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Familicide: Risk Factors, Characteristics of the Offender, Characteristics of the Crime of Familicide, and the Prevalence of Suicide Following Familicide

Valerie R. Barthell

University of New Hampshire, Durham

Kathleen M. Shelton

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Abstract

This study will be examining the risk factors to familicide, the characteristics of the offenders of familicide, the characteristics of the crime, and the prevalence of suicide following familicide. Of the literature reviewed it has been found that there are risk factors to familicide, there are known characteristics of the crime of familicide, and suicide is prevalent following familicide (Wilson et al., 1995; Brewer & Paulsen, 1999; Harper & Voigt, 2007). Findings are expected to suggest that there will be a higher proportion of cases in which the offender felt as though they were under immense stress due to the stresses and expectations of society, there will be a higher proportion of male offenders that commit suicide following familicide, that a larger proportion of familicide cases occurred in homes in which stepchildren did reside, and that indicate pre-existing drug and alcohol use is prevalent in the offenders of familicide.

Running head: RISKS, CHARACTERISTICS, HOMICIDE- SUICIDE

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Valerie R. Barthell

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Abstract

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How close are you to your family? Could you imagine killing one of them? Can you imagine a family member attacking you? Well, this does happen and it is a serious problem. Familicide is defined as “a multiple-victim homicide incident in which the killer's spouse or ex-spouse and one or more children are slain” (Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995, p. 275). While this is a tragic event, it is an understudied phenomenon; researchers have yet to systematically compare familicide to other homicides (Wilson et al.,(1995).

Past Research

Of the previous research examined on the topic familicide a vast amount of information on the risks associated with familicide, filicide, and uxoricide has been uncovered. Previous studies have examined characteristics of the typical offenders of these crimes, the characteristics of these crimes, and the prevalence of suicide among the offenders.

Risk Factors

After an examination of relevant literature it has been found that there are many risk factors to the crime of filicide and uxoricide. Wilson et al., (1995) found that there is a strong correlation between the wife's age and uxoricide risk finding that the group with the highest risk is women age 25 to 44 years old. Research has shown that a stepchild in the home is strongly correlated to violence against the wives and the children (Wilson et al.,1995).

A study conducted by Brewer and Paulsen (1999), of uxoricide risk for women, focused on the correlation between stepchildren in the home and violence. It was found that stepchildren are more likely to be killed or abused than those children who live with their genetic parents. It was also found that those women who have co-residing minor children from previous partners are at a much greater risk for uxoricide than women in the population at large (Brewer & Paulsen, 1999). Out of the 119 cases that Brewer and Paulsen (1999) they found that one fourth of the cases involved women with minor children, one third of the cases involved women with no children, and one third of the cases involved women with adult children. From this data Brewer and Paulsen (1999) concluded that women with minor biological children with a new partner were more than four times more likely to be victims of uxoricide (329).

Characteristics of the Offender

Research concerning familicide had identified numerous characteristics with respect to perpetrators, with much agreement among authors; however, some independent analyses have elected various nuanced information. Wilson et al., (1995), Harper and Voigt (2007), Liem and Koenraadt (2007), and Adinkrah (1999) all are in agreement that familicide is a particularly male dominated crime. Research has found that men were responsible for 95% of all familicidal killings (Wilson et al.,1995). Further research has found that those who killed both their children and spouses were all male; and males also predominated in filicide- suicide (Liem and Koenraadt, 2007).

Research has shown a higher proportion of an intimate partner relationship between the victim and offender in familicide cases. Brewer and Paulsen (1999) concluded that about 40% of the women victims were in registered marriages, one third

of all uxoricide victims were cohabitating girlfriends, and one fourth of all uxoricide victims were in common-law marriages. Harper and Voigt (2007) found that of 30 cases the largest proportion occurred in the victim- offender relationship of a married couple (nine cases) and of the remaining 21 cases all but three cases involved an intimate relationship between the victim and offender.

Previous research points to racial and ethnic patterns among the perpetrators of familicide. Research by Harper and Voigt (2007) shows that out of 42 cases of the perpetrators “16 are White, 10 are African American, 1 is Hispanic, 1 is interracial (African American and Hispanic), and 2 are unknown in terms of ethnicity or race” (303). The cases examined by Harper and Voigt (2007) are limited due to the fact that they represent only a small proportion of familicide cases, as research was conducted only in a 12-year period, and only in New Orleans , Louisiana. Data has indicated age patterns in familicide cases. Harper and Voigt (2007) determined that in the 42 cases examined all of the perpetrators were males, whose average age was 29.6 years old. In these 42 cases all victims were female, whose average age was 29.1 years old (Harper and Voigt, 2007). However, Brewer and Paulsen (1999) determined in their findings that there was a gap of 10 years or more in the ages of the female victims and their offending partners. This difference in data could be attributed to the differences in sample size and the area in which the sample was taken.

