

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

KILLER QUEERS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF QUEER SERIAL KILLERS IN THE NEWS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Science in Criminal Justice

By

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Norman, Oklahoma
2024

KILLER QUEERS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF QUEER SERIAL KILLERS IN THE NEWS

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DODGE FAMILY COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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Dedication

First and foremost, I dedicate this body of work to the LGBTQ community for the braveness and tenacity they show in living their truth every day. Without the work of my queer elders and their shoulders to stand on, I would not be the woman I am today. Next, I thank my family from the depths of my heart for always believing in me and pushing me to be the best they always knew I could be. To my father, John Reynolds, for always offering a listening ear and sound advice, even when I didn't want to hear it. Let me admit, you're (almost) always right. To my sister, Braxten Reynolds, for bringing me back to Earth when things felt like too much. You are the sun to my moon, forever. To my best friend and colleague, Hope Ray, who let me bounce ideas off her for years while we both worked to improve the field of criminal justice. I am eternally grateful to be able to call you my friend. I hope we get many more years together to laugh and learn. To the rest of my support system, please know that your love and encouragement do not go unnoticed. Your guidance and helpful criticism have pushed me so far. Without the love and support of those around me, I would be lost, and for that, I thank you endlessly. I give you all my love. As I finish this body of work during pride month, it only feels right to lead with the words of a pioneer for queer liberation, "No pride for some of us without liberation for all of us" - Marsha P. Johnson. I love you; I love you; I love you! I hope I continue to make you all proud.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my chair, Dr. Trina Hope. Your guidance and support have motivated me throughout the entire thesis process. I have felt safe with you from our first conversation and your allyship gives me such hope for the future of academia. Discussing queer identities is not a light subject and you have approached it with such grace and kindness. Your excitement for the topic lit a fire in me each time we spoke.

To Dr. Paul Kroutter, when I was putting together this committee, I knew I wanted you on my team. I have repeatedly told friends and family that I believe you are the best professor I had during my time at OU. Your passion for research and education is so evident in the way you guide your students.

Dr. Susan Sharp, I extend my gratitude for your participation in this process. I have heard such beaming things about you from former classmates and that solidified my choice to have you on my team. I deeply appreciate your guidance in my work.

Abstract

This study examines how offenses by queer serial killers were addressed by law enforcement through the eyes of the media. The analysis focuses on infamous serial killers John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer to analyze how the criminal justice system handled their cases through news article documentation. The study aims to explore how the media shapes the narrative surrounding queer identities when they become offenders. The study discusses how homophobia serves as a driving force for upholding negative stereotypes of an entire community. The content analysis shows how the media responded to the serial killers in terms of their sexual identities.

Keywords: Queer, Criminology, Offender, Victim, LGBTQ, Deviance, Homosexuality

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Killer Queers: A Content Analysis of Queer Serial Killers in the News

Introduction

The ostracization of the LGBTQ community in the United States is not a new phenomenon. It has deep roots in the nation's history and bleeds into every facet of life, which ultimately causes it to trickle into how laws are made and enforced regarding the lives of the LGBTQ community. The conversation on queer identities continues to churn throughout history and greatly varies based on who is guiding the narrative. While the tides are changing for the field, criminology has long excluded the queer community. The data surrounding queer identities in the field is small in comparison to what is available for other groups. It is the goal of those invested in this research to expand the opportunities for queer individuals to be better understood and supported within the criminal justice system.

The objective of this paper is to identify the disparities within criminology for members of the queer community, specifically through the lens of media outlets. This paper will use relational content analysis to analyze news articles regarding John Wayne Gacy between January 1, 1968, and January 1, 1980; and Jeffrey Dahmer from January 1, 1980, and January 1, 1991, in order to visualize how the response to queer offenders by society and the criminal justice system was handled.

When queer individuals are mentioned in modern criminology, the most common reaction is to assume they are the victim of whatever offense has taken place. I believe it is the fear of offending the LGBTQ community that prevents many criminologists from including sexual orientation and gender identity in their scope when researching criminal behavior. However, I would argue that it is more offensive to exclude queer individuals from the data by ignoring such a large part of their identities. I believe the queer offender can be openly critiqued

as long as the outdated scope of deviance is removed prior to conducting any studies. I also believe that it could be considered offensive to assume that queer individuals could not be offenders because of their status in society. Queer individuals, particularly queer men, are often seen as more effeminate and sensitive by society. This belief leads people to assume that queer individuals are more likely to be the victim of crime rather than the perpetrator.

While much work has been done to progress the rights of the LGBTQ community, there is still much more to do. Homophobia impacts queer individuals in all aspects of their lives. Stigma and discrimination can be harmful and result in fatal outcomes. Leaving queer identities out of criminology is harmful to both the community and the field.

Theoretical Framework

Throughout this paper, there will be an array of different terms used to describe members of the LGBTQ community. “Queer” will frequently be used. It is important to note that in the context of this paper, queer is not used as a slur or meant to cause harm, but rather serves as an umbrella term for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) community. “Although the term originated with intent to harm, ‘queer’ was reclaimed in the late 1980s and early 1990s by sexuality- and gender-diverse people who sought to break through what they took to be the limitations and failures of gay and lesbian politics of the time to produce new political futures (Sullivan, 2003; Ball, 2016, p. 475). It is also crucial to understand that not every individual within the LGBTQ community identifies as queer. The term homosexual will also be used throughout the paper. Some people view this word as harmful as well. As touched upon by Buist and Lenning (2023), “the use of ‘homosexual’ to define one’s sexuality is medicalized language used as an antiquated diagnosis of psychopathology and more (see Goorens & Gijs 2015; Drescher 2010; Ross 1988) and is therefore potentially dangerous and stigmatizing” (Buist &

Lenning, 2023, p. 8). As Buist and Lenning (2023) point out, the word queer is not exclusive to the LGBTQ community. It also describes a deviation from the norm.

