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An Integrated Theory of Lethal Punishment: Social Geometry, Status Relationships, and the Dehumanization Process

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Abstract

Punishment exists universally as a form of social control, spanning a continuum from the physically inconsequential to lethality. What explains observable variations in punishment, or lethal punishment as a form of social control? This paper builds upon Black's pure sociology framework and Milner's theory of status relations to argue that lethal punishment occurs mainly under conditions of marginalization, disruptions of the previous social geometries, and social polarization that characterize interpersonal encounters or inter-group relationships. These conditions facilitate the status degradation processes that lead to the dehumanization of the "other." By the same token, such conditions do not often prevail in familial settings and hence lethal punishments are far less common than the lethality associated with other forms of moralistic violence and state-sanctioned punishments.

Keywords

lethal punishment – social geometry – status relationships – social polarization – dehumanization – sociological theory

Introduction

Much academic literature deals with punishment as a question of legal and social philosophy, evaluating the ethical aspects of normative theories of

punishment such as desert-based and consequentialist approaches (e.g., Haist 2009; Lacey and Pickard 2015; Ryberg 2013). A social science theory of punishment shifts the conceptual focus to consider the conditions under which such behavior arises in the first place. To date, scholars have devoted much attention to the study of lawful punishment, with several journals devoted to the subject (e.g., *Law and Social Inquiry*, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, *Journal of Family Law*, *Modern Law Review*, *Law & Society Review*). Yet as Cooney (2014a) has observed, *informal* punishment surely occurs far more frequently in the social world. A general theory of punishment, therefore, should identify key conditions that underlie variations in both formal (legal) and informal (non-legal) types.

The current paper applies a sociological lens to examine physical punishment (hereafter *punishment*) as a form of social control wherein social superiors use physical force to reprimand inferiors for deviant behavior. Punishment refers to a type of *violence*, or the application or threat of physical force against people or property (Black 2004).¹ The violence has a *moralistic* quality, meaning those who punish others are responding to perceived norm violations and justifying their actions thusly. Hence Black (1983) differentiates “predatory violence,” predicated upon pure exploitation, from “moralistic violence” rooted in conflict and applied as a form of social control.

In addition, violence can be unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral in nature, which thereby implies directionality. Violence may be imposed by those in positions of social superiority (downward violence), by relative equals (lateral violence), or by those in positions of social inferiority (upward violence). By focusing narrowly on non-governmental forms of moralistic violence, a diverse array of phenomena can be categorized more efficiently regarding the various strategies through which people assert social control. Chart 1 summarizes several subtypes of non-governmental moralistic violence, as determined by the directionality implied.

1 The U.S. Criminal Code (Title 18, Part 1, Chapter 1, § 16) states that “the term ‘crime of violence’ means – (a) an offense that has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another, or (b) any other offense that is a felony and that, by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.”

TABLE 1 *Non-governmental forms of 'moralistic violence'*

Directionality		
Downward	Lateral	Upward
Corporal punishment	Fistfights	Rioting
Honor violence	Brawling or gang fights	Rebellion
Lynching	Vengeance	Sabotage or vandalism
Vigilantism	Feuding	Terrorism

The focus here involves informal punishments: *the non-governmental application of downward, unilateral violence to inferiors in response to their alleged deviant behavior*. These include mainly the types delineated in the first column of Chart 1. In everyday situations, for example, parents have authority to exercise a great deal of discretion in meting out various forms of corporal punishment to their children.² Yet one might consider many other punitive sanctions with varying degrees of severity as well. Punishment can be lethal in extreme circumstances, such as in deadly use of force against children known as *filicide* (Barone et al. 2014), in cases of *honor killings* involving family members (Deswal 2012), where individuals are *lynched* in small-group or mob settings (Arnold-Lourie 2008), or where *vigilantes* mete out lethal justice to avenge alleged crimes or wrongdoing within their communities (Gross 2016). What explains the lethality of these different forms of non-governmental punishment?

This article synthesizes two previously separate analytic traditions to develop a more comprehensive theory of punishment and human behavior in general. First, Black's analytic framework of "pure sociology" (Black 1979; 1995; 1998; 2011) offers a structural argument to explain punishment behaviors as a function of the social geometry of people's interactions and their social locations relative to each other. These features of human experience inevitably are intertwined and hence affect the evaluations of the behaviors involved,

² *Authority* refers to having legitimate power to exercise such social control. The authority may be legally bestowed, such as the application of law or state punishment. Yet authority may be cultural in nature too, whereby some members within a group have special statuses and are accorded more power and responsibility to "discipline and punish" (Foucault 1977).

subsequent expressions of approval and disapproval, and the degree to which different people are subjected to varying amounts of punishment. In effect, one's actions cannot be divorced from one's social location, precipitating evaluations in more or less favorable terms based upon the relative positions of those who observe and respond to the behavior in question.

Second, the paper draws upon Milner's (1994; 2005; 2010; 2016) theory of status relations to identify the primary mechanisms through which the "othering" process occurs to devalue certain individuals and groups. The argument suggests that status competitions prevail across social contexts, with some people accorded more power and authority through historically evolved advantages (e.g., "white, male, landowners" having an exclusive right to vote in the U.S. prior to the passage of Constitutional amendments). These advantages, though, do not accrue only through governmental fiat, but are endemic to all communities where differentiation and status hierarchies emerge. From a more elevated perch, some are empowered to exercise social control and to punish others formally via state apparatuses or informally through cultural sanctions. One's position in extant social networks thus either yields reputational advantages or further marginalizes those accused of wrongdoing, which increases their likelihood of being punished accordingly.

In brief, the proposed model of lethal punishment emphasizes five inter-related elements: 1) individuals' real or alleged behaviors; 2) the degree of inferiority people have relative to their accusers; 3) the disruption of the social geometry of relationships; 4) the social conditions that intensify the stigmatization of "othering" processes; and 5) the degree of social polarization. Lethal punishments arise not solely from breaches of normative standards, but where vast social distances and dramatic changes in social locations alter existing relationships. The ensuing social polarization, especially during periods of instability and rapid social change, then facilitates the dehumanization and demonization processes that increase the use of fatal punishments. Such conditions are less common in family settings, which helps explain why corporal punishment and honor violence produce far fewer fatalities than other types of moralistic responses.

Pure Sociology and Social Geometry

Accurate sociological predictions of social control require knowledge of actors' social locations. One cannot proffer a scientific assessment of the morality of human actions divorced from social contexts and communal standards.

Moral hierarchies exist within communities (à la Durkheim's ([1895]1964) *deviance among saints* idea), as some people are privileged to identify objectionable behaviors. Within the pure sociology framework, those adjudged to be *nonconformists* have less normative status and are subject to more social control.³ The individuals who occupy the most marginal positions within specific relational, community, or societal contexts are at greatest risk for lethal punishment (Trammell and Morris 2012). Social location matters.

Seemingly identical behaviors may be evaluated quite differently, depending upon the relative statuses and the nature of the relationships among the participants involved. A group of adolescent males walking down a city street, for example, may provoke a vastly different reaction from a police patrol as compared with a group of middle-aged men walking down that same street. Research has shown that African-Americans experience more “stop and search” surveillance by the police compared to other racialized groups – and are more likely to be punished or subjected to legal forms of social control (Wortley and Owusu-Bempah 2011; Geiger-Oneto and Phillips 2003). Yet beyond biased policing practices, the same logic applies more broadly in societies.

