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AN ATTRIBUTE APPROACH TO RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS IN HOMICIDE

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I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the victim and the offender is an important variable in studies of personal violence because it places the event within the context of social structures. Roles such as husband, wife, friend, lover, and stranger are complex social relationships which may delineate homicides that share a distinctive etiology.¹ Furthermore, the moral and legal responses to violence are, to a large extent, determined by the social roles of the victim and offender.²

Although most studies of personal violence collect information on victim-offender relationships, the literature contains little conceptual guidance and almost no methodological research on the measurement issues. Researchers typically report results as though the distinctions between concepts such as "primary" and "secondary" or "stranger" and "non-stranger" are simple and self-evident.

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¹ Parker & Smith, *Deterrence, Poverty, and Type of Homicide*, 85 AM. J. SOC. 614 (1979).

² See, e.g., H. LUNDSGAARDE, *MURDER IN SPACE CITY: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF HOUSTON HOMICIDE PATTERNS* (1977).

In practice, however, the classifications are based on complex decisions made by coders working with police documents which frequently contain contradictory testimony and spotty information about victim-offender relationships.

Without depreciating the value of previous research, systematic research on the measurement of victim-offender relationships would strengthen studies of personal violence. This Article reports the results of preliminary research on a proposed coding instrument that should increase the reliability and validity of victim-offender classification. The Article begins with a discussion of the problems of some of the classification schemes that have been used in previous research. A description of the coding instrument follows. The proposed coding instrument is referred to as an "attribute coding form" because it breaks down the classification of victim-offender relationships into a series of binary decisions about the presence or absence of an attribute. This method not only increases the reliability of classifications, but also allows for the possibility that the relationships fall into more than one category. Furthermore, the use of this method strengthens the ability of the researcher to identify sources of reliability problems. Finally, this study compares estimates of the reliability of the Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) victim-offender classification for Baltimore in 1983 with an estimate of the reliability of the attribute approach from a pilot study. Preliminary evidence suggests that the attribute approach is considerably more reliable than the SHR.

II. PROBLEMS WITH EXISTING CLASSIFICATIONS

Existing schemes suffer from three major problems. First, the making of comparisons between studies is difficult because the classification schemes are not standardized. Second, many schemes are multidimensional and contain overlapping categories. Finally, definitions in the schemes are often vague and incomplete.

A. STANDARDIZATION

Since much of the research on personal violence is based on records of local agencies, comparisons between studies conducted at different times and places are an important part of the accumulation of evidence. Unfortunately, methodological differences between classification schemes are frequently confounded with time and place variations in the nature of homicide. While careful matching and collapsing of categories may, in some cases, allow valid comparisons between studies, interesting information is often lost. In

other cases, classification schemes may be so different that comparisons are impossible.

In Table 1, for example, the five selected estimates of the percentage of "friends" or "acquaintances" range from 14.5 in

TABLE 1
VICTIM-OFFENDER RELATIONSHIP DATA FROM SELECTED STUDIES

	Place/Time	"Friends or Acquaintances"	"Strangers"
Wolfgang ^a	Philadelphia 1948-1952	41.7	12.2
Boudouris ^b	Detroit 1926-1968	14.5	—*
Lundsgaarde ^c	Houston 1969	34.0	17.5
Riedel & Zahn ^d	U.S. 1976-1978	39.8	13.6
Pokorny ^e	Houston 1958-1961	32.6	1.4

a Categories "Close Friend" and "Acquaintance" were added. Source: Wolfgang, *infra* note 5, at 207 (Table 11).

b Source: Calculated from J. Boudouris, *supra* note 3, at 86 (Table 5).

c Source: H. LUNDSGAARDE, *supra* note 2, at 232. The 68 "Friends, Associates" from Table XII were divided by the total number of victims (200) to obtain the percentage.

d The "Acquaintance" category presumably includes "Friends." Source: M. RIEDEL & M. ZAHN, *supra* note 4, at 13 (Table 2-2).

e "Close Friend" and "Acquaintance" were added together. Source: Pokorny, *infra* note 7, at 483 (Table 5).

* Note: Boudouris did not include a "Strangers" category.

Boudouris' Detroit sample³ to 54.5 in Riedel and Zahn's national sample.⁴ It would be misleading, however, to conclude that there are fewer friend-acquaintance homicides in Detroit than in the nation as a whole. Rather, part of the difference is caused by Boudouris' classification scheme. His scheme includes categories, such as "Subcultural recreational-casual," "Psychiatric," and "Sui-

³ J. Boudouris, Trends in Homicide, Detroit: 1926-1968 (1970)(unpublished Ph.D. dissertation available from University of Michigan Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan).