Queer theory is also important to take into consideration within the scope of this paper. Queer theory can be broadly explained as the study of gender identities and sexualities beyond what has been deemed the “norm” (Indiana University Libraries, 2024, para. 1). Queer theory was established as a rethinking of sexuality separated from the binaries of heterosexual power structures by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991. De Lauretis explains in “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Studies,” that there are at least three concepts at work under queer theory: refusing heterosexuality as the benchmark for sexual formations, a challenge to the belief that lesbian and gay studies is one single entity, and a strong focus on the multiple ways that race shapes sexual bias (Illinois University Library, 2024, para. 4). The core concept of queer theory is to provide a framework of thought when discussing concepts that may impact queer individuals. Understanding the background of the queer community provides needed context for the content being discussed. In the context of this study, it is important to apply queer theory when examining how the sexualities of the offenders impacted the response by the media and the criminal justice system. Queer theory provides a roadmap for understanding how these identities changed the scope of the cases.

Queer criminology, as proposed by Woods (2014), is the idea of including sexual orientation and gender identities within the field of criminology to garnish a more inclusive space. Adding queer identities to criminology opens the possibilities for theorists to establish ideologies that can be applied to more than just the classical image of the straight white male in criminology. Queer criminology in and of itself is a stretch from what is typically discussed as the norm when considering the field of criminology.

Labeling Theory

Nickerson (2023) explains that labeling theorists specify two types of categories when investigating the implications of labeling: formal and informal labels. Formal labels are labels ascribed to an individual by someone who has the formal status and ability to discern deviant behavior” (Nickerson, 2023, para. 10). Criticisms of the labeling theory explain how applying generalized labels to people can be stigmatizing. The LGBTQ community has been viewed as deviant throughout history. The general notion of being queer has been criminalized for a long time. Prior to the 1970s, members of the LGBTQ community were considered to be criminals, psychopaths, sinners, and perverts (Sarbin, 1996). Labeling queer individuals as deviants immediately places them at a disadvantage.

Strain Theory

General Strain theory, as proposed by Agnew, suggests that when individuals are faced with frequent or intense stress, they may turn to criminal behavior as a way to cope. Agnew (2019) posits that there are three types of strain; 1. Strain from people losing something they value. 2. Strain from being treated in an adverse or negative way, such as being verbally or physically abused. 3. Strain from people being unable to achieve their goals” (Agnew & Breznia, 2019; Nickerson, 2023, para. 40).

Jordan Blair Woods provides an assessment of deviance as it pertains to the queer community. Woods’ (2013) introduces the homosexual deviance thesis. “As a result of LGBTQ people’s historical distortion and more recent omission from criminological theory and research, there is little understanding of how sexual orientation and gender identity differences might relate to criminal offending, desistance, policing, and victimization” (Woods, 2013, p. 7).

Life Course Theory

The Life Course theory of criminology explores how an individual's development impacts their likelihood of committing crimes. Within this theory, there are two integral concepts: trajectories and transitions (2003 Annual Report to the Florida Department of Education: Juvenile Justice Educational Enhancement Program, 2003). "A trajectory is a pathway over the life course, which involves long-term patterns of events, such as employment or family history. A transition, in contrast, involves the short-term events, or turning points, that make up specific life changes, such as marriage, divorce, or parenthood" (2003 Annual Report to the Florida Department of Education: Juvenile Justice Educational Enhancement Program 2003, p. 103). As people age and move through life, the experiences they have shape who they become. Adverse experiences can result in adverse behaviors. In a study conducted at Vanderbilt University Medical Center and Vanderbilt University, researchers found that "83% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals reported going through adverse childhood experiences (ACE) such as sexual and emotional abuse, and worse mental health as adults when compared to their heterosexual peers" (Lowary, 2022). Of the nearly 3,000 LGBQ individuals included in the survey, 83% of LGBQ adults experienced at least one ACE compared to 64% of straight adults. More than half, 52%, of LGBQ adults reported three or more ACEs compared to 26% of straight adults. LGBQ people experienced higher rates of each of the eight defined types of ACEs, but researchers found that the disparities were largest for sexual abuse, household mental illness, and emotional abuse (Lowary, 2022). As it stands, life course criminology does not fully consider the experiences of queer individuals. Dismissing these experiences eliminates the possibility of fully representing the LGBTQ community within criminology. Life course criminology utilizes turning points as "part of a process over time and not as a dramatic lasting change that takes place at any one time" (Laub and Sampson, 1993, p. 304-305).

A queer individual's identity as a queer person is something they hold in high regard. Sexual orientation and gender identity should be viewed by criminologists in the same way other classifications such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status are viewed. Queerness can play a large role in a person's life as they may face strain from being queer from their community or internally. Queer individuals should not immediately be labeled as deviant for their sexuality, but rather viewed in whole as an individual that is capable of the full spectrum of possible behaviors, criminal or otherwise.

