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Fathers and Murders: a retrospective study of paternal filicide in Italy

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Abstract

Background. An amount of literature has heavily focused on homicidal mothers. Nevertheless, due to the lower frequency of these events, yet little is known about the paternal filicides.

Aim. The purpose of this study was to identify the spatio-temporal coordinates, authors and victims characteristics, and the context in which these murders take place, in order to identify specific patterns.

Methods. We analyzed 76 events occurred in Italy, between 1996 and 2012 involving 134 victims. The data were collected through a careful and thorough review of the daily press and encoded on a Excel ® sheet specially designed for data collection.

Results. Findings show a significant incidence of psychiatric disorders, history of violent behavior, employment problems and low-skilled professional roles. In particular, violence seems to be determined by the fear of loss which is more common among the common law partner and among youngest male, especially when son is far.

Conclusion. The in-depth analysis of the phenomenon may contribute to its best knowledge and to identify the areas on which psycho-social intervention, based on prevention best practices, are required.

Keywords: paternal filicide, psychiatric illness, violence, mental health.

1. Introduction

According to the Italian Association of Marriage Counsellors, in Italy between 1970 and 2008 have been consumed 378 infanticides, with an average of 9.9 per year. In 90% of the cases of infanticide, involving children between zero and six years, the author is the mother. Every year born in Italy about 500 thousand children. This means that the risk for a child to be murdered by his/her mother is the 0.00165%.

The majority of the studies addressed the filicide in Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Hong Kong, Japan, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Friedman & Resnick 2007).

Furthermore, the study concerning filicide in Italy was carried on samples of female murders (Mc Kee & Bramante, 2010; Camperio Ciani & Fontanesi, 2012).

On the contrary still little is known about paternal filicide. The majority of the existing literature has focused on the comparison between maternal and paternal filicide, finding both differences and similarities. Bourget, Grace & Whitehurst (2007) for example found a common factor: the association between filicide and parental pre-existing psychiatric disorders, but also the presence of significant life stressors; social isolation and lack of social support; and a history of abuse in childhood. "Additional factors that differentiate filicidal fathers from filicidal mothers are: (1) fathers rarely commit neonaticide; (2) filicidal fathers are usually older; (3) filicidal fathers are more likely to have a history of violence toward their children; and (4) more fathers who commit filicide also commit suicide" (p.79).

A secondary aspect which regards paternal filicide is the population studied. Marleau et al., (1999) reported in detail 10 study cases of man who committed paternal filicide, hospitalized at the Institut Philippe Pinel de Montreal, Quebec between 1982 and 1994. Even Bourget & Gagné (2005) examined in 77 cases of paternal filicide, occurred between 1991 and 2001 in Quebec, Canada. Liem & Koenraadt (2008) conducted a similar study in Netherlands for the period 1953–2004 79 men and 82 women, having killed or attempted to kill their own child(ren). To our knowledge, there are not Italian studies which have focused on paternal filicide in the Italian context.

Hence, the purpose of the present study is to identify the spatio-temporal coordinates, the characteristics of the author, the victims and the context in which these murders take place, in order to identify specific patterns of the paternal filicide in Italy.

2. Method

The data were collected through the major national newspapers, all available information on the web were printed, crossed and verified, raising the level of reliability of the information collected and allowing to get a good grip on reality, in terms of quantity and quality.

Our series consists of 76 homicidal events, which occurred in the familiar environment all over the country, over a period of time between January 1, 1996 and May 31, 2012, with 76 authors and 134 victims.

The murders examined do not constitute the totality of those occurred, but they represent the vast majority and the remarkably long period of time during which they occurred and the many variables examined, allowed to proceed with a thorough overview of a decade of paternal filicides in our country.

The data collected, processed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 17.0), were

analyzed by studying the evolution of the variables (for most categorical) using the Chi-square test and appropriately represented in frequency tables and graphical representations.

As a result, in order to explore the relationship of association between groups of variables were observed Spearman rank correlations. Finally, we compared groups of subjects, divided according to such victims involved (murder of children only vs. murder of children and spouse) in order to identify contextual differences with respect to risk factors and murder mode.