A variety of sociocultural axes are used to differentiate people, often rooted in observable differences such as gender, race, ethnicity, and age (Korteweg 2014: 185-190). Every individual occupies multiple statuses simultaneously, which in combination affect one's reputational status in positive and negative ways. The complex process of social interaction creates the social structure or unique *geometry* that defines each entity's social location relative to everyone else within a social universe. Black's (1979; 2011) pure sociology approach explains variations in the social universe with the location, direction, and movement of behaviors in a multi-dimensional social space of five vectors: 1) vertical space (inequalities in wealth and resources); 2) horizontal space (differences in social integration and relational distance); 3) symbolic space (the degree of cultural diversity and cultural distance); 4) corporate space (the size of groups and their degree of organization); and 5) normative space (the degree of social control applied to actors).

As a practical matter, the pure sociology approach conceptualizes social interactions as the key units of analysis, or *cases* to be evaluated. Each social entity occupies social positions in relation to every other entity with whom one interacts, defined by their relative locations and distances from each other. In any encounter, for instance, two actors may share similar statuses in terms of

3 In regard to honor killings, Dogan (2013: 405) has argued the following: “Whenever these norms are neglected or defied, the community specifies necessary sanctions or punishments, in forms of criticism, condemnation and exclusion, against nonconforming behaviour.”

wealth and yet vary substantially along other dimensions. A company president may earn a high annual salary and be held in high regard, while a drug lord with several arrests may have a similar salary and yet less respectability relative to the president. Every encounter among social actors involves a social geometry that varies across time and space – sometimes subtly and at times severely – and these social locations impact the manner in which the encounters unfold.

The five dimensions actually collapse into three main dimensions. Vertical space consists not merely of inequalities in wealth, but can be conceptualized as involving inequalities of three main types of resources, each with empirical referents: wealth, power, and status. One can readily measure the degree to which social actors control varying amounts of financial resources or wealth. The organizational dimension refers to the degree to which one participates in groups and can access partisan supporters via social networks (power). Just as material inequality varies across social entities, the degree to which one can mobilize supporters or *social capital* on one's behalf has a variable quality as well. As for one's normative status, the dimension essentially deals with questions of social status and respectability. Not everyone garners equal respect, as will be demonstrated in the discussion of Milner's (2005; 2010) theory of status relations.

Two other dimensions capture distances that can be measured from one social entity to the next: *relational* and *cultural* distance. The former deals with the "degree to which (people) participate in one another's lives" (Black 1976: 40) and the *depth* of their involvement. Those who have been in a relationship longer, who interact more regularly, and whose interactions are more intensive (e.g., spending time alone together at dinner versus a business meeting) have a closer or more intimate relationship compared to those who do not interact to the same degree.⁴

The concept of cultural distance refers to degree to which people have similarities that reflect the breadth of their symbolic connectedness (or relative lack thereof). If one shares the same language, ethnicity, alma mater, and religion with another person, then these would be indicators of cultural similarities. The sub-dimensions of culture can be multiplied much further, but the logic suggests a continuum ranging from extreme cultural homogeneity to

4 The intimacy factor here refers to the degree of involvement in each other's lives, as opposed to the "emotional connection" or some other type of intimacy. One can have a long-term relationship and spend time with someone and yet *not* "feel" close or connected, but that's irrelevant to pure sociology, which ignores the psychological predispositions of individuals (see Black 1995).

cultural diversity or heterogeneity. Multiple distances operate simultaneously in every encounter, which complicates the attendant evaluations. As a result, not every interaction produces a singular pattern to readily predict variations in social behaviors such as punishment.

Moreover, just as physical time relates to spatial differentiation (e.g., the movement of the moon about the earth, or the earth's revolutions around the sun), Black (2011) employs the terms "moral time" or "social time" to link each of three primary vectors: vertical time (changes in inequality), relational time (changes in intimacy), and cultural time (changes in diversity). Human interactions can be assessed in terms of their social geometry or positioning along each of the three vectors *and* in terms of the dynamic aspects of interactions, i.e., relative movements along each vector defined as changes in social time. More concretely, while a conversation pulls two people closer together in social space, ignoring each other or passing by unnoticed leaves the relationship or social time unchanged. Thus social behaviors can be described and explained in part through an analysis of the location, direction, and movements in social space of the participants involved.

The question remains, however, as to why some behaviors are designated as affronts, or certain offenses as especially egregious. One must acknowledge that the interactions observed have an interpretive component that pure sociology ignores in an effort to eliminate people, purposes, and psychology from consideration (Black 1995; 2000). For example, a cornerstone argument has been that social control reflects a response to grievances and, indeed, that most *violence* represents moralistic rather than predatory behavior (Black 1983; Cooney and Phillips 2002). Yet one cannot determine whether someone uses violence in response to a grievance rather than purely for exploitive purposes without some means of understanding the individual's *intentions*. As even the staunchest advocates of the approach have acknowledged, pure sociology lacks causal mechanisms (Cooney 2014b; see Marshall 2008). While some favor the use of the "social time" concept as the underlying causal mechanism (e.g., Black 2011; Campbell 2013; Cooney and Bigman 2015), responses to movements in social time or changes in *social geometry* always and everywhere depend upon observers' *evaluations* of those changes.⁵

5 A full critique cannot be offered here. Yet to illustrate the importance of actors' interpretations in determining whether grievances arise, consider a conversation from Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. Vincent Vega (John Travolta) wants to ask Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) about what happened to a colleague who had been seriously injured by Mia's husband. Mia asks, "So, did you think of something to say?" Vincent responds, "Actually, I did. However, you seem like a really nice person and I . . . I don't want to offend you." Mia replies,

Furthermore, the creation of social life in the Blackian sense depends upon human beings and their interactions. What distinguishes their *social* behavior from that of inorganic matter or even nonhuman animals? Quite simply, the capacity for normative evaluation via sociolinguistic interpretations and justification systems (Henriques 2003; 2011). These always occur within the context of sentient human beings exchanging information. In fact, the social geometry of the interactions alone cannot determine or even markedly influence behavioral outcomes without *knowledge* of the relative statuses involved. The police officer who pulls over an anonymous speeder behaves differently only upon learning of the police chief's presence behind the wheel. The social geometry of the encounter changes, but the response (applying or withholding law) depends upon the officers' subsequent evaluation of the newly acquired information.

To drill down further to understand the evaluative process, Milner's theory of status relations helps identify the operative mechanisms. Pure sociology's single most important contribution to the sociological conversation consists of demonstrating that certain statuses routinely advantage or disadvantage social actors across their encounters. The approach remains silent, however, on the question of what shapes the evaluative processes associated with acquiring or losing status. In the context of explaining lethal punishment, the key analytic issue involves identifying the conditions under which severe losses of status occur via dehumanization and demonization. The argument boils down to the idea that individuals or entire outgroups are at risk for more serious or even lethal punishment as a result of these "othering" processes.