Subjectivity Statement

As a member of the LGBTQ community, I found it important to provide an understanding of how excluding identities is harmful, therefore I would be remiss to not acknowledge my connection to the material. I am a white cisgender lesbian woman. These identities have molded my life and impacted how I view the world and the people in it. Bearing in mind that I am a member of the queer community, I do not know the trials that all queer people face, nor would I ever claim to. I can only speak about my own experiences with marginalization within the confines of my own identity. It is also important for me to note the privileges I hold. Upon first glance, I am a middle-class white woman with the privilege of "passing" as heterosexual. This privilege allows me to maintain my safety in spaces where queer identities are not welcome. My whiteness also serves as a privilege that I acknowledge, especially within the scope of criminal justice. While my identities are relevant to the material discussed in this paper, I am using an unbiased approach to achieve equity for all individuals within the field. I believe that this work is important and necessary for the advancement of queer people and the field of criminal justice.

Research Question and Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore, identify, and describe how homophobia impacts the criminal justice system through the lens of queer serial killers and their victims. I used my research to gain an understanding of how queer offenders are portrayed in the media, particularly in the news. In addition to gaining an understanding of the portrayal of queer offenders in the media, the purpose of this research is to add to the body of knowledge regarding the intersection of the LGBTQ community and the criminal justice system. From these data, I analyzed and discussed what this means for the field. As the LGBTQ community expands and society becomes more accepting of queer identities, I believe the criminal justice system must grow alongside it. Throughout history, queer individuals have been labeled as deviants and stigmatized by society. The field of criminal justice has played a role in the stigmatization of the queer community as well. Examining the disparities within criminology for queer individuals will aid in providing an understanding of what work must be done to provide inclusive policies and theories within the field.

Literature Review

The current state of criminology shows that the data surrounding the inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in the field is severely lacking. However, Berggren, Gottzen, and Bornas (2020) shared that, “recently, there has been an upsurge in criminological research informed by queer perspectives such as, (Ball, 2016; Buist & Lenning, 2015, Dwyer et al., 2015; Peterson & Panfil, 2014). A central concern has been to highlight ‘how the lives of LGBTIQ people are impacted...social justice (Dwyer et al., 2015, p. 10)’” (Berggren et al., 2020, para. 1). Most research also centers on the LGBTQ individual as the victim and rarely examines them as offenders without first labeling the individual as a sexual deviant. There are many possible

reasons for the hesitancy of researchers to engage in this discussion. In this literature review, I first examine the cause of tension between the LGBTQ community and the criminal justice system. Second, I will explain the current state of criminology and its lack of resources regarding the LGBTQ population. Third, I will explore how excluding queer identities from criminal justice research harms both the queer community and the field of criminal justice through the examination of queer offenders.

Understanding the Tension Between the LGBTQ Community and the Criminal Justice System

Matthew Ball (2016) explores the concept of queer criminology as activism. Ball (2016) explains the motivations of queer criminologists to advocate for the inclusion of queer identities as a form of resistance against the injustices brought against the community in the form of discrimination, heteronormativity, gender binarism, or invisibility. Ball (2016) also breaks down the politics of queer criminology. He argues that queerness in and of itself is political. Queer criminology will not be able to progress without extensive activism from within the field. Those wishing to bring light to the subject must engage those that are resistant to the inclusion of queer individuals in the discipline. As Ball (2016) describes, the original queer liberation movement's goal was to drive queerness into the "straight mainstream." This was not done out of a desire to supersede existing identities, but rather be put on an equal playing field. It is also necessary that when discussing queer criminology, queer theory be at the forefront of the conversation. Queer theory on its face provides an understanding of how queer individuals see the world and interact within it.

Queer theory is suggesting that the study of homosexuality should not be a study of a minority – the making of the lesbian/gay/bisexual subject – but the study of those knowledge and social practices that organize 'society' as a whole by sexualizing – heterosexualizing or homosexualizing – bodies, desires, acts,

identities, social relations, knowledge, culture, and social institutions.
(Groombridge, 1999, p. 533)

To best understand the existing tension between the LGBTQ community and the criminal justice system, there must be a clear picture of the history of the relationship. Legal persecution is not a new phenomenon for the LGBTQ community, considering that queerness as a whole has been criminalized. The first recorded reference to anti-LGBTQ ideology begins with Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible. English Common Law viewed sodomy as an offense against God and deemed it punishable by death. Three hundred years later in 1533, the Buggery Act was established. This Act was the first instance of homosexual activity as civil law. Martin (2021) explains this Act: “same-sex sex as 'the detestable and abominable vice of buggery,' stating those found guilty should be sentenced to death. Members of the clergy, such as priests and monks, could also be executed under the Act, despite their immunity from being executed for murder” (para. 3).

In the United States, laws prohibiting sodomy have existed for over a century. The establishment of this law sought to criminalize sexual behavior between both same and opposite-sex partners. Despite current knowledge and understanding of the attitudes towards the queer population in the nineteenth century, sodomy laws were said not to have been established out of prejudice for the LGBTQ community. Sodomy laws were described as, “crimes against nature, committed with mankind or with beast” (Weinmeyer, 2014, para. 2). This affront to nature was typically not defined by penal codes, so American courts relied on well-established common-law meanings of sodomy that involved the penetration of a “penis inside the rectum of an animal, a woman or girl, or another man or a boy” (Weinmeyer, 2014, para. 2). Weinmeyer (2014) suggests that sodomy laws were introduced to achieve two purposes: to protect “public morals

and decency,” and to protect women, “weak men,” and children against sexual assault (Weinmeyer, 2014, para.3).

