

February 15, 2018

Dear People:

In case anyone might be interested in the sociological explanation of mass shootings such as the school shooting (killing at least 17) in Florida yesterday, I want to note that the theory in MORAL TIME is highly relevant.

The theory is that conflict is a direct function of the movement of social time. The faster and greater the movement of social time, the more conflict will occur. And “conflict” includes both deviant behavior and social control.

So in a case such as the Florida shooting, the theory invites us to examine whether the social world of the shooter experienced any major movements of social time in the recent past. And it did. Several big ones: His father died several years ago, then in November his mother died. In the recent past, too, his girlfriend abandoned him for another boy. Next he attacked his ex-girlfriend’s new boyfriend, and was therefore expelled from school. He moved into the home of a family friend, but not long ago (for unknown reasons) moved to the home of someone else. That’s a lot of upheaval of his social space!

And before the above (for reasons I haven’t yet learned), some years ago he had lost his biological parents and was available for adoption. His last parents adopted his brother and him when they moved from New York to Florida. So it would seem that his relationship with his brother was also damaged or destroyed as well — after his mother died a few months ago or after he moved from his last home.

And now he’s in prison. I’m sure they will try to keep him from committing suicide, but I would not be surprised if he succeeds in doing so eventually. (I’m sure Jason Manning has already thought of this last point about a possible suicide.) In fact, he might have planned the shooting with the expectation of his death in the first place (though he obviously did not kill himself in the school, nor did he fight until he was killed).

Can any other sociological theories make sense of a mass killing such as this? If so, I haven’t heard of them.

One thing about the theory of moral time that I view as particularly exciting is that it can explain both deviant behavior and social control. This alone makes it a radically new theory.

I might finally add that the Florida shooting was, like much other violence, a case of both deviant behavior and social control at once. Obviously it was a crime, but it was also a moralistic crime — a form of justice from the standpoint of the aggrieved shooter.

As you know, existing sociological theories cannot explain particular acts of deviant behavior (such as a single act of violence). The theories merely specify general conditions that could at some unknown time result in deviant behavior of some unknown kind. Two favorites are the theory that deviant behavior occurs because someone has learned to be deviant or that it occurs because someone has been frustrated by something (“strain”).

I find the existing theories not merely weak but laughable — because they are so vague and so incapable of making sense of any particular act. They do not allow one to do an anatomy of the act to determine what caused it. They cannot tell you why, for example, a shooting might have occurred at a school or, as in this case, on Valentine’s Day.

I'm not saying that one can always find the movement or movements of social time that caused a particular act. But at least we can sometimes do this. And it is particularly easy to do in the case of acts of violence such as a school killing or workplace killing.

The theory of moral time also has practical value. As someone emailed me this morning, it is even capable of saving lives. If the theory were known more widely, people such as those with authority in schools and places of work would know when their actions (such as expulsions or firings) are creating literally dangerous conditions that could cause violence. In the case of the Florida shooter, someone should have been able to see that all the movements of social time in his social world were creating a very dangerous situation. But who would think in those terms?

And even criminologists do not know about this theory. It is too new for them. They can only relate to old and boring ideas.

Moral time? Run for the hills! Run back to your fifty-year old theories that have never accomplished anything.

Donald

Best to all,

Donald
6:09 PM (4 hours ago)

to pure-sociology

Dear all,

In a society that fails to do even the most basic things to reduce violence (such as reasonable gun regulations), certainly there is little chance we would apply a new sociological theory to reduce homicide. In any case, I am curious to better understand how the theory could be used to prevent violence, in this instance, while retaining its fidelity to pure sociology and the principles of a democratic society? Specifically, what concrete policy suggestions does moral time imply that could save lives such as the kids in Florida? (I discuss the theory in class next week, so it would be great if I had more examples/policy ideas to add to my armamentarium.)

Regards,
Callie

Dear Callie:

I'm not sure I understand your question. But all that I was suggesting is that the theory of moral time tells us that one or more major movements of social time cause conflict such as violence. So if we know that someone's social world has experienced major movements of social time, such as all the movements of social time that the Florida shooter's social world experienced (his loss of his parents, his loss of his girlfriend, his expulsion from school, etc.), we know that he might engage in some kind of conflict. Such a situation is dangerous. So before the school expels such an individual, the school officials might take this into account -- in hopes of preventing something that could be harmful to other people. They might, for example, decide not to expel the boy, but instead try to do something more supportive. Or if they expel him, they might make sure to monitor his actions afterward to assure that he does not take steps to do something harmful to others.

Presently, however, there is no knowledge of this theory -- even among criminologists. So people such as school officials have no theoretical basis for deciding how to handle someone such as this boy -- who had an amazingly large number of major movements of social time in his life.

Had you told me about all the movements of social time that had occurred in this boy's world, I would have said that he might well do something that no one would like to have happen. He might, for example, become violent. Someone could therefore have tried to take steps to prevent having something undesirable from happening. But no one had any theoretical basis for expecting that something violent might occur.

I hope this makes some kind of sense.

Please ask me to be more clear if you cannot follow what I am saying.

Best,

Donald