The Dehumanization and Demonization Processes

With respect to the domestic sphere, such extreme othering does not occur with great frequency and lethal punishments are less common than between unrelated individuals and groups. The intimacy factor and cultural similarities within families partly undermine the status degradation that outgroups often

"Oh, this doesn't sound like the usual, mindless, boring, gettin' to know ya' chit-chat. That sounds like you actually have something to say." Vincent: "Well, well, I do, I do, but you have to promise not to be offended." Mia: "No. No, no, no. You can't promise something like that. I have no idea what you're gonna ask me. So you can go ahead and ask me and my natural response could be to get offended, but then through no fault of my own, I would have broken my promise" (Tarantino and Avary 1994). Thus communicative *content* clearly matters in determining whether a grievance arises or not.

experience. That naturally does not mean that no lethal conflicts occur. The FBI's Uniform Crime Report data reveal, for example, that about one in four homicides in the United States between 2010-2015 involved a family member or relative killing another person within the family. The most common form of domestic homicides involved intimate partners, which represented roughly 9% of all homicides during that time span (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2016), while a comparative analysis of European homicides revealed one in seven committed by intimate partners (Corradi and Stöckl 2014). In general, homicide rates are much higher among non-family members. Since lethal punishments *do* occur in families, additional facets of these relationships are considered below to account for any apparent contradictions.

The research indicates instead that, in the extreme, non-family members and outgroups are perceived as more "animal-like" and dehumanized accordingly (Goff et al. 2008; Pacilli et al. 2016; Zhang et al. 2015; see Haslam 2006). As Costello and Hudson (2009: 4) explain, these "representations presumably justify the exclusion of outgroups from moral consideration (and) render the outgroup less deserving of compassion and respect." The people at the lowest rungs of status hierarchies are sometimes dehumanized or referred to as animals. The concept conveys the idea that those evaluated as such have lost their humanity or status as *human beings*.

For instance, despite the cultural similarities of Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, the latter's designation as *inyenzi* (cockroaches) facilitated the subsequent genocide (Hatzfeld 2005). But what would lead to such a designation? One argument stresses the competition for scarce economic resources and political power as an underlying mechanism that reinforces ethno-nationalist boundaries, the "othering" process, and conflict in general (Nasong'o 2003; see Arowosegbe 2016; Sirkeci, Cohen, and Yazgan 2003). Yet Campbell (2013; 2015) argues that key events alter the geometry of social relationships, prompting shifts in social time that produce genocide. In the case of Rwanda, the long-standing grievances between the leading ethnic groups had never been fully resolved. Instead, intergroup tensions were exacerbated through the forcible expulsion of Tutsis from power in government and education via quotas, humiliating practices in schools that reinforced Tutsis inferior statuses, the subsequent invasion by the Rwandan Patriotic Front comprise mainly of Tutsi exiles, and then the assassination of the Rwandan president. The underlying mechanism, though, that produces mass violence and genocidal behavior involves the process of status degradation or the creation of the nefarious "other" who threatens the group. The dehumanization process provides the critical means through which individuals justify the harshest treatments possible of

any outgroup defined as in the wrong, or somehow representing an affront to the sensibilities of a specific group by their very existence.

Among the many examples available, Alleyne et al. (2014: 758) argue that gang members often dehumanize their adversaries to justify the use of extreme violence in settling disputes: "(T)he facilitative role of dehumanization (means) we treat those we perceive as similar with moral concern, thus empathizing if they are mistreated . . . in order to cause harm we strip away uniquely human qualities from our victims and engage in *animalistic dehumanization*" (emphasis in the original).⁶ The dehumanization process, then, helps promote the infliction of violence. As further evidence, Elizur and Yishay-Krien (2009) report from their qualitative interviews that the dehumanization process facilitated brutal repression tactics by Israeli soldiers during the first *intifada*. Yet the same processes operated in a review of final video statements by Palestinian suicide bombers (Hafez 2006; see Aly 2009). From the social psychological research, "moral disengagement" serves as a gatekeeping mechanism to justify the use of violence without incurring unnecessary pain or guilt (Caprara et al. 2014; Hymel and Bonnano 2014).

Moreover, parents of children killed in terrorist attacks reacted with mixed feelings of hatred and anger toward the attackers, desiring revenge, viewing the attackers as negligible or insignificant entities, and characterizing those responsible as demons (Saka and Cohen-Louck 2014). Indeed, the nadir of the status hierarchy can be found in the *demonization* of the other. The extremists who demonize their enemy offer the ultimate justification of their lethal actions: a moral obligation to rid the world of "evil" as defined by their ideologies (see Moghadam 2008).

The identification of *evil* lies at the polar opposite end of the *sacred*. Within religious status hierarchies, the loftiest position consists of the other-worldly status of a god. In contrast, the demonization process involves denigration and the designation of the lowest possible status of pure evil. The existence of evil directly threatens communal well-being and inspires the harshest punishments, or a retributive response which Cusac (2009), for instance, has linked back to the Christian traditions of early U.S. settlers. The same logic applies to the Muslim case of Farkhunda Malikzada, an Afghani woman tragically lynched by a Kabul mob in March 2015.

6 At the other end of the continuum, those who represent goodness and virtue are recognized as "saints" in society and destined for eternal salvation. For example, many Catholic Popes have been canonized, viz., recognized as saints by the Roman Catholic church (82 of 266 to date).

As a devout Muslim who had just finished afternoon prayers at the Shah-e Du Shamshira shrine, Malikzada encountered trouble after questioning the caretaker, Zain-ul-Din, as to why he should be selling un-Islamic scraps of paper bearing Qu'ranic verses. In response he shouted, "This woman is an American and she has burned the Qu'ran!" While neither accusation was true, these claims immediately demonized the woman as representing perhaps the most blasphemous anti-Islamic symbol possible. Within minutes a lynch mob gathered and, despite the efforts of local police to protect her, she succumbed to the vicious beating and was dragged underneath a car before having her body set afire and desecrated (Kargar 2015).

The demonization process, however, extends beyond religion and applies across much of the social universe. Those who transgress far enough beyond extant moral boundaries and who occupy the most marginal social locations in the first place may be defined as blasphemers, heretics, apostates, or demons – and thereby subjected to the most severe forms of punishment. In cases where someone leaves a religion such as Islam, for instance, the radical alteration of the social universe creates such a backlash that nonbelievers may be condemned to death. In one case, a mother responded to her daughter's disavowal of Islam as follows: "I don't want anything to do with you, you're not my daughter . . . the ruling on apostasy in *shariah* is death. If anyone decides to carry that out (I) won't stop them" (Cottee 2015: 102). Under what conditions do the most extreme forms of such "othering" occur, i.e., wherein individuals or groups are reviled as animals with their normal human rights and privileges suspended (Michalski 2016)? The next section offers a sociological explanation that helps account for the harshness of such reactions.