The Current State of Criminology Regarding Queer Identities

Jordan Blair Woods (2014) explains how queer people are left out of the criminal justice conversation on a broad scale. In his research, Woods (2014) explains how there is only a small amount of data currently available regarding LGBTQ people’s experience with the criminal justice system, whether as victims or offenders. In addition to the scarcity of data, a majority of the available data comes from before 1980 and has a skewed vision of homosexuality as sexual deviance. Woods (2014) calls on researchers to redirect the conversation in criminology and expand its parameters to include sexual orientation and gender identity as the life-shaping factors they are. Woods also introduces homosexual deviance theory, which explores the ways in which the queer community has been labeled deviants. The labeling of an entire community can be harmful. Within this theory, there are two elements: the deviance-centered element and the invisibility element. The deviance-centered element explains that historically criminology discussions involving queer individuals have approached them from the frame of queerness as deviance. In doing so, the queer individual was viewed in a degrading manner and not equally evaluated when compared to their heterosexual or cisgender counterparts. As Woods explains, prior to the 1970s, deviance was the main descriptor for queer individuals as their identities were not widely accepted in society. The invisibility element highlights the exclusion of queer identities from criminology as a whole, apart from hate crimes, bullying, and intimate partner violence (Woods 2014).

Queer criminologists have found on a large scale that queer identities are being erased and ignored within the discourse of criminal justice. Love (2015) shares that despite the

connectedness of queer theory and criminology, there is little contemporary crossover. The assumption for most queer individuals when interacting with the criminal justice system is that they are the victim. Little research has been conducted on the queer offender. Lamble et al. (2020), explore queer criminology beyond the confines of victim and perpetrator to understand the underlying questions of subject formation, power, desire, subjectivity, temporality, and spatiality that shape the broader social conditions, norms, and power relations of those encounters (para. 3). The literature I have reviewed reiterates the idea that exclusion from the field of criminology does a disservice to the queer community. When queer identities are not considered, it impacts the entire field of criminal justice. The field is put at a disadvantage by not being provided adequate resources to best serve the queer community.

One example of the potential contributions of queer criminology is a study by Berggren, Gottzén, and Bornäs (2020), which applied queer theory to an analysis of desistance studies in relation to intimate partner violence. Their study revealed the importance of acknowledging queer identities within the context of desistance. By applying a queer lens, the researchers were able to look beyond how masculinity impacts crimes to understand how queerness impacts an offender's perspective.

Vanessa Panfil (2017) approaches the potential benefits of including queer identities in criminology. She explains that while there has been growth for queer criminology in the field, it is still not at a sufficient level when compared to criminology for other identities. Panfil also addresses the idea of the queer offender. Typically, queer men are viewed as effeminate and susceptible to victimhood. Panfil contrasts this belief with her investigation into queer gangs.

Panfil (2017) conducted a study with gay gang members in Columbus, Ohio. In doing so, she posits that queer people are just as capable of committing crimes as their heterosexual

counterparts. However, the reasoning behind each offense may be more directly tied to a queer person's sexual orientation or gender identity than a cis-gendered heterosexual offender. Her research helps explain queer individuals as perpetrators of crime outside of the sexual deviant label that is typically cast upon them. Panfil (2017) explores how violence can serve a purpose for these offenders. She suggests that often men commit violent crimes as a way to prove their toughness and masculinity. Violence can also be used as a means of protection, for either themselves or others. Panfil (2017) discovered that violence was used as conflict resolution when other methods were inefficient.

Exploring Queerness as a Social Problem

Early criminologists began to study how homosexuality could be perceived as a social problem rather than its original view of being an individualistic problem. This shift in thought helped to shape the future of criminological theory for the queer community. However, the shift in research introduced more questions about the lived experiences of queer individuals, such as how their environments played a role in their identities (Woods, 2013). Woods (2013) explains that framing homosexuality as a perceived form of (social) sexual deviance created consequences resulting in most early critical criminologists not considering sexual orientation or gender identity as non-deviant differences comparable to other differences such as race, ethnicity, and class, among others.

In turn, few early critical criminologists conceptualized homophobia and transphobia—concepts that challenge the stigmatization of LGBTQ populations as sexual deviants on the sole basis of their sexual orientations and gender identities—as structural-social conditions that might facilitate criminal offending or victimization. (Woods, 2013, p. 7-8)

Lemert (1951), whose work is based on societal reaction and labeling, proposed a skewed idea of homosexuality. Lemert developed two concepts: primary and secondary deviance

(Lemert, 1951). He describes primary deviance as infrequent criminal acts that do not impact the perception of the actor, either internally or externally (Lemert, 1951). He describes secondary deviance as criminal acts that cannot be separated from the identity or perception of the actor, either internally or externally. Lemert (1951) believed that a series of primary deviant acts coupled with negative social reactions could result in the actor performing secondary deviant acts. Lemert (1951) used homosexuality to explain how adverse societal reactions can influence an actor's behavior:

This makes it important to examine more closely the ways in which a deviant status or role gives access to rewards and satisfaction. If effective stigmatization imposes penalties and circumscribes access to conventional means of life's satisfaction, it may also provide new means to ends sought. Thus, becoming an admitted homosexual ('coming out') may endanger one's livelihood or professional career, but it also absolves the individual from failure to assume the heavy responsibilities of marriage and parenthood, and it is a ready way of fending painful involvements in heterosexual affairs (1972:74–75). (Woods, 2013, p. 8)

Although after the 1970s LGBTQ identities were beginning to become removed from the deviant label, criminology had not yet caught up to the times. The goal of queer criminology has been to move away from the label of deviance to see the queer individual as a person with a full range of feelings and possibilities. Their identities should be included when studying their behavior, but they should not automatically be discounted by an outdated ideology.