⁴ M. RIEDEL & M. ZAHN, NATURE AND PATTERNS OF AMERICAN HOMICIDE (1985).

cide-murder," which overlap to an unknown degree with the category of "Friends and acquaintances." This overlap produces a downward bias in the estimate of the number of friend-acquaintance homicides because some homicides involving friends and acquaintances are also classified as "Psychiatric," "Subcultural recreational-casual," and "Suicide-murder."

Similar problems arise with other comparisons among these studies. An estimate of 41.7%, derived from Wolfgang's study,⁵ increases to 60.4% if the categories of "Paramour, Mistress, Prostitute," "Sexual Rival," "Enemy," "Paramour of Offender's Mate," and "Homosexual Partner" are added to the "Close Friends" and "Acquaintances" categories.⁶ Also, the percentage of "stranger" homicides reported by Pokorny⁷ is so small (1.4%) that one cannot help but wonder whether it is explained by a methodological artifact.⁸

B. CATEGORIES ARE MULTIDIMENSIONAL AND OVERLAPPING

Some classification schemes are multidimensional with the result that logically different traits are mixed into the same scheme. A common pattern confounds social role with the motive for the assault or with the general circumstances surrounding the offense. For example, during the period 1973 to 1975, the SHR⁹ used the classification scheme set out in Table 2.

The first two classes, "Within family," and "Outside family but between friend and acquaintance," are based on the status of the victim and the offender. The third category, "Crime-related," is distinguished by a completely different trait. Clearly, the first two categories overlap with the third; many "crime-related" homicides are also "friend-acquaintance" homicides, and some are "within family homicides."¹⁰ The problem, however, is not the overlap. The dis-

⁵ M. WOLFGANG, *PATTERNS IN CRIMINAL HOMICIDE* (1958).

⁶ This is a reasonable approach that has been followed by several authors. See, e.g., Hepburn & Voss, *Patterns of Criminal Homicide: A Comparison of Chicago and Philadelphia*, 8 *CRIMINOLOGY* 21, 30-32 table 2 (1970).

⁷ Pokorny, *A Comparison of Homicides in Two Cities*, 56 *J. CRIM. L. CRIMINOLOGY & POLICE SCI.* 479 (1965).

⁸ More than fifty (22.7%) of Pokorny's cases are in a category labeled "Other categories." *Id.* at 483, table 5.

⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, SHR Tape (October 9, 1974)(unpublished computer tape documentation acquired from Paul A. Zolbe, Chief, Uniform Crime Reporting Section, FBI).

¹⁰ In 1976, however, the FBI modified their coding scheme to separate elements of incident circumstance from the victim-offender relationship. The revised victim-offender relationship variable includes 16 categories of "Within family," 11 categories of "Outside family but known to victim," one category of "Offender not known to victim"

TABLE 2

WITHIN FAMILY	
	Spouse kills spouse
	Parent kills child
	Child kills parent
	Relation kills relation
	Other family
OUTSIDE FAMILY BUT BETWEEN FRIEND AND ACQUAINTANCE	
	Lovers and triangle
	Brawl due to alcohol
	Argument over money or property
	Other arguments
CRIME RELATED MURDER	
	Gangland killing
	Institution killing
	Felony murder
	Suspected felony type
MISCELLANEOUS	
	Illegal abortion
	Circumstances not described or cannot be scored from information given

tortion arises because overlapping dimensions are forced into a set of mutually exclusive categories.

Boudouris' classification also uses multiple, overlapping dimensions.¹¹ Some of his categories are defined by status positions, such as "Domestic relations," "Love affairs," and "Friends and acquaintances;" others seem to depend on variables such as etiology and motive. For example, "Psychiatric" is defined as "homicides perpetrated by defendants considered mentally ill by medical authorities."¹² Similarly, "[c]ultural recreational-casual" homicides "take place under normal and legal situations of social interaction. The persons may or may not be acquainted, but the homicide is a result of the interaction in the immediate situation rather than any prior

(stranger), and one category of "Unknown relationships." Information regarding "brawls," "arguments," "crime-related murders," and the like is captured in a circumstance variable distinct from relationship. See Federal Bureau of Investigation, Supplementary Homicide Report Coding Guide (1976) (unpublished computer tape documentation acquired from Paul A. Zolbe, Chief, Uniform Crime Reporting Section, FBI).