Milner's Theory of Status Relations

If the othering process of dehumanization and demonization serves as the precursor (*proximal cause*) to extreme punishment, then what determines such an inferior status in the first place? What would lead some to dehumanize others? Michalski (2016) has shown that the existing status hierarchy privileges humans over nonhuman animals, such that the probability approaches zero of the latter group achieving a comparable status with human beings. Milner's (2010; 2013) general theory of status relations helps explain why, commencing with the observation that status operates on an independent axis not reducible to economic and political power. Furthermore, status assumes greater importance *and* stability in social contexts where economic and political resources

are less prominent, such as the Indian caste system (Milner 1994) or among American teenagers (Milner 2016). The reason stems from unique qualities that status has as a resource compared to economic and political resources: inalienability and inexpandibility.

In the first place, Milner stresses that status has an inalienable quality that reflects the judgments of others. As a resource that others confer upon the person or object in question, status cannot be appropriated arbitrarily or simply claimed on one's own behalf. Rather, status depends upon the evaluations of others and, therefore, to change one's status requires a change in the balance of approvals and disapprovals. The process works both ways, such that one can either gain *or* lose status only through altering others' opinions.

Status has the additional quality of being relatively inexpandible, whereas economic and political resources can increase exponentially. A sudden acquisition of wealth sometimes occurs and can profoundly affect the economic landscape (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg). The ability to secure allies or stockpile weapons can alter the distribution of political power. As a result, economic and political resources can be expanded substantially, both in absolute and relative terms. In contrast, status as a resource cannot be manufactured arbitrarily, existing instead in a *relational* context. Within status hierarchies, an individual's ascent accompanies someone else's decline in relative ranking. Not everyone will be viewed as equally popular, attractive, or talented. Only one person usually wins the pageant, the league MVP, or the "most congenial" award. If hundreds of such awards or a ribbon for every participant were handed out, then status inflation would devalue their relative worth. While not exactly a zero-sum game, social life involves a constant quest to acquire or enhance one's status. How might one acquire or suffer a relative loss of status?

Although there are many caveats, Milner (2010; 2013) argues that people acquire status via two primary mechanisms: 1) associating with other high-status people; and 2) conforming to group norms. *Ceteris paribus*, associating with those of higher status increases one's status, whereas spending time with low-status individuals decreases one's status. Social associations are relevant, though, only to the degree that these are public knowledge (Emler and Reicher 1995). Hence the importance of being seen with others, which spans many social contexts, from which celebrities appear with whom to seating arrangements in high school lunchrooms (Milner 2005; 2016). And one suffers a relative *loss* of status by associating with disreputable individuals.

Second, those who adhere to existing collective norms acquire status primarily by the reference group in question, since standards vary across groups (Katz 1982). The productive worker who arrives on time regularly and

cooperates with colleagues will be lauded as dependable. The logic applies at the group level too, such that firms derive reputational advantages through their conformity (Philippe and Durand 2011). Wherever people exceed normative expectations or demonstrate proficiency beyond their contemporaries, they may be rewarded further through promotions, awards, or public recognition. Exceptional performances (*hyper-conformity*) are a reliable means for acquiring status. As Driessens (2013: 544) argues, “Most (superstars) thus catch people’s attention by exploiting a certain talent, or achieving something, which also applies to heroes.” The most compelling performances can be described as *other-worldly* or, in Durkheim’s terms, as *sacred*. Those who achieve the highest ideals of ritual purification ascend to the moral hierarchy’s peak to achieve a sacred status (Milner 1994).

By combining Black’s and Milner’s approaches, note that individuals located *within* any specific social system already occupy positions of relative advantage. Moreover, at the community or societal levels, social systems vary in their degree of openness and social mobility. Large-scale groupings have established status hierarchies and norms that privilege elites through demographic and social locations, such as on the basis of gender, age, family or clan connections, and even racial or ethnic appearances. Economic advantages often accompany these distinctions as well, which means some individuals and groups have difficulty ascending the status hierarchy. Of equal significance are the implications for how those who suffer from status inequalities experience differential evaluations and a greater likelihood of punishment for ostensibly identical behaviors.

The proposed theory has profound implications for understanding the variable and potentially lethal nature of punishment. From a behavioral standpoint, acquiring status requires the proper enactment of rituals and conformity to group norms. Any perceived failings may elicit negative reactions, with offenders subjected to a range of informal social control mechanisms such as gossip, chastisement, putdowns, ostracism, exclusion, or punishment. Not everyone has equal authority to enforce the codes of conduct or exercise social control. The capacity varies with the social environment under consideration, but clearly follows from an unequal distribution of power linked to the resources available (Lammers and Stapel 2011).

Within specific micro-systems of interaction – a family, a school clique, a band, a military unit or training camp, a workplace setting – some members have more disciplinary power with respect to punishing those who offend the larger group’s sensibilities. To occupy the top rung of the status ladder (e.g., within the prison system) means having a privileged position in the exercise of violence to punish non-conformists or even dehumanize those who otherwise

do not measure up to the group's expectations (see Michalski 2015). In the extreme one finds that some individuals and groups by their very nature or *existence* occupy inferior statuses (e.g., "ethnic minorities" or "illegal immigrants" or "thugs") and are denied equal recognition regardless of their behavioral proclivities.

While there are many types of punishment, these differ in severity as adults everywhere can recall from their own childhood experiences. Consider three different forms of punishment, which vary across the landscape and illustrate core principles that one finds with greater or lesser regularity in the social world: corporal punishment leading to filicide, honor killing (and intimate partner homicides), and lynching and witchcraft allegations. These subtypes demonstrate how the variable nature of status differences and social locations of behaviors help predict the uneven likelihood of being dehumanized and lethal punishment arising in non-governmental settings.

Corporal Punishment and Filicide

Most *corporal punishment* involves mild forms of physical discipline designed to manage the misbehavior of children, such as restraining or lightly spanking a child. Whatever one's views of corporal punishment, two facts are undeniable based on the available evidence. First, the clear majority of parents engages in some form of corporal punishment (Straus and Kantor 1994). For example, about two-thirds of parents in the United States use corporal punishment as a regular method of disciplining their preschool children. By high school, researchers estimate that about 85% of American children have been subjected to corporal punishment (Gershoff 2010).⁷

Second, although severe in some cases, corporal punishment rarely ends up being lethal. Parents do not often kill their children, a practice known as filicide. One study confirmed that the U.S. recorded about 500 cases annually over three decades, with a modal age of one year and more than two-thirds of the victims under the age of six (Mariano, Chan, and Myers 2014). Canada registers about 30 filicide cases annually. Yet if one could calculate accurately the *total* number of times children received *any* form of corporal punishment, then instances resulting in filicide would be a mere fraction. Simply put, the

7 Bell and Romano (2012) discuss the opinion data on corporal punishment. In Canada, the current legal debates focus on Section 43 of the Criminal Code (Romano, Bell, and Norian 2013).

sociological conditions associated with most corporal punishment are generally not conducive to lethal outcomes.

Families are rife with the potential for conflicts, especially where the individual members live in close proximity and routinely interact with each other. Every encounter presents an opportunity for conflict to erupt, yet child homicides are by far the exception rather than the rule. From a pure sociology standpoint, the key to understanding the variable nature of filicide requires an assessment of the relative positions of those involved. Not all family members are equally intimate, similar, powerful, or autonomous. The social locations of family members work to shield most people from the threat of *lethal* punishment.