The Queer Offender

Charles Smith conducted a study in 1954, in which he took 100 gay male prisoners in federal prisons and compared their crimes to heterosexual male prisoners (Smith, 1954). Smith (1954) found that the gay prisoners committed fewer violent crimes than the heterosexual group. Smith (1954) stated that the gay prisoners were weak and feminine and “not up to macho crimes,” but rather their crimes were more impulsive. He believed that “homosexuals were

impulsive, excitable, and unable to exercise good judgment” (Smith, 1954, p. 588). His belief was that “the gay criminal was not prodigiously evil, doing bad things for the sheer joy of being bad; he had a pecuniary motive” (Smith, 1954: Dennis, 2014, p. 90).

Dennis (2014) explains that prior to the nineteenth century, it was difficult to identify gay criminals because the concept of a separate LGBTQ identity had not yet been established. Queer criminals did not become much of a concern until 1937 when J. Edgar Hoover declared “War on the Sex Criminal,” by which he meant the “homosexual,” (Dennis, 2014, p. 89). This declaration encouraged psychiatrists to investigate the connection between criminality and homosexuality. The existing literature provides context into how little is understood about queer identities from a criminal justice standpoint. When considering the queer offender, identity plays a large role in the causes and motivations behind their behaviors as explained by existing theories. However, as sexual orientation and gender identity are left out of the conversation a major portion of the offender’s identity is erased. In doing so the big picture is skewed and true understanding of the individual within criminology will not be possible.

The problem this research addresses is how homophobia impacts police investigations using the media as a gathering point for data. Through the gathering of news articles, I was able to examine how homophobia impacted both the offenders and the victims in the cases of Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy.

Method

This research uses both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of news articles covering John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer over a 12-year span from when their names first appeared in print. I Googled each offender’s name coupled with homosexual, homosexuality, gay, and queer using the Google News feature. The most results were found when using the

term homosexual. The documents were selected by availability from reputable news sources. Most of the articles were printed by the New York Times. The articles included in this study are listed in Appendix A.

Design

I used deductive content analysis to apply predetermined codes to the data set. Deductive coding works using predetermined codes to apply to research. These codes might come from previous research, or what might already be known about the topic prior to coding (Medelyan, 2024). The codes I selected included: *mention of homosexuality, criminal justice intervention, and background on each offender*. I anticipated that these topics would be mentioned throughout each article when selecting my codes. I read through each article to code instances of each qualitative measure. Once each document was coded initially, I returned to code again using a set of subcodes. The subcodes were *homophobia, failures by police, and missed signs from the offenders' backgrounds that could have suggested they may become violent*. I chose these codes because they speak to how each case was mishandled by the criminal justice system and society. I combined each instance of the codes to summarize the data provided using a table. Upon combining my data sets I was able to analyze themes throughout the news articles for each offender. The themes I recorded were *homophobia, denial, disbelief, dismissal, and shame*.

Results

Background on the Offenders

A prominent example of queer individuals as offenders can be found among serial killers. Two of the most infamous are John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer. These men share commonalities in more ways than one: they were both serial killers, both were either confirmed or believed to be gay, and both arguably benefitted from homophobia from the police. Hardwick

(2021) shows the idea that homophobia aided in allowing these serial killers to continue their crimes. In my analysis I will elaborate on the claim that homophobia both harmed and benefited Gacy and Dahmer.

John Wayne Gacy

John Wayne Gacy was arrested in 1978 at 36 years old for the murder of Robert Piest, a 16-year-old boy (McEvoy, 2023). Before Gacy's arrest, he is believed to have raped and murdered at least 33 boys in Cook County, Illinois. Gacy claims to have realized his attraction toward men at a young age, which caused him great strife. Although Gacy married Carole Hoff in 1972, this did not keep him from engaging sexually with other men (McEvoy, 2023).

Gacy's first interaction with the criminal justice system took place in 1968 when he was convicted of sexually assaulting a teenage boy and attempting to assault another (McEvoy, 2023). Gacy's standing in the community led some to believe him when he denied these accusations, but he was ultimately sentenced to 10 years in prison. Gacy was released on good behavior after serving only 18 months in the summer of 1970 (McEvoy, 2023). A year later Gacy was arrested again after attempting to sexually assault another teen (McEvoy, 2023).

Homophobia helped Gacy continue his violence because the officers working the case chose to blame the victims (Hardwick, 2021), painting them "male prostitutes" and "hustlers" and believed that their encounters with Gacy were "consensual sex slave relationships gone awry" (Hardwick, 2021, para. 5).

Jeffrey Dahmer

A lack of understanding of queer identities also played a role in Jeffrey Dahmer's crimes. Dahmer served as a physical manifestation of what many believed to be a "sick and evil"

lifestyle (Schmidt, 1994). Dahmer was responsible for the murder of 15 young men in Wisconsin. Dahmer's identity is important to the case as it provides an understanding of how he accessed his victims, and potentially what drove him to kill. His victims were young gay men of color who resided in the Black neighborhoods of Milwaukee.

In Dahmer's case, his queerness is used as an explanation for his crimes from both sides – the LGBTQ community and the public. His identity as a gay man was villainized by the media as they argued that he used “homosexual overkill” as introduced by Milwaukee County Medical Examiner Jeffrey M. Jentzen, who made the phrase up (Schmidt, 1994).