¹¹ J. Boudouris, *supra* note 3; Boudouris, *A Classification of Homicides*, 11 *CRIMINOLOGY* 525 (1974).

¹² Boudouris, *A Classification of Homicides*, *supra* note 11, at 530.

grievances.”¹³

C. DEFINITIONS ARE INCOMPLETE OR VAGUE

Many classification schemes do not provide operational definitions of concepts, and any such definitions which are provided are usually brief. The SHR classification, for example, does not define any of the categories.¹⁴ Presumably, the coders have developed a series of rules for classification, but it is not clear that the rules are consistently used. In other studies providing definitions, it is frequently difficult to determine how lines are drawn for some categories. Typical questions left unanswered by these studies include: How does one distinguish between a friend and an acquaintance? Are in-laws treated as family members? What constitutes a “common law marriage”? and is “common law marriage” treated as equivalent to a marriage sanctioned by the state?

III. AN ATTRIBUTE APPROACH

This Article’s approach to classifying victim-offender relationships is based on three principles. First, *simple judgments are more accurate than complex judgments*. Methodological research on the content analysis of documents suggests that coders make more reliable judgments when a single, binary choice, rather than a complex choice among multidimensional categories is required.¹⁵ Accordingly, the proposed instrument is structured as a series of such binary decisions, which, in effect, break a complex classification into a series of questions about the presence of a single attribute.¹⁶

Second, *the computer can be used to create final classifications*. Once the attribute data have been collected, it is easy to use a computer to create the complex, multidimensional typology. This method avoids some errors that coders make in manipulating complex information, and, more importantly, it allows flexibility in constructing different typologies that might be appropriate for different types of analyses.

Finally, *codes are more reliable if observable and specific criteria are enu-*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ See *supra*, text accompanying notes 9-10.

¹⁵ See Holsti, *Content Analysis*, in 2 THE HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 596 (G. Lindzey & E. Aronson eds. 2d ed. 1968); Schutz, *On Categorizing Qualitative Data in Content Analysis*, 22 PUB. OPINION Q. 505 (1958).

¹⁶ The use of binary codes is not a new idea, and it has been used widely in many contexts. This Article, however, has been heavily influenced by the work of Albert D. Biderman and others associated with the redesign of the National Crime Survey. That influence is gratefully acknowledged.

merated. If one thinks of social structure as a recurrent pattern of interactions maintained, to a large extent, by culturally defined beliefs about social roles,¹⁷ then one can measure social structure by either asking questions about culturally defined roles or by observing patterns of interaction and inferring culturally defined beliefs. Either approach necessarily involves some inferences about unobservable beliefs. To reduce errors in making such inferences, this study provides coders with definitional criteria which are observable or are at least specific. Some examples drawn from the proposed instrument illustrate the application of these principles.

A. NEIGHBORS AND CO-RESIDENTS

The two items in the instrument are: Did the victim and offender reside in the same building or block, but not in the same household? Did the victim reside in the same household as the offender at the time of the incident? Together, these items illustrate all three principles. They present binary choices and provide an operational definition of "neighbors"—a person who lives in the same building or block, but not in the same household. Therefore, once the data are collected, one can easily classify those who live in the same building or block, but not in the same household, as "neighbors."

B. LOVERS

The next question is: Did a romantic relationship exist between the victim and offender in either the immediate or distant past? A romantic relationship is a dyadic heterosexual or homosexual relationship involving partners who are legally married, dating, or cohabitating and, it is reasonable to infer, are partners in a consenting sexual relationship.¹⁸

The three statuses delineated so far—"neighbor," "household member," and "lover"—are not mutually exclusive. In the real world, they overlap; lovers, for example, may or may not be co-residents. The attribute approach preserves this information. The researcher can investigate empirically the extent to which any of the attributes measured in the instrument are correlated. This method stands in contrast to most classification schemes which force many statuses to be mutually exclusive.

¹⁷ See generally *APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE* (P. Blau, ed. 1975).

¹⁸ These categories would exclude most cases of prostitution and incest.