Parents and intimates are more likely to be forgiving of transgressions that might be evaluated as especially egregious in other contexts. As Black (1976) has famously demonstrated, law varies inversely with relational distance. The same adult who advocates for the death penalty in capital murder cases might sing a different tune if the alleged perpetrator happens to be one's own child. Most important, children in most families have cultural similarities and sufficient status in other respects such that in only rare instances would they be dehumanized or demonized. Thus while children on balance occupy a relatively low status in most families (Freeman and Saunders 2014), they are not often demonized – unless a parent suffers a psychotic episode (Knabb, Welsh, and Graham-Howard 2012) or otherwise lacks significant attachments (Barone et al. 2014).⁸

The evidence reveals that children are more susceptible to lethal punishment during their youngest years. Their social locations place them in positions of high dependency, with maximal vulnerability and inferiority (see Mariano, Chan, and Myers 2014). If children are more isolated from external contacts or supports, then their likelihood of experiencing lethal punishment increases – as the evidence suggests in regard to other forms of domestic violence (Katerndahl et al. 2013; Fusco and Rautkis 2012; Rajan 2014; Vandecar-Burdin and Payne 2010). Children gain greater autonomy as they age *and* interact to a greater extent with those outside of their families, building up their stock of potential supporters and external network ties (along with other resources), which thereby reduces their risk of lethal punishment.

8 One tragic case of demonization involved Andrea Yates, who killed her five children in 2001. She shifted between viewing herself as not righteous and her kids as under Satanic influences: "I was afraid Satan would ruin my children . . . maybe that even I had some Satan in me" (Annussek 2002). She ultimately ended up being found not guilty for the homicides by reason of insanity.

Another intriguing pattern stands out where infants have not yet fully established their “human” status: the younger the child, the greater the likelihood of being killed by one’s parents (Fox and Zawitz 2006).⁹ In addition, studies of filicides in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, reveal that stepparents kill their charges at higher rates than genetic parents (Daly and Wilson 1994; 1998; Harris et al. 2007; Weekes-Shackelford and Shackelford 2004). Even the *methods* stepparents use often inflict more pain and *punishment* on average compared to biological parents, who use tactics that produce quicker and less painful deaths (Debowska, Boduszek, and Dhingra 2015).¹⁰ Moreover, children from larger families are at greater risk for receiving lethal forms of discipline. In short, lethal punishments are more common among those who have far less status and who are located at much greater social distances than what one typically encounters in the context of corporal punishment.

In most cases children are *not* dehumanized or demonized, which helps protect the vast majority from lethal punishment. Greater risks for dehumanization or devaluation occur among the youngest or even the unborn, where one has not yet achieved the full and equal status of “human being.” From a cross-cultural standpoint, pregnancies and bearing children generally enhance one’s status and family reputation, but not in all circumstances. In cases where a woman has been raped by a stranger and becomes pregnant, for example, she has a greater likelihood of having an abortion, which arguably reflects a combination of greater social distance from the infant (i.e., with an unknown or distant father) and a greater degree of shame incurred (Liebling and Slegh 2011; Holmes et al. 1996). More abortions occur wherever pregnancies are “unwanted” and where these might harm the reputational status of the woman and/or her family (Altink 2007; Finer et al. 2005). In effect, in lieu of being punished herself for impugning the reputation of her family, the woman (and complicit males and medical personnel) transfers the lethal verdict to an unborn fetus.

9 Note that the morality of abortion hinges partly on definitions of the “sanctity of human life” and disagreements regarding exactly when *life* begins. Consistent with the current logic, as the embryo develops and acquires more status with traits that define the organism as a *human being*, opposition to abortion increases. Most laws restrict late-term abortions or those occurring after “fetal viability,” except for threats to a mother’s life (Guttmacher Institute 2016).

10 These findings accord with Tucker and Ross’ (2005) analysis of corporal punishment, where they identify three structural features linked to an increased use of corporal punishment: 1) the social distance between parents and children; 2) the degree of social inequality within the family; and 3) the degree of social isolation or lack of network supporters from outside the household.

Perhaps the most controversial practice involves the disproportionate rates of female infanticide and especially female foeticide, which consists of aborting the female fetus before birth. Herein the mother essentially renders a lethal punishment for the unborn fetus, adjudged to be guilty for no other reason than being “the wrong sex” (Gill 1998). The evidence confirms a widespread preference for males, especially in patriarchal societies, as their presence generally enhances a family’s reputation and economic status to a greater degree within the village or community in question (Oomman and Ganatra 2002; Larme 1997). In contrast, a devaluation of females across many cultures stems from diverse normative standards, but the net effects mean that unborn females are at greater risk for a lethal verdict. For example, the Kallar (a sub-caste of the Mukkulathors in India) have a preference for male infants for economic, military, and religious reasons (Krishnaswamy 1984). Such partiality has meant skewed sex ratios in many places, such as India and China (Mitra 2014; Crow 2010; Coale and Banister 1996).¹¹

Honor Killings and Intimate Partner Homicides

In cases of honor violence, many of the same arguments apply in that sociocultural locations have a certain protective effect in most cases since the accused typically has family attachments. According to Human Rights Watch (2001), honor killings are “acts of violence, usually murder, committed by male family members against female family members who are perceived to have brought dishonor upon the family.” The focus on males as perpetrators highlights an important distinguishing feature, i.e., that the *honor* in question represents a special form of status that helps define the *family’s* standing in the community. Especially in the context of “honor cultures,” men have a responsibility to ensure that female behaviors measure up to the prevailing standards. Yet the women themselves can contribute positively to enhance “the reputation and status of the family by marrying someone of higher social status and also by helping ensure compliance of others with a male’s and/or the family’s wishes” (Roberts, Campbell, and Lloyd 2014: 21). Consistent with Milner’s (2005, 2010) theory, the two mechanisms of associations with high-status individuals and conformity offer important means by which one acquires status.

11 Selective reproductive technologies permit diverse means through which to judge the viability of the fetus beyond medical rationales, linked to a range of issues such as gender preferences, social inequality, religious factors, and so forth (Gammeltoft and Wahlberg 2014).

On the other hand, behaviors that threaten the family's standing are likely to be subjected to social control or even punishment. Sev'er and Yurdakul (2007: 972) argue that "the poor are even more possessive about their honor, because they have little else in the rigidly stratified societies in which they live. (J)udgments about honor can and do become fatal." The violent defense of honor assumes special priority where economic or political resources hold less sway, such as among youth subcultures (Milner 2016), within the confines of the prison system (Michalski 2017), or in defending the family's reputation (Roberts, Campbell, and Lloyd 2014).

The United Nations once estimated that "throughout the world, perhaps as many as 5,000 women and girls a year are murdered by members of their own families" for reasons of honor (UNFPA 2000: 29). Yet many cases are likely underreported and often camouflaged as suicides, accidents, disappearances, or deaths from natural causes (Wikan 2008: 77-78; Chesler 2010). Whatever the real numbers, honor killings have distinct characteristics that help distinguish such familial punishment from other forms (Cooney 2014a). Indeed, one might argue that honor killings are the non-state equivalents of state-sanctioned lethal (capital) punishment.