Findings from Analyses of News Articles

The searches described above yielded 11 articles for John Wayne Gacy. Of the 11 articles available, 10 of them directly discuss homosexuality, either that of Gacy or his victims. Three articles directly mention the response from law enforcement. Ten of the articles provide background on Gacy's character and upbringing. After screening the available articles, I noted a theme of disbelief. There is disbelief from those who knew Gacy personally and disbelief and denial from Gacy himself.

Table 1 John Wayne Gacy

Primary Code	Subcode	Frequency	Description
Homosexuality		10	Mention of homosexuality/gay/queer
	Homophobia	4	Homophobic comments about offenders or victims
Police Interaction		3	Interactions from Law Enforcement with each case
	Police Failures	2	Instances of police failures for the case, how law enforcement failed the victims by not doing thorough investigation, and how law enforcement believed Gacy could not be guilty.
Background		10	Background information on each offender
	Missed Signs	2	Missed signs that each offender may become violent, how Gacy portrayed himself to others in his life, odd behaviors noted by others that were not investigated.

Analysis of John Wayne Gacy

Gacy adamantly denied being homosexual despite revealing to his wife Carole Hoff in 1975 that he was bisexual (Margaritoff, 2021). Those who knew Gacy were also shocked to discover the nature of his crimes. Gacy's second wife is quoted as saying she had "problems believing that he was homosexual" (Kneeland, 1979, para. 5). The disbelief of Gacy's

homosexuality from those who knew him well is difficult to understand, considering that he had a prior charge of sodomy on a boy in 1968 (McEvoy, 2023). Gacy was held in high regard in the community. The response from the community did not yield positive results for the victims. The nine victims that had not been identified did not have many people come forward to claim them. An article from June of 1981 paints the image of the funerals for the unidentified victims, “there were no weeping parents, no heart-struck lovers or grieving friends at their funerals – and no one to throw the first handful of dirt” (O’Shea, 1981, para. 2).

Cook County Medical Examiner Dr. Robert Stein made a final plea to the parents of the nine to come forward to identify their sons. Addressing the nine coffins arrayed in a semicircle on the granite terrace entrance to the chapel, Stein said: 'I don't want you to go to your resting place as just so many numbers.' 'Perhaps your parents are resigned to what you have done or what they thought you have done,' he said, referring to the homosexual overtones surrounding the Gacy affair. 'I pity such thoughts. (O’Shea, 1981, para. 5-7)

Sgt. Anderson of the Cook County Sheriff’s Department said “We’re getting calls, and we’re getting stuff in the mail now, but we’re just not getting the volume you’d expect. In the future, I would expect hundreds. Maybe it’s because of what happened. If it was a bus accident, I guess they’d call, but since it’s a homosexual thing, well...” (Kneeland, 1978, para. 10). This speaks to the homophobia the victims experienced even after their deaths. There was no confirmation that the victims were queer, but because of the nature of the crimes, many people dismissed them and came to their own conclusions. Aside from the scene being gruesome for the nature of the crime, many people did not want to talk about the sexual aspect as it was taboo to mention homosexuality during this time.

The articles produced for Gacy show themes of homophobia as anticipated by the coding. The response to Gacy as a queer man was skewed among the community as some found it hard to believe or did not believe it at all. Rodriguez (2016) shares an analysis of Gacy from his

adverse experiences during childhood stating, “from [Gacy’s] early childhood he was abused by his father for not partaking in typical “boy activities.” This time period likely served as a catalyst for Gacy’s discovery of his sexual identity through the differences he felt from other boys and likely his attraction to them. This could have created an unpleasant state of mind for Gacy and established a frustrating set of circumstances that he could not properly process (Rodriguez, 2016).

The research revealed that in two recorded instances, there were missed signs that Gacy could become violent. Those that knew Gacy spoke to his larger-than-life personality. Tom Langlas, an acquaintance of Gacy, said that Gacy, “was a glad-hander type who would go beyond” (Fort Lauderdale News, 1979, para. 4). While most of the people in Gacy’s life held him in high regard, there were still some, such as Tom Langlas, who were hesitant to fully trust him (Fort Lauderdale News, 1979). Another acquaintance of Gacy said, “I can’t understand why they would have let him out of prison in Iowa,” regarding Gacy’s sodomy charge (Fort Lauderdale News, 1979, para. 3). He was also reportedly violent with men in his past. One man, Jeffrey Rignall, who had survived an attack by Gacy in March 1978 had reported an attack by Gacy to police but later decided not to press charges. However, in Gacy’s murder trial, he took the stand and “recounted how he’d been chloroformed and taken to Gacy’s house, where he was sexually assaulted and tortured, explaining “the beastly and animalistic ways [Gacy] attacked him” (Kettler, 2022, para. 8-9).

Police failures in the Gacy case were revealed as law enforcement not fully investigating each instance of missing boys in the area. The families that reported missing boys shared that they believe the police failed their children by not taking their claims seriously. The police wrote off some of the boys as runaways and did not investigate further into their disappearances,

despite the testimonies from family members (Moser, 2011). Michael Albrecht revealed later in an Esquire interview that a victim of Gacy's had escaped and made a report to the police, but the Chicago police department did not follow up after Gacy admitted to having sexual contact with the victim (Kranc, 2021). Gacy was a respected member of the community and as a result, law enforcement did not take the claims made against him seriously. "Gacy was well-liked in his community, he organized cultural gatherings and was active in political organizations and the Jaycees civic group" (McEvoy, 2023, para. 7).