C. FRIENDS AND ASSOCIATES

One of the most important and difficult distinctions to make is the distinction between friends and acquaintances. Conceptual confusion arises if a distinction is not drawn between the intensity of the relationship, and the functional basis of the relationship. The intensity of the relationship corresponds to the common sense distinction between "close friends" and "casual friends." Functional basis, on the other hand, refers to the reason for interaction and the mechanisms that maintain social structure. Some repeated interactions are based on ecological location and market relationships, such as journey to work, place of residence, place of employment, and the organization of work groups. Other such interactions are based on mutual attraction and the exchange of interpersonal reinforcement. Also, many relationships are based on some complex combination of both types of interactions. Relationships based on circumstances of ecology or markets are sometimes called "instrumental," and those based on personal attraction are called "expressive."¹⁹

The approach proposed in this Article separates these dimensions. The functional basis of the relationship is determined by asking the following: Was the relationship between the victim and the offender based on recurrent *circumstances*, such as working in the same place, being in the same business (legal or illegal), living in the same neighborhood, using the same facilities (transportation, schools, parks, or restaurants); or was it based on *voluntary friendship*; or was it based on both?

The intensity of the relationship is operationally measured in terms of the relative frequency of interaction: Did the victim and offender communicate frequently (once a week or more over a period of at least three months), now or in the past?

People whose relationships are based on circumstances alone are, in our terms, "associates." When the relationship is based on friendship or both friendship and circumstances, the parties are considered "friends." If they interact once a week or more over a period of at least three months, the relationship is defined as a "close" relationship. This system generates the four types.

¹⁹ See, e.g., TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY OF ACTION (T. Parsons & E. Shils, eds. 1951).

FIGURE 1

BASED ON:	FREQUENCY OF INTERACTION	
	High	Low
Circumstances	Close Associates	Associates
Friendship	Close Friends	Friends

D. FAMILY

In practice, the range of possible family relationships is vast. The new procedure makes a basic distinction between family relationships based on consanguinity (related by blood) and family relationships based on affinity (related by marriage). Coders are then provided with a series of possible family statuses to assist their recognition of the range of possible family relationships. In addition to familiar statuses like parent, child, and sibling, the proposed list includes pseudo-consanguineous relationships like "stepparent" or "half-sibling." There are also specific provisions for adoption, foster parents, and legal guardianship.²⁰

E. STRANGERS

In the proposed scheme, strangers are defined by the lack of personal recognition of the offender by the victim: Prior to the day the homicide occurred, would the victim have recognized the offender?

F. OTHER STATUSES

Other statuses measured in the instrument include police officer. Also included is an open-ended item that prompts the coder to specify relationships that may not be anticipated: Did the victim have a type of relationship with the offender that has not been previously mentioned? In the new scheme, it is important to note that strangers may share other statuses that are also measured, such as neighbor, police officer, or even family member.

G. MISSING INFORMATION

The classic double-barreled question—"How many times did the victim beat his wife last month?"—illustrates a complexity of

²⁰ See Appendix, *infra*.

coding missing data. The answer "unknown" would cover three different circumstances: the victim beat his wife, but the frequency of his beatings is unknown; there is reason to suspect that the victim beat his wife, but it is not an established fact because, for example, there is contradictory testimony or ambiguous evidence; or, the record is silent on the topic, and there is no reason to suspect that the offender beat his wife.

The proposed solution to the problem is to provide the coder with four options when indicating the presence of an attribute: "Yes," when there is definite indication in the file that the attribute is present; "No," when there is definite indication in the file that the attribute is absent or when there is no mention of it in the file and no reason to suspect that it is present; "Suspected, but uncertain," when there is something in the file that suggests that this attribute may be present, but there is not enough information to be certain; "Unknown," when the attribute is relevant (i.e., the question is raised by something in the investigation), but no information is available. The difference between "Suspected, but uncertain" and "Unknown" is that no information about a relevant attribute is available for "Unknown," while ambiguous information is available for "Suspected, but uncertain."

IV. RELIABILITY

Although no attempt at a complete assessment of the reliability of the attribute coding is made, preliminary evidence, which falls into two parts, is available. First, in order to establish a baseline against which to compare the reliability of the attribute codes, an estimate of the reliability of SHR classifications for Baltimore is made. Then, a pilot inter-coder reliability study to obtain an estimate of the reliability of the attribute form is conducted.

A. COMPARISON WITH SHR

In an earlier study, which used a traditional format for coding information of victim-offender relationship,²¹ data were collected on 196 homicides committed in the city of Baltimore during 1983.²² By comparing the date of the incident, the victim's age, race, gender, and, if necessary, the offender's age, race, and gender, all of the

²¹ Loftin, *The Validity of Robbery-Murder Classifications in Baltimore*, 1 VIOLENCE AND VICTIMS 191 (1986).