A variety of specific behaviors may impugn family honor, such as violations of female chastity (Canna'n 1931), divorcing or dating outside the accepted cultural parameters (Ercan 2015), inappropriate social contact (Akpınar 2003), the failure of women to accept and properly enact a subservient role to their men (Hasan 2002), or females striving for autonomy more generally (İnce, Yaralı, and Özsel 2009). From a behavioral standpoint, the violation of cultural norms threatens the social status of the offender's family and especially the male members. Cooney (2014a: 409) explains that honor offences not only imperil their status, but that the "dishonored family may be excluded from community activities, bear the brunt of mockery and gossip, and experience difficulty finding marriage partners."

Even in cases of rape, the female has "dishonored" the family despite the fact she may have been assaulted by a family member (Epstein 2010; UNFPA 2000). Women's involvement in any type of disreputable incident adversely affects the family's status, which thereby leads to the othering process and the creation of *stigma* or *pollution* that has more serious and sometimes lethal consequences (Trammell and Morris 2012; Gill, Stranger, and Roberts 2014; Jafri 2008; see Awwad 2001). Even the women themselves often acknowledge the importance of the female avoiding any hint of impropriety, as an Arab interviewee explains: "A good woman, a respected woman, gives no one cause to speak about her or spread rumors" (Hasan 2002: 3). Honor can be regained, however, by punishing or even killing the guilty party. In one case an Egyptian

father publicly displayed his daughter's head while shouting: "I avenged my honour" (UNFPA 2000: 30). As a form of moralism, the perpetrators often defend their actions in court by claiming that "they carried out the duty imposed on their shoulders" (Dogan 2013: 403).¹²

Yet the behavior alone does not determine outcomes divorced from their social contexts, with differences in the social geometry of relationships and movements in social time increasing the risk of ostracism and demonization linked to honor killings. While there are many possible honor offenses, only some result in lethal punishment. Holding constant the nature of the offense, women who are more relationally and culturally distant are subjected to lethal punishment. Most families resolve conflicts and deal with grievances *without* resorting to lethal punishment, while maintaining their social ranking. They may deny an infraction occurred, warn a female to break off a relationship, arrange for an abortion, suppress certain news, or banish her from the household. Potential infractions generate honor killings mainly under the most extreme conditions of social distance and social inferiority, for honor offenses always involve two parties (Cooney 2014a).

First, the social distance between a woman and her family depends on her relationship with her own family and indirectly on *his* relationship to her and her family. A woman who becomes involved with a socially distant man, such as dating someone with a different racial or ethnic background, increases the combined distance between the offenders and her family. Such an offense attracts more punishment than an intimate offense. A woman who develops a relationship with an outsider assumes a greater risk than one who has an affair with a man from the same village or town. Furthermore, increase the religious, linguistic, and racial differences of those involved and one augments the likelihood of honor killing. Chesler (2009: 6-8) describes several instances of honor killings consistent with these principles, perpetrated by those of either Muslim or Hindu faiths. And where social inequality thrives, such as in patriarchal systems, gender-based violence directed by males against females increases too (Michalski 2004), with family members routinely implicated in the killing of females with inferior statuses (Roberts, Campbell, and Lloyd 2014).

But these relationships are relative as well, such that some women come from privileged families, or those that are wealthier than the man with whom she has a liaison. That status advantage will often protect her from an honor killing, as the economically and socially inferior family will more likely demand compensation for the dishonor brought to their family. As a young

12 As İnce, Yaralı, and Özsel (2009: 538) elaborate, the killings (or forced suicides) are viewed as punishments sanctioned by the clan or family councils to help regain family honor.

Turkish woman lamented: “Where there’s money all our customs are forgotten. When there’s money no one wants to kill the girl. They don’t want a poor husband. But we move in poor circles, where are we supposed to find the rich husbands?” (Onal 2008: 45-46). Where the female hails from a financially inferior family, however, she has a greater risk of being subjected to lethal punishment. More generally, the principle appears to be almost a sociological law that those who have inferior statuses attract more serious and even lethal punishment (Cooney 2015).

Finally, the degree to which individuals deviate more radically from the existing patterns of relationships increases the likelihood of honor violence (Black 2011). Cooney (2014b: 94) offers mainly anecdotal evidence to argue that honor violence as a form of punishment mainly occurs in response to “micro-rebellions,” where those with inferior statuses challenge the cultural traditions of their group and especially those in positions of authority. The greatest likelihood of honor violence occurs under those conditions whereby multiple aspects of the pre-existing social geometry change rapidly and simultaneously.

For example, a daughter might “rebel” and violate the family rule either to date someone of the same race clandestinely, or by dating someone of an altogether different race. Both furtive acts represent movements of vertical time (challenging or subverting patriarchal authority) and of relational time (shifting at least some of her time and loyalties to someone *outside* of the family circle). The latter example represents an even more dramatic shift, though, by combining both a change in relational time or intimacy with an outside member, *and* cultural time, or a movement toward cultural diversity. If the young man in question happens to hail from a poor family as well, that yields an even greater loss of status to the family, who views such liaisons as even more dishonorable than a similarly unauthorized relationship with a man from a more powerful or affluent family (Cooney 2014b; Chakravarti 2005). Gressel’s (1981: 142) extended comments provide an excellent summary of why honor violence occurs among Arab Muslim societies with patrilineal descent, consistent with the theory outlined here:

Maintenance of group honour means continuous supervision over daughters’ movements by provision of all their subsistence needs so that they will go out of the house as infrequently as possible . . . and provision of all their feminine needs to make them immune from temptation (*hasana*), by which is meant marrying them off as soon as possible. The test of virginity is decisive and compels families never to leave young girls on their own. However, the immunity of the woman and her modesty remain the concern of her family of origin even after her marriage –

indeed, throughout her life. In fact, the shari'a teaches that punishment should be more severe for the adulteress than for the single woman (in that) the former is to be stoned, while the latter receives 100 lashes in public.

In sum, the mere existence of honor killings may be unthinkable from a Westerner's standpoint, but these can be explained by noting three important aspects of most cases. First, the victims of honor violence have compromised the family's honor and reduced their status through their alleged activities. In the most extreme cases, once the offensive behaviors receive public recognition, even inappropriate "holding hands" can be "stigmatised" (Gressel 1981: 148). Second, the special configurations of social geometry mean that some individuals are at greater risk for precisely the same behaviors due to their social locations: those who are in more marginal and relatively powerless positions are at greater risk for lethal punishment than others with advantageous social locations (i.e., those who are more integrated, culturally similar, and with more status). Third, the grievance(s) punished reflect more or less drastic movements of social time, i.e., a transgression that alters the preceding social arrangements or upsets social stability.