Jeffrey Dahmer

The searches yielded 25 articles for Jeffrey Dahmer. Of the 25 articles available, 24 of them directly discuss homosexuality, either that of Dahmer or his victims, 17 articles directly mention the response from law enforcement, and 7 of the articles provide background on Dahmer's character and upbringing. After the articles were coded using the primary codes I coded again, the subcodes produced 15 articles mentioning homophobia, 12 instances of failure by law enforcement, and 11 instances of missed signs that could have potentially prevented Dahmer's violent behavior. After screening the available articles, I noted a theme of mistrust between the LGBTQ and black communities toward law enforcement, homophobia from law enforcement, and repression of sexual identities.

Table 2 Jeffrey Dahmer

Primary Code	Subcode	Frequency	Description
Homosexuality		24	Mention of homosexuality/gay/queer
	Homophobia	15	Homophobic comments about offenders or victims
Police Interaction		17	Interactions from Law Enforcement with each case
	Police Failures	12	Instances of police failures for the case, how law enforcement directly failed the victims of Dahmer.
Background		7	Background information on each offender
	Missed Signs	11	Missed signs that each offender may become violent, indications from Dahmer's behavior that acted as red flags to those around him.

Analysis of Jeffrey Dahmer

Dahmer's case differs from Gacy in that Dahmer's victims were predominantly gay men he sought out in the Milwaukee nightlife. The homophobia for Dahmer's case played a much larger role. The articles reveal that the media's response to Dahmer did not stray far from the antiquated deviance label placed on the queer community. The portrayal of Dahmer's identity as a queer man was sensationalized by the media. The police response to Dahmer ultimately cost a young man his life. Homophobia from law enforcement enabled him to kill Konerak

Sinthatomphone. Responding officers returned the injured boy back to Dahmer after being told that he was just his lover having a drunken episode. Law enforcement dismissed the boy and later went on to laugh about needing to be “deloused” after leaving Sinthatomphone with Dahmer (Associated Press, 1991).

Commonality between Gacy and Dahmer’s articles showed that the average response to their crimes was centered around sexuality. In Dahmer’s articles, the media made more comments about his sexuality – this could be due to Dahmer’s openness about his identity and the places he found his victims. Dahmer and Gacy both suffered from repressed feelings about their sexualities. In Dahmer’s case,

Psychiatrist Dr. George B. Palermo shared that he believed Dahmer's actions could be explained by a 'tremendous amount of repressed hostility, frustrated desire and an intense fear of rejection.' He also called Dahmer a sexual sadist and an accomplished liar. “I believe Jeffrey Dahmer killed these people ... because he wanted to kill the source of his homosexual attraction,” Palermo said. 'He was suffering from a very serious personality disorder. He was not really gratified from the killing. He was afraid they might abandon him. (Smith, 1992, paras. 31-32)

The media and law enforcement response to these crimes help portray how queerness is perceived. Understanding the identities of both Gacy and Dahmer can help improve criminological theories on why they committed such heinous acts. Their queerness plays a major role in their crimes from how they viewed and selected their victims, to how the public responded. If their identities are not considered when theorizing on their behaviors a large part of the crime is erased. Although being queer did not cause these men to kill, it could be argued that it played a role in the way they view themselves and other queer individuals. The perception these men had of queerness could have resulted in their violent acts. Providing an understanding of these identities and the nuances within them to criminologists will aid in studying future patterns of crime.

Discussion

As displayed by the data, homophobia largely impacted the police response to both offenders. Law enforcement in Gacy's case did not suspect that a highly respected community member could be engaging in homosexual behaviors. Law enforcement in Dahmer's case willingly returned the victim to his perpetrator. I believe the period of both offender's crimes also plays a role in the media response. During Gacy's crime homosexuality was considered more taboo and less discussed in public spaces. Gacy also did not specifically target queer men, whereas Dahmer did. I believe this explains the disparities in available articles for each offender.

Criminologists have excluded homophobia and transphobia as driving factors for criminal behavior or victimization. This exclusion is harmful as it does not provide equitable research opportunities for the queer community. When queer experiences are not factored into the lives of those being studied by criminologists a large part of that person's identity is stripped away. A person's sexual orientation and gender expression are a major part of who they are. The experiences they have directly correlated to these identities also impact their lives in major ways.

Criminology must expand its reach to include all facets of a person's identity. The current lack of information available regarding the intersection between criminology and the LGBTQ community is of concern for many researchers. Exclusion is harmful on many levels. "Although the enterprise of queer criminology attempts to bring sexual orientation and gender identity issues to the fore of criminological inquiry, it cannot neglect how intersecting differences of race, gender, class, and religion shape LGBTQ people's experiences of crime, both in terms of victimization and offending" (Woods, 2014, p. 31).

As outlined in the paper, queerness must be included when considering the full spectrum of a person's engagement in criminal behaviors or victimhood. As seen with the queer gangs of

Columbus, John Wayne Gacy, and Jeffrey Dahmer, queerness can be a driving factor behind criminal behavior. The shift from viewing queerness itself as a crime is ongoing and may continue to move for a while. It is crucial that the label of deviance be removed from the narrative when discussing queer offenders. It can be argued that a person's queerness served as a factor in why they engaged in criminal behavior. However, it is important to note that queerness is not a cause of crime in the sense that individuals engage in criminal behavior because they are queer. Rather, being queer can cause strain on an individual's life if they are faced with homophobia – either internal or external – or discrimination. The current criminological theories aid in explaining how a person's experiences, environment, and lifestyle can result in criminal behavior, but they fail to include all facets of identity in these explanations.