Characteristics of the Crime

Examining the literature pertaining to familicide has emerged. A study by Wilson et al., (1995) determined that there are an equal number of sons and daughters murdered. Leveillee, Marleau, and Dube (2007) found that 71% of male perpetrators and 29% of

female perpetrators kill two or more children. Research has indicated there are numerous motivations for the crime of familicide. Harper and Voigt's (2007) study found that familicide is typically carried out by the head of the household whose motivation is the belief that they no longer can care for their families. Leveillee et al.,'s (2007) study revealed that men are more likely to murder their children as part of revenge against their wives, yet women are more likely to feel as though they are saving their children by killing them. Duwe (2004) found that "the motive in familicides triggered by divorce, or threat of a divorce, is usually revenge"(751). Liem and Koenraad's (2007) study revealed 44% of homicide- suicides were motivated by jealousy. Adinkrah (1999) also found that homicides in the United States committed by women are usually motivated as a means to end abuse, or as a last chance effort to save their life.

Literature has revealed that there are apparent patterns in the perpetration of familicide. These patterns pertain to the type of weapon used and the scene of the crime. Wilson et al., (1995) determined that the majority of familicide cases were perpetrated with a firearm. Brewer and Paulsen (1999) found that of the 191 cases in the sample firearms were the predominate weapon used (70%). Contrary to findings in the U.S. and Canada Adrinkrah's (1999) study found that there were no reported cases of spousal killings with firearms. Researchers have found that intimate crimes rarely take place in public locations, and most familicides take place in residential settings. Harper and Voigt (2007) found most familicide victims are victimized in their own bedrooms and "the majority of incidents take place in residences located in middle-class suburban communities" (313).

Suicide

We hypothesize that there is a high prevalence of suicide among the offenders of familicide. Shackelford, Weekes- Shackelford, and Beasley (2008) research on filicide-suicide in Chicago from 1870 to 1930; examined the differential risk of suicide following filicide by genetic parents and stepparents. Although the data from this study is nearly 40 years old, the data does provide us with useful information of familicide. This study yielded several results: a larger proportion of genetic parents commit suicide following filicide, parents who kill multiple victims are more likely to commit suicide than those who kill a single victim, and parents are more likely to commit suicide after killing an older child than parents who kill a younger child. There is no significant difference in suicide rates between filicidal mothers and fathers. Contrary to Shackelford et al., (2008) Messing and Heeren (2004) suggests that women are less likely to commit suicide following murder than are men.

Wilson et al.,'s (1995) study observed that half of the male perpetrators of familicide committed suicide; and the incidence of suicide after uxoricide and filicides far exceeds the rate of suicide after other homicides. Similar to patterns indicated by Wilson et al., (1995) Adinkrah (1999) found that 16% of the other homicidal husbands attempted suicide but were unsuccessful in killing themselves. None of the women offenders committed or attempted to commit suicide (Adinkrah, 1999). This lends support to the idea that murder-suicides among female offenders are rare.

Previous studies have focused on risk factors, characteristics of the offender, characteristics of the crime of familicide, and the prevalence of suicide following familicide. Wilson et al., (1995), Harper and Voigt (2007), and Brewer and Paulsen (1999) focused their studies on the risk factors such as age and children in the home.

They did not however, examine the effects of drugs and alcohol or any pre- existing mental disorders in the perpetrator of the crime. We hypothesize that drugs and alcohol are pre- existing factors to familicide.

Wilson et al., (1995), Harper and Voigt (2007), Liem and Koenraadt (2007), and Andinkrah (1999) in their studies of familicide found many characteristics of the perpetrator. These researchers have found that familicide is a male- dominated crime; marital status is a contributing factor, as is age of the victim and offender. They did not however examine, if the perpetrators had a history of violence that may have contributed to violence in the home. There is very little information on the race/ ethnicity of the offenders, nor do they focus on women or children as the perpetrators of familicide.

Wilson et al., (1995), Leveillee et al., (2007), Andinkrah (1999), Harper and Voigt (2007), Brewer and Paulsen (1999), Langford et al., (1998) and Duwe (2004) all focused on the characteristics of the crime of familicide. They found information on motive, weapon used, and the location of the crime. They did not focus however, on the prevalence in each geographical region, or the likelihood of familicide in urban versus suburban areas.

Shakelford et al., (2008), Wilson et al., (1995), Liem and Koenraadt (2007), Messing and Heeren (2004), Harper and Voigt (2007), and Andinkrah (1999) found information on the prevalence of suicide following familicide. They focused on the prevalence of suicide differences in men and women. However, research was not conducted on children committing suicide following familicide or the weapon used to commit suicide.

Purpose of This Study

There are differences in the risk of violence in the home when there are step children present. We propose to examine the number of cases of familicide in which step children are present in the home. There has not been research on the role drugs and alcohol play in contributing to familicide. We propose to evaluate the number of cases of familicide in which drugs and alcohol were a pre-existing factor. Therefore, it is hypothesized that men are more likely to commit suicide following familicide than women. It is also hypothesized that the presence of step children in the home increases the risk of familicide. Finally it is hypothesized that pre-existing use of drugs and alcohol is prevalent in a large number of familicide cases.