Despite the tragic nature of these crimes, honor killings are not nearly as common as several other forms of moralistic violence outlined in Chart 1. For example, Hayes, Freilich, and Chermak (2016) only identified 16 honor crimes with 40 murder victims in the United States from 1990-2014. Yet their results proved consistent with Cooney's (2014b) research insofar as the primary motivations involved movements in social time (Black 2011), such as increases in relational distance via separations and divorces (under-intimacy) and increases in "westernized" behavior (under-traditionalism). The perpetrators in most cases did not view their behavior as criminal, since the victims had besmirched their family reputations with culturally unacceptable, "disrespectful," or "shameful" behaviors. In Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (2002: 395) analysis of court proceedings in cases of Palestinian honor killings, the language of shame had been translated into even more severe denunciations and justifications, such as the female victims having "violate(d) the most sacred sociocultural code." In each case assessed, the victims' families relinquished the right to pursue further civil or tribal action due to "extenuating circumstances," signaling the devalued nature of the women as essentially nothing more than damaged property.

Thus while the underlying motives involved in honor killings differ in many respects from filicide, neither practice commonly occurs due to the intimacy and cultural similarities that render the dehumanization process more problematic. On the other hand, intimate partner homicides (IPH) are more

common and might seem inconsistent with the general theory. Yet a deeper examination of the issue and the social contexts of IPH helps resolve the apparent contradiction.

First, interpersonal homicides much more often involve non-family members, as discussed above with the FBI data. Second, even within the family, some homicides are more *predatory* in nature and a reflection of coercive control or “intimate terrorism” rather than the *moralism* associated with punishment (Johnson 2008; see Cooney and Phillips 2002). Third, the risk for IPH increases significantly where grievances have escalated and couples have separated or divorced – which further implies reduced intimacy and a shift in the social geometry of the relationship, or what Black (2011) describes as a movement in “social time.” The data confirm that a combination of increased relational distance following separations and the movement of social time implied (i.e., from a more intimate to a more distant or terminated relationship) tend to amplify the partners’ grievances and increase the likelihood of men to render lethal judgments against their ex-partners (Cunha and Goncalves 2016; Campbell et al. 2007; Jordan 2010).¹³ Cetin (2015) defines femicides like these as “revolt killings,” wherein Turkish men kill their female partners who have attempted to sever their relationships with their husbands as a modern-world expression of their autonomy in a patriarchal culture that continues to favor traditionalism.

Finally, IPH often involves a moralism wherein an aggrieved male partner, who once adored his wife and placed her on a pedestal, might respond to various conflicts or marital problems with lethal violence. Mathews, Jewkes, and Abrahams (2015: 118) interviewed men who murdered their partners and discovered a common theme that “once ‘perfect’ women were now flawed due to their perceived indiscretions or behaviour which was not fitting.” The use of lethal punishment only occurred once the relationships had disintegrated and a cognitive shift occurred that allowed the men to redefine their once venerated partners as fatally flawed. The men exhibited polarized views of their female partners as either all good or all bad via the psychological process of “splitting” (Siegel 2006), which “allowed them to kill the partner they once adored without remorse, and to externalize blame” (Mathews, Jewkes, and Abrahams 2015: 118).

The pattern applies cross-culturally in that uxoricide occurs more frequently where women occupy inferior social statuses and have less power than men (Gondolf and Shestakov 1997). The patriarchal attitudes that have

13 Note that men kill female partners more in cohabiting relationships, which may serve as a marker of greater social distance or reduced intimacy by the current definition (Shackelford and Mouzos 2005).

prevailed indicate that in diverse historical contexts men often have justified severe and ultimately lethal beatings as a byproduct of *correcting* or *disciplining* their wives. As Muravyeva (2013: 318) explains in the early modern Russia context:

Men, often drunk, accused their wives of various improprieties, including theft, drinking, leaving home without permission, bad housekeeping, and loose sexual mores. Murderous husbands constructed their motives using available gendered discourses. In their confessions and explanations their late wives had to represent a deviation from the ideal femininity.

Charges of female improprieties have proven to be most egregious in highly patriarchal societies and those characterized by patrilocal arrangements, which reinforce female inferiority and greater social isolation. Adinkrah's (1999: 1312) study of Fijian uxoricide, for example, confirms these patterns with respect to the importance of bridal virginity and marital fidelity: "Breaches of these norms are grave offenses and bring immense dishonor to the implicated individuals and families and were among the major sources of conflict precipitating wife killings." Similar patterns can be found in diverse societies, such as Ghana (Adinkrah 2008), South Africa (Matthews, Jewkes, and Abrahams 2015), and among Ethiopians emigrating to Israel (Edelstein 2012).

In short, women experience an elevated risk of lethal punishment from spouses where more extreme forms of gender inequality prevail. The comparative evidence indicates that a woman's status in male-dominated societies tends to be severely devaluated through the perceived failure to live up to prevailing societal standards. Yet such *failures* and possible demonization extend much further into social space, with lethal punishments ramping up under specific conditions. If social interactions involve individuals who are highly unequal in the first place and separated by vast cultural differences, social polarization occurs more readily than within families and, as a result, lethal punishments occur much more frequently. Consider lynching and witchcraft allegations.

Lynching and Witchcraft

Senechal de la Roche (1996: 103) defines lynching as "unorganized form of collective violence with individual liability," or as a "form of violence in which an informal group punishes an individual" (Senechal de la Roche 2001: 129). While lynching does not necessarily or always result in killing the alleged

deviant (e.g., tar and feathering, or modest forms of punishment), the most extreme versions *do* consist of informal or *non-state* forms of executions. Not surprisingly, the social structure of lynching shares similarities with honor killings and filicide. Unilateral collective violence generically arises under the same circumstances, or through a combination of variables: 1) relational distance; 2) cultural distance; 3) functional independence; and (4) inequality. While each varies in degree from one conflict to the next, Senechal de la Roche (1996: 106) has hypothesized that where the factors combine, a multiplier effect occurs to produce the greatest likelihood and severity of collective violence.

Yet the shift toward a more collective form of violence arises mainly in those contexts where social polarization emerges. Within families, most violence occurs internally and mainly at the individual level. A child disobeys or disrespects a parent, or flouts the family rules and, as a result, may be reprimanded through corporal punishment. Yet the behavior does not produce a collective response except perhaps if the parents unite in their disciplinary measures. Under some circumstances, though, one parent may actually come to the defense of the child, which fundamentally alters the social geometry of the encounter as the child acquires a network supporter or advocate – and hence reduces to some degree the threat of violence. If the offense within a family applies more broadly or threatens the reputation of the family as a whole, then that creates the impetus to initiate a more collective response of violence as occurs with honor killings. Whether committed by one male member within the family or multiple members, normative violations that implicate an entire group enhance the likelihood of a collective response. In effect, the individual in question has created a degree of social polarization, reinforcing the distinctions between the *good* and the *bad*, or *us* and *them*.

The current theory predicts that lethal punishment will be more common where the greatest level of social polarization occurs, i.e., *beyond* the level of the family through the combination of extreme relational distance, cultural distance, inequality, and functional independence. If one has a grievance with one's child, then the handling of that dispute will be less violent and rarely lethal. The social conditions are not as conducive to such violence as with cases that involve different configurations of more socially and culturally distant actors. Imagine a scenario where a stranger arrives in town who has high relational distance (does not know anyone in the community), high cultural distance (has a different racial or ethnic background), has few resources (no other allies or significant economic resources), and where a total functional independence exists between the individual and the townspeople (does not work for anyone else or perhaps does not work at all). Such an individual usually will be subjected to far greater surveillance and social control, even for

otherwise seemingly innocuous behaviors such as speaking with a woman to ask directions.

