

Case Report

Filicide-Suicide Non Altruistic : A Brief Report

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Introduction

Child murder is a significant cause of infant mortality [1]. It can be perpetrated by a parent, sometimes followed by the parent's suicide. We present the case of a "non-altruistic" filicide-suicide corresponding to Resnick classification 5 [2], which describes a total of five classes. Filicide-suicides, committed for revenge, have been inadequately studied in the international literature. The study of this case has led us to postulate psychopathological hypotheses to explain this act and envisage prevention.

Case Presentation

The case involved a double homicide (7- and 5-year-old children) followed by the suicide of their father, 38, an engineer. The three bodies were discovered burned, the father's on the ground floor of the family home and the children's near a second fire zone, in the parents' bedroom, with the door locked from outside.

In the front of the house, a handbag containing wedding pictures of the couple, bank statements, and farewell letters addressed the deceased's ex-wife, his parents, and his ex-wife's parents, was found (Figure 1).

The autopsies showed third-degree burns and charring on the three bodies and an 8-cm penetrating wound on the father's body, the trajectory indicating "seppuku" (Japanese term designating voluntary self-stabbing in the abdomen for suicidal purposes).

The autopsy and the pathological report confirmed that the victims were breathing at the fire sites. The toxicological analyses showed acute toxic exposure to oxide of carbon for all three victims, alcohol absorption in the father, and Zopiclone[®] intoxication, a potentially toxic hypnotic agent, in the children.

The investigation revealed recent divorce proceedings, at the request of the ex-wife, after 12 years of marriage and the wife's extra-marital relationship 2 months before the events. No financial or social problems were identified.

The father presented no history of psychiatric, medical, or judicial

Abstract

Child murder is a significant cause of infant mortality. We present the case of a double child homicide followed by the suicide of their father. Filicide-suicides, in particularity non-altruistic filicide-suicides, have been inadequately studied in the international literature. We shall describe at first the general characteristics and the specificities of this case. From the case study and that of the literature, we shall postulate psychopathological hypotheses to explain this act and envisage prevention.

Keywords: Homicide suicide; Paternal filicide; Crime scene behavior; Forensic psychiatry

problems, but the family reported depressive indications following the divorce, recent alcohol overconsumption, and suicidal ideation with a pre-established scenario that he had confided to friends a few weeks before the crime. He had consulted his physician on several occasions, 2 months before the events, for sleep onset insomnia; Zopiclone had been prescribed. The family described the image of an ideal father and husband, hyper conformist, with a deep narcissistic wound since the separation.

The farewell letters and a phone text message, addressed to the ex-wife immediately before the filicides, revealed a desire for revenge regarding the wife and the desire to make her suffer, painful experience separation, affective immaturity, as well as a clear depressive syndrome.

Discussion

Three types of homicide-suicide are described in the literature: spousal, familial, and extra familial (mass murderers, suicide bombings) suicides [3,4]. The case presented, classified as familial homicide-suicide, is not rare in industrialized countries, with a prevalence varying from one country to another: 6% of all homicide-suicides in the United States, 40% in Sweden, 48% in England, and

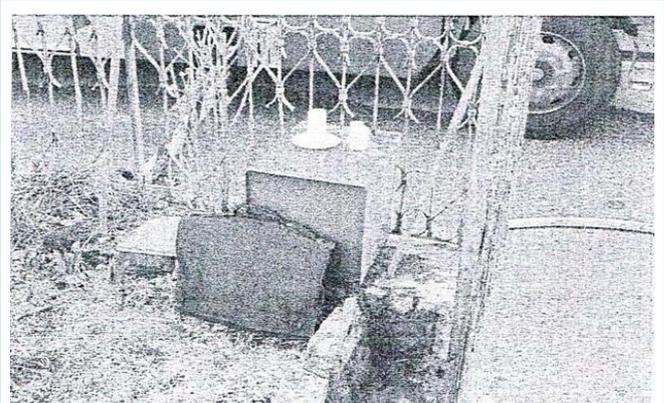


Figure 1: Crime scene in the front house.

70% in Japan. The interest of this case resides in its classification as “paternal” filicide-suicide, rarely studied because of the inclusion of neonaticides contributing to the overrepresentation of women as perpetrators in the literature [5,6,7] as well as the suicide of the perpetrators, making analysis difficult [1,5,8,9].

This case presents specificities that are seldom described. The high educational level and professional situation are rarely reported; with most studies reporting unemployed fathers in vulnerable situations [1,8,9,10]. The perpetrator in the present case was not known for intra- or extra familial violent acts and had no previous criminal record. No emotional deprivation or neglect was suspected in the children, contrary to the data reported in the literature [1,5,8,9,11]. This discordance can be explained by a very specific subtype of paternal filicide in a context of repeated intra familial abuse ending accidentally in a child’s death [11,12,13]. In these cases, carrying out the murder is highly impulsive and not premeditated, and is infrequently followed by the father’s suicide.

The voluntary destruction of all of the family’s property by arson during these crimes is another specificity whose symbolic value raises questions. In the present case, the father carefully left a handbag with writings explaining his acts out of reach of the fire. He had no desire to mask or destroy the proof of his implication.

In addition to these factors, common characteristics described by certain authors are found in the present case: school-age children, the violence of the lethal means used [2,14] with premeditation of the act, the vengeance motive [1,8,15], the family home [16], the suicide of the perpetrator after the murders [1, 7,15], the context of marital separation and infidelity [2], without specification of the duration of the marriage however (more than 10 years in this case).

Three important traits, common to paternal filicide-suicides, are revealed in this case and in the literature review, raising the question of their contribution to the crime.

Neglected depressive pathology: The literature has established that certain psychiatric pathologies increase the risk of committing a homicide, such as paranoid jealousy [3,17]. Some authors [18] emphasize the presence of evolving thymus impairment in the weeks preceding the act in homicidal parents, particularly signs of a major depressive episode in the days preceding the crime [2,8,12], with no specific treatment of the depression reported. For a large number of filicide-suicide perpetrators (50% of the cases for Resnick), family physician consultations are found in the weeks preceding the events [2,8,18], as in our clinical case, with clear evidence of patent symptoms of an obvious depressive episode responding to the DSM5 criteria in the father, raising the question of his criminogenic and hetero aggressive valence in this type of homicide-suicide.

Misuse of alcohol: This can be a factor favoring committing the crime: the alcohol abuse observed in this case is found in a number of filicide-suicide perpetrators [6,9]. The disinhibiting effect of alcohol, facilitating the crime, can be suggested.

A desire for revenge: This can be a driver of infanticide of passion as part of the Medea complex described by Stern in 1948. This syndrome refers to Greek mythology. It arises in a context of recent, difficult separation, with the children used as objects of blackmail,

and most particularly the desire for revenge regarding the parent originating the separation, a pathognomonic sign of this syndrome.

The clinical case reported herein gathers the majority of the factors described in the Medea complex, going as far as filicidal crime to deprive the other parent of contact with her children. Nonetheless, the analysis of the different letters also showed sacrificial remarks: the father indicated several times that he did not wish his children to be subjected to the family problems.

The study of this case and the review of the literature has made it possible to disentangle “psychopathological constants” that could be considered possible predictive signs, alerting healthcare professionals to the risk of a person resorting to criminal action. With a better understanding of this phenomenon, it is possible to envisage preventive means and attempt to limit filicides of passion that could become a considerable public health problem.

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