²² There were 207 homicides reported in Baltimore in 1983, but only 196 were included in the study. Six cases were excluded because investigation files could not be located, and five were omitted because the assault leading to death did not occur in 1983.

court cases can be matched with a corresponding case in the Baltimore Supplementary Homicide Reports.

Although the two data collections use slightly different classifications, they are conceptually similar. One is, therefore, able to treat the two data collections as independent classifications of victim-offender relationships. In instances in which it is unclear whether codes from different studies are discordant or concordant, they are considered concordant. Hence, the results are an estimate of maximum reliability.

In only 60% of the cases did the two studies agree on the victim-offender relationship.²³ The major source of disagreement is the use of the "acquaintance" category which is used in 35% of the SHR classifications and in only 10% of the reliability study classifications. Relationships that are coded by the reliability study as "married" and "romantic" are coded as "acquaintances" in the SHR, despite the availability of categories like "husband," "wife," "boyfriend," and "girlfriend."

The stranger classification is especially interesting. Forty-three of the Baltimore homicides are classified as "stranger homicides" by either the SHR or the reliability study, but only nineteen (44%) are classified as "stranger homicides" in both studies. This result, of course, is only a crude estimate of the reliability of the SHR classification and may not apply to other cities or to other years. It provides, however, a point of departure for more elaborate methodological research.

B. PILOT STUDY OF INTER-CODER RELIABILITY

A simple random sample of twenty homicides from the 1983 Baltimore files was selected for a pilot study of reliability of the attribute instrument. Two coders, who had no prior experience with the 1983 Baltimore cases, each coded the sample using the attribute instrument and the case file in the office of the State's Attorney for the City of Baltimore. The coders were not typical coders because they helped to develop the instrument; but, they worked independently without discussing cases until all coding was completed.

Overall, the coders agreed on 85% (220 of 260) of the items. Examination of discordant items suggests some modifications in the instrument that would enhance agreement, but most of the differences arose from ambiguous information and contradictory information in the case files. Incidentally, only three cases were classified

²³ Actual estimates range from 62% to 56%, depending on definitions of agreement.

as "stranger homicides," but there was perfect agreement between the two coders on these cases.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The attribute coding form will benefit from additional development and refinements, but experience to date demonstrates that it has several advantages over traditional approaches. First, it is more reliable because of the use of specific operational definitions and the emphasis on binary choices. A related advantage is that the binary structure of the instrument makes it easy for the researcher to identify specific areas where coders make unreliable judgments.

Second, it enhances conceptual clarity by linking the classification of victim-offender relationships to more general conceptions of social structure. Furthermore, the focus on specific attributes helps clarify conceptual distinctions and avoid ambiguous, multidimensional categories.

Finally, the attribute coding form allows the researcher flexibility in the development of typologies of social statuses without reducing the comparability of studies. As long as the binary nature of the classifications is preserved, it is possible to specify an exact and reproducible procedure for creating the same typology.

APPENDIX: ATTRIBUTE CODING OF FAMILY AND RELATIVES

The consanguinal categories enumerated are:

- Parent
- Child
- Sibling
- Grandparent
- Grandchild
- Consanguinal Aunt/Uncle
- Aunt/Uncle (Unknown Whether Consanguinal or Affinal)
- Consanguinal Niece/Nephew
- Niece/Nephew (Unknown Whether Consanguinal or Affinal)
- Consanguinal Cousin (First Degree)
- Consanguinal Cousin (Other or Unknown Degree)
- Cousin (First Degree—Unknown Whether Consanguinal or Affinal)
- Cousin (Other or Unknown Degree—Unknown Whether Consanguinal or Affinal)

The affinal categories enumerated are:

- Married to Each Other (Common Law Included)
- Legally Separated or Divorced From Each Other
- Stepparent
- Stepchild
- Half-sibling
- In-law
- Stepgrandparent
- Stepgrandchild
- Affinal Aunt/Uncle
- Affinal Niece/Nephew
- Affinal Cousin (First Degree)
- Affinal Cousin (Other or Unknown Degree)
- Stepcousin

The miscellaneous categories enumerated are:

- Adopted Parent
- Adopted Child
- Adopted Sibling
- Foster Parent
- Foster Child
- Foster Sibling
- Legal Guardian
- Legal Ward