The purpose of this study is to examine risk factors, characteristics of the offender, characteristics of the crime, and suicide as they relate to the crime of familicide. This study will examine how societal stresses and norms impact the risk of familicide, as well as the risk of suicide following familicide. This study will attempt to find the differences in suicide rates of men versus women following familicide, what influence step relationships may have on violence in the home, and whether or not drugs and alcohol contribute to the perpetration of this crime. There are differences in the proportion of men and the proportion of women who commit suicide following familicide. We propose to compare the number of men who commit suicide following familicide to the number of women who commit suicide following familicide.

Method

Participants

Forty cases involving living victims as well as reports on deceased victims will be recruited based on a quota sampling non-probability procedure. It is expected that

participants will range from 0 to 70 years old, and will be recruited from the New England region of the United States. It is further expected that there will be an unequal number of males and females in our study. Further, it is expected there will be a higher proportion of male perpetrators. Due to the fact that the sample accounts for a rare phenomenon it is expected that the sample will not be representative of the population at large however, it will be representative of the population of familicide perpetrators. It is expected the sample will be representative of all socioeconomic statuses.

Measures

The Number of Familicide Cases. Data will be collected using pre-existing published agency records. We will be using data from uniform crime reports published by the FBI, as well as statistics published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. From these databases we will determine the number of familicide cases. We will code each case by the number of victims, for example 1=1 victim, 2=2 victims, 3=3 victims, and so on.

Characteristics of Offender. Data will be recorded about the age, race/ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status of the offender.

Characteristics of Victim. Data will be recorded about the age, race/ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status of the victim(s).

Relationship Between Victim and Offender. Data will be recorded about the intimate relationship between the victim and offender. It will be coded as 1=married, 2=divorced, 3=cohabitating, 4=common-law marriage, 5=Ex from an unregistered union, 6=Current partner from an unregistered union.

Suicide following Familicide. Data will be recorded about the rates of suicide following Familicide. It will be coded as 1=Completed suicide, 2=did not attempt suicide, 3=Failed attempt at suicide.

Gender Differences in Suicide. Data will be recorded about the differences in suicide based on gender. It will be coded as 1= female, 2= male, 3=other.

Qualitative Data. Interviews will be conducted to collect first-hand accounts of the incident of familicide from surviving victims, perpetrators, as well as first responding police and the investigators of the cases. The main focus of the interview will be to gain information relating to characteristics of the offender, characteristics of the victim, the relationship between the victim and offender, the prevalence of suicide following familicide, and the gender differences in the suicides following familicide. The interviews will be conducted as face-to-face interviews as well as over the phone interviews, to record the data an audio recorder will be used. Questions such as “what were the circumstances surrounding this case of familicide?” and “what was the status of the relationship between the victim and the offender, was there previous history of violence?” as well as other probing questions will be asked. From these questions emotions as well as direct answers will be observed. From this information follow up questions (e.g., “What occurred in these previous episodes of violence?”) will be asked to probe deeper into the relationship.

Procedure

After searching through the databases of agency records for acceptable candidates formal letters will be sent to these acceptable candidates. These letters will explain the purpose of our research, request their participation, and if they chose to participate a letter

of consent will be included. The study will use quota sampling in an attempt to increase external validity. The sample will attempt to include all races, genders, and ethnicities as they are found in the population. A follow up letter will be sent two weeks later to all acceptable candidates yet to respond. Once consent is received from willing participants the study will begin.

Participants who have consented will be contacted by phone to schedule a face-to-face interview. At the beginning of the interview the participant will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire concerning the crime. Questions such as the number of victims and their gender(s) will be asked. These results will later be coded and recorded. After completing the brief questionnaire the participant will then be interviewed and an audio recording will be made of the interview.

Due to the fact that familicide is a rare phenomenon researchers will be at the mercy of the data. To control for possible threats to internal validity a representative sample (or as close to one as possible) will be used. Also, the study will be replicated with different participants at a later time. All results will be coded using the same scale for each study. The study to be conducted will be a longitudinal study. Because of the relatively infrequent nature of the crime, as well as the fact that there are a small number of living victims researchers will have to find acceptable candidates from different time periods.

Expected Results

To test the quantitative hypothesis that men are more likely than women to commit suicide following familicide a chi square independence test will be conducted. It

is expected that there will be a higher proportion of male offenders that commit suicide following familicide.

To test the quantitative hypothesis that the presence of stepchildren in the home increases the risk of familicide interviews will be conducted with living victims, living offenders, first responding police, and detectives. The interviews are expected to yield results that a larger proportion of familicide cases occurred in homes in which stepchildren did reside.

To test the quantitative hypothesis that pre-existing use of drugs and alcohol is prevalent in a large number of familicide cases interviews will be conducted with living victims, living offenders, first responding police, and detective. The interviews are expected to yield results that indicate pre-existing drug and alcohol use is prevalent in the offenders of familicide.

To test qualitatively whether societal stresses and norms impact the risk of familicide, as well as the risk of suicide following familicide interviews will be conducted to determine what stresses the perpetrators were under at the time that the case of familicide was committed. It is expected that there will be a higher proportion of cases in which the offender felt as though they were under immense stress due to the stresses and expectations of society.

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