000). However, in more recent studies are shedding new light on this. In an extremely interesting piece of research conducted in India (Rajender, Pandu, Sharma, Ghandi, Singh, & Thangaraj, 2008), 645 male participants were examined, 241 of whom had been convicted of rape, 107 of murder, 26 of both murder and rape, and 271 of whom were in the control group. A particular type of repeat exists in the androgen receptor (AR) gene called the CAG repeat; this study demonstrated significantly shorter CAG repeats in those who had committed murder and those who had committed rape in comparison to control participants. However, more intriguingly again, the group of participants who had been convicted of both murder and rape (the most violent offenders) had shorter CAG repeats than the other three groups, thus lending support to the notion of a biological root to violent crime (Rajender et al., 2008). Possible genetic links to less extreme antisocial behaviour generally have been supported by numerous studies (Tuvblad, Grann, & Lichtenstein, 2006).

In a longitudinal study of American adolescents (Vaughn, Delisi, Beaver, & Wright, 2009), strong support was shown for the effects of certain genes (DAT1 and 5HTT), which affect certain neurotransmitters (dopamine and serotonin) on criminal behaviour; however, environmental features, specifically the peer network, mediated this effect. Pertinently, this study controlled for self-control: all in all, demonstrating the complexity of Environ-
Environment X Personality X Biology models. This complexity must be taken into account when considering the motivating factors of gangland crime. Yet another factor worth consideration is the possibility of psychopathology.

**Psychopathology**

Describing his first murder, Sammy Gravano said, “Am I supposed to feel remorse? Aren’t I supposed to feel something? But I felt nothing like remorse. If anything, I felt good. Like high. Like powerful, maybe even superhuman. It’s not that I was happy or proud of myself. Not that. I’m still not happy about that feeling. It’s just that killing came so easy to me” (Abadinsky, 2010, p. 37). This excerpt clearly demonstrates flat affect, lack of empathy and grandiose sense of self-worth, which are all factors on Robert Hare’s Psychopathy Checklist (Hare, Clark, Grann, & Thornton, 2000).

In the context of this paper’s previous discussion of both environmental (considering both society and family) and biological factors, Mealey’s (1995) model of sociopathy is especially relevant. This model postulates two pathways of sociopathic development: primary and secondary. Primary sociopathy comes about as a result of abnormal moral development; the individual expresses no social responsibility, due to the influence of their genes. A disadvantaged environment is associated with secondary sociopathy. Risk factors for secondary sociopathy include “low socioeconomic status, urban residency, low intelligence, and poor social skills” (Miles & Carey, 1997, p. 216). It is pertinent to note that these factors associated with the development of secondary sociopathy reflect those deemed relevant to violent crime perpetration.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Gangland killings can thus be attributed to many factors: inherent aspects of gang membership, social and economic issues, the influence of drugs and involvement with the drug trade, consequences arising from the family environment, individual psychological characteristics, genetic and other biological effects, and psychopathology. It seems that should an individual perpetrate violent crime, such as that involved in gangland homicide, a combination of some or all of these factors are likely to be at play.

Given the difficulty inherent in extricating the relative importance of each of these factors, it is not surprising that there is no one model available at present to account for all motivating factors behind gangland murder. This is further compounded by the scarcity of research in this area. However any multi-factor model must take into account existing psychological theories of violence, such as, for instance, the aforementioned social cogniti-
Social cognitive theory generally posits that human behaviour is determined by learning in social environments, through imitation and modelling of behaviour. However in recent years this theory has been reviewed from an agentic perspective, which states that human behaviour is not solely based on the interpretation and incorporation of other’s behaviour, but also acts as agents of their own actions (Bandura, 2001).

In terms of the execution of violent crime, this agentic perspective on social cognitive theory states that although individuals typically restrain their behaviour to that which is morally correct, when committing violent crime individuals can disengage these self-imposed restraints by cognitively construing the victim as dehumanised, having bestial attributes, or drawing the suffering onto themselves (Bandura, 2001). Those individuals who frequently disengage these restraints have been found to “experience low guilt over harmful conduct, are less prosocial, and are more prone to vengeful rumination” (Bandura, 2001, p.9). These characteristics fit into the Hare Psychopathy Checklist, as discussed previously in this paper.

Social cognitive theory, from an agentic perspective, also posits that sociostructural factors such as economic conditions, socioeconomic status, and family structure do not affect an individual’s behaviour directly, but rather by influencing various factors related to the individual’s self-regulation, such as their aspirations and sense of efficacy (Bandura, 2001). Accordingly, the theory rejects the proposal that sociostructural determinants of behaviour are distal in their causative influence, but rather than they impact individual’s lives proximately; “multicausality involves codetermination of behaviour, not causal dependencies between levels” (Bandura, 2001, p.15).

In this way, social cognitive theory does take into account many, but not all, of the factors discussed in the body of this paper, however it is difficult to disentangle these crimes from the gangland background to which they belong. In the specific case of Irish gangland killings, it is especially difficult to elucidate the motives involved, as there is so little empirical evidence available; therefore caution is advised in judging the causes of such crime. It is also worthwhile to consider the importance of multidisciplinary research on this topic, as the wide variety of factors involved may be best understood by different disciplinary knowledge before synthesised. By crossing the traditional boundaries of the knowledge disciplines and consolidating a body of work, an appropriately complex model may be developed to adequately account for this uniquely Irish phenomenon.

Conclusion
The central argument set out in this paper is that it is impossible, at present at least, to isolate the sole or most important motivating factor behind gangland killings. Rather, it is most likely that some or all of the factors discussed above operate in conjunction in motivating such crime; as organised crime is both complex and multifaceted, as Levi (1998) claimed, the motives behind gangland homicide, a result of organised crime, are similarly complex. Although the agentic perspective on social cognitive theory offers some theoretical insight to the phenomenon, several possible motivating factors are neglected. In order to gain a nuanced and complete understanding of why these crimes are committed, further interdisciplinary research is necessary, after which a suitably complex model of motivation could be developed.

References


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