Looking at labeling, strain, and life course theories provides us with a framework to examine the queer serial killers. Through labeling theory, we can hypothesize that the stigma of queerness made each offender feel ostracized from their communities and what was deemed the “norm.” As homosexuality was labeled as deviant behavior, it is likely that this helped reinforce any feelings of isolation these offenders experienced. Strain theory is applicable in these cases as well, as the queerness of the offenders may have caused them emotional turmoil. As displayed in Dahmer, he did not want the victims to leave him, he had a fear of abandonment (Smith, 1992). Gacy was in denial about his homosexuality (Margaritoff, 2021). Looking at the missed signs from each offender, we can apply life course theory to determine that these adverse events may have played a role in their violent behaviors. Gacy experienced a strained relationship with his father during childhood and into his adult years (Rodriguez, 2016). It is likely that this strain impacted the way he viewed himself and the world.

The field of criminal justice must expand its parameters to be more inclusive of all personal identifiers. In living history, queer individuals have been labeled as deviants and instantly written off as criminals. This hinders potential progress for criminology to examine queer criminals outside the scope of sexual deviance.

Limitations

The content available did not provide analysis into the queerness of the offenders. This speaks to the comfort levels of queer identities during these eras. Open discussion around queerness has only recently come to the forefront. The available data can also be considered reductive as coding for specific information creates the potential for disregarding full context and nuance within phrasing. Another limitation is the relatively small sample size. When applying the words homosexual, queer, or gay to the offender's names within the allotted time frame, a limited number of articles populated. This information is also subjective. What one researcher may consider homophobic, or a failure of law enforcement may vary greatly.

Implications for Practice

A better understanding of the LGBTQ community and the variety of identities within it can improve how the criminal justice system responds to minority groups. Understanding the challenges the LGBTQ community faces can aid in inclusive policy creation. These policies can aid in creating equitable services that provide everyone that encounters the criminal justice system with fair treatment. Seth Brysk, the central Pacific regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, shares that hate crimes against LGBTQ individuals are often not reported to law enforcement, much less recorded by the FBI or prosecuted (Keith & Gagliano, 2018). "Only 1,776 of the 15,254 police departments participating in the FBI's crime tracking program

reported hate crimes in their jurisdiction in 2016, at a time when other measures indicate a sharp rise in bias-motivated crimes” (Keith & Gagliano, 2018, para. 8).

Strengthening the relationship between the LGBTQ community and the criminal justice system will take time. The criminal justice system must make an active effort to show the LGBTQ community that actions are being taken to provide inclusive practices. For example, in 2009 in Austin, the Lesbian and Gay Peace Officer's Association (LGPOA) became the first official LGBTQ Police Association in the state of Texas. The group represents LGBTQ identified officers, civilian employees, and our allied officers and civilian employees. (LGPOA Austin, 2024). This group provides visibility for members of the LGBTQ community within law enforcement. When queer people are shown representation, they are more likely to feel comfortable with the system.

Conclusion

Dennis sums up the necessity for the importance of including queer identities within different criminological theories. He believes “it would be more profitable to interpret and understand LGBT persons as neither innate villains nor innate victims, but as capable of the entire gamut of human activity, capable of being both law-abiding citizens and criminals. The historical and cultural milieu of the LGBT experience, such as growing up with parents who are generally not gay and often homophobic, may produce a different trajectory into criminality, and a different configuration of crimes than we see among heterosexuals” (Dennis, 2014, p. 95). I believe this sentiment is genuine and accurate. We must hold the field of criminal justice accountable for the exclusion of queer identities and homophobic tendencies.

Through analysis of queerness as a crime, we have gained an understanding of how queer individuals are viewed in the eyes of society. The belief that homosexuality is a form of sexual

deviance is harmful to the community. It instantly portrays the individual as a deviant and tarnishes their image before any analysis can be made about their character or behavior. The reality is that queer people do commit crimes. As exemplified by Panfil's (2017) queer gangs, there may be seemingly valid reasons why queer individuals engage in criminal behavior. In the case of Gacy and Dahmer, sexuality plays a role in their crimes. Erasing and ignoring the sexual orientation of these criminals impedes criminologists' ability to truly understand the reasoning behind their actions.

In order for criminological theories to maintain their credibility they must grow and change with the times. These theories must adapt to the world as society morphs constantly. Each year we are provided with a greater understanding of different minority groups. Criminal justice as a whole must adopt inclusive policies to best serve all communities and garnish trust. As seen with Stonewall, mistrust between the LGBTQ community and the criminal justice system is a deep-seated problem (Barnes, 2020). The best way to engage both sides in repairing the harm that has been done is through inclusive practices. The LGBTQ community should be provided with equitable resources, such as fairness in policing and LGBTQ-informed practices, for criminal justice to meet the community where it stands, and as it grows.

Outside of criminal justice, providing an inclusive space for the LGBTQ community to be comfortable in their identities is crucial for the safety of the group. Gacy and Dahmer both struggled with their sexual identities and used their internalized homophobia to take the lives of innocent young men. If a more inclusive society had made these individuals believe their sexuality was not a problem, perhaps these crimes would not have occurred. Homophobia, as seen in these cases, harms far more than just the queer community.

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