2.1 Instrument

The data were collected through a structured grid, specifically conceived, consisting of four sections: (1) time-space coordinates; (2) the characteristics of the victims; (3) the characteristics of the offender; (4) characteristics of the murder.

2.1 Sample

The sample consists of 76 authors, all male aged between 25 and 63 years ($M = 40.9$, $SD = 7.6$). Of these, 92.1% are Italian, 6 are Italian citizens with foreign origins (one from Eastern Europe, one from another European country, two are Africans and two Asian).

The victims are 134. The sample is divided into two subgroups: the cases in which only the children were killed ($N = 37$) and cases in which was involved also the author's wife - spouse / partner or former spouse / partner ($N = 37$).

From the comparison, we excluded two cases where other relatives were also involved. The intended victims (the children) are therefore 94 aged between 0 months and 14 years ($M = 6.8$, $SD = 4.0$).

3. Results

Data were analyzed with SPSS 17.0. By univariate analysis were explored the four areas related to the data collection grid, then the variables considered were subsequently correlated and compared on the different groups emerged.

3.1 Time-space coordinates

The distribution of crime in the Italian Regions does not seem random ($\chi^2 = 44.4$, $df = 15$, $p < .001$). It is more focused in regions such as Lombardy and Lazio, follow Emilia Romagna and Sicily. During the period considered, on average, occur almost 5 cases for each region. It is worth noting that there are some areas where there has been no filicide such as in Molise, Umbria, Trentino and Aosta Valley. When these data are classified according to Istat division of the Italian regions, including North West (18 cases), Centre (18), North East (17), South (10) and Islands (10), no significant differences were found.

Observing the frequency trend of murders over the 16 years examined, we can see that the paternal filicides in Italy are an average of four per year. The figure 1 shows two peaks, however, can be observed: the 2004 was the year in which the greater frequency of cases was recorded, while 2005 and 1998 were the years with fewer episodes.

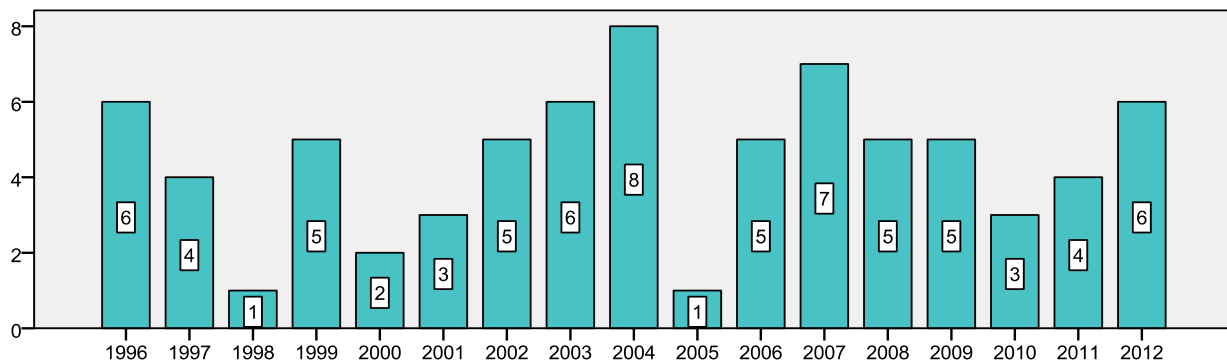


Figure 1 – Frequency of paternal filicides per year

As for the season, the highest concentration is observed during the winter months, especially in January (10.5%), February (13.2%) and March (13.7%), followed by September (10.5%). The season, in fact, with a higher incidence paternal filicides is the Winter with 51.3% of cases, while 23.7% occurred during the Summer. This incidence is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 30.6$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$).

Finally, not emerges a specific day of the week, but on Monday is dominating compared to other weekdays (21.1%). As far as the day time also there are not differences between the filicides committed during the hours of the day vs. at night.

3. 2 Victim's characteristics

The intended victims, or the children, are 44 males and 50 females, aged between 0 months to 14 years ($M = 6.8$, $SD = 4.0$). Were grouped into age ranges and it was verified the significance of the impact of circumstances