Consistent with the theory presented, lethal violence tends to occur in the form of lynching where the aforementioned conditions prevail and where the individual in question has somehow challenged the sanctity and solidarity of the group by his or her presence, or perhaps through some type of alleged or real violation of group norms. The violence then “collectivizes” to the extent that partisanship arises in the group context, where those involved take sides in the dispute. At a Ku Klux Klan or “white supremacist” rally, the partisanship will almost always be much more one-sided – which means that any opposition or threat will almost certainly be met with violence, such as what Edward Norton (a.k.a. Derek Vinyard) experienced in *American History X* after he had renounced his allegiance to the Aryan Brotherhood and showed up at one of their gatherings. Such strong partisanship arises if the potential third parties to disputes are more solidary among themselves and commit more fully or completely to one side in a dispute against another. As Senechal de la Roche demonstrates (2001: 115):

Lynching is a joint function of strong partisanship toward the alleged victim and weak partisanship toward the alleged offender. Classic lynchings of outsiders (such as those accused of crime in the American South) as well as communal lynchings of insiders (such as those accused of witchcraft in tribal villages) share this structure.

These individuals are at extraordinary disadvantages because they have been dehumanized or at least designated as moral outcasts, typically in the first instance by occupying social locations that distance them rather dramatically from the dominant group or those administering the sanction. To the extent that these groups are more solidary amongst themselves and strongly supportive of one side in a dispute, the other side runs the risk of experiencing ever more severe or even lethal forms of punishment. For example, the Khasi of Northern India mainly practice either of two forms of Christianity (Presbyterianism and Catholicism) while retaining their folkloric traditions surrounding the evil spirit of Thlen, a “fallen angel” and primary source of evil in their society. Lyngdoh’s (2015: 182) ethnographic work has highlighted that those who are socially marginalized or who have “little or nothing in common with the rest of the community” end up being targeted as the “other” and may suffer lethal punishment as a result. Lyngdoh (2015) describes several instances where individuals were thought to be agents of Thlen, confronted by angry mobs, brutally attacked, and even murdered. The victims were accused

of *witchcraft* and included those who were deemed to be outsiders of various kinds. Such individuals might be relative strangers in the community, those who practiced a minority indigenous religion, or who were mentally challenged or suffered physical abnormalities.

Yet even long-time members might be the focus if they have grown too prosperous, which implicates Thlen's involvement and the associated sins of greed, accumulation, and possibly exploitation. Hence the *othering* occurs either by virtue of cultural distance and social inferiority or through what Black (2011) terms "overstratification," i.e., those who have altered the social geometry and created conflict by moving up the ladder of success. As Lyngdoh (2015: 181-182) concludes: "Most of Thlen-related violence is directed toward people who for some reason are viewed as being an opposing *other*." Such patterns are consistent with recent evidence surrounding immigrants, who similarly create conflict simply by being the "other" and by virtue of their perceived threats to claims on scarce resources (e.g., Dhaliwal and Forkert 2015).¹⁴

The pattern has occurred with the infamous Salem witch trials, which involved several towns for a brief period in the late seventeenth century. In fact, 25 different towns had at least one accusation. As the social historian Latner (2008: 146) has pointed out, the accusations evinced a highly consistent pattern: "They were women of middling or advanced years, often widowed or single, who had been involved in bickering or disputes with neighbors . . . They were often mobile and of relatively humble means, or were men reputed to practice some form of magic." Further, many had been accused previously and/or were sometimes connected to others accused. In short, those accused typically were women with inferior or marginalized statuses, with relatively few allies, who were subjected to trials by more powerful and socially distant superiors. If one cannot attract strong or high-status supporters to the cause, then one will be more vulnerable and less able to counter the larger community's judgment or narrative of one's behavior.

Conclusions

Non-state actors engage in various forms of punishment regularly, but do not usually engage in the practice of *lethal* punishment. To arrive at such a point requires a more sustained shift in the characterization of the aggrieved against

14 Harris and Kim (2015) have shown that immigrants are more likely to be scapegoated and framed as a violent "other" in historical context, despite the evidence that immigrants were no more likely to engage in spousal homicides than anyone else.

whom punishments are inflicted. In combination, the several factors identified in the current paper contribute to the identification of moral outcasts and, in the extreme, the dehumanization or even demonization of the “other” (Giner-Sorolla, Leidner, and Castano 2012). While the individuals’ actual behaviors matter, these are always evaluated based on their relative positions within the social universe. Those who occupy more marginal and inferior statuses relative to those vested with authority will be subjected to greater amounts and more serious forms of punishment. To the extent that people disrupt or threaten the preexisting social geometry of relationships by living out their lives in contact with social superiors, such movements in social time generate conflicts (Black 2011). Where social polarization separates entities more severely in social space, the risk of punishment and moralistic violence increases proportionately. Such polarization helps ensure that the protective mechanisms of conformity and affiliating with the dominant group end up far less accessible to certain individuals, which thus increases the risks of stigmatization and dehumanization associated with the othering process.

Yet non-governmental forms of punishment are far less likely to be lethal in nature than state-sanctioned punishment (e.g., capital punishment). The more intimate relationships and cultural similarities between family members create a firewall against the types of dehumanization and demonization that occur in non-family contexts. The state exercises more lethal punishments on balance due to the vast social and cultural distances separating state representatives and the accused, the dramatic power imbalance between the collectivity and the alleged lawbreaker, and the increased capacity to dehumanize and demonize those who live in different social worlds from most of those who render judgments. Along these lines Phillips and Cooney (2015) demonstrate further that the public from vast social distances responds far harshly with dehumanizing rhetoric and characterizations of convicted killers as “animals” if afforded the opportunity to express their hostility through the “electronic pillory.” And the greater the degree of social polarization, the more readily can people establish their boundaries and identify some “deviants” as members of outgroups that can be stigmatized, dehumanized, and have their lives devalued.

The implications of the theory are compelling. Most important, to reduce lethal punishment invoked at *any* level requires shifting the social landscape to be more conducive to alternative strategies of social control. The offending individuals and designated outgroups will be at their greatest risk for dehumanization and lethal consequences where they are: 1) less integrated and less intimate with their accusers, or especially where social and legal barriers reduce opportunities for integration; 2) more culturally distant along multiple

dimensions – and less able and/or willing to conform to dominant group norms; 3) in a chronic state of disrepute (e.g., defined as immigrants or “illegal aliens”), i.e., where they suffer from a type of collective liability that precedes their behavior; 4) lacking in allies or social network support; and 5) lack the resources to counter the dehumanization and demonization narratives effectively.¹⁵ To the extent that these conditions intersect to differentiate more comprehensively specific individuals or groups from each other in the social world, the greater the likelihood of more severe or even lethal punishment in response to alleged normative violations.

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15 Mooney and Young (2005: 119) explain terrorism thusly: “To do evil, to act with excessive violence toward other human beings, a discourse must be developed that allows for the moral release of the perpetrators from the normal human values . . . We have seen how the process of essentialization of the other can give rise to the dehumanization that permits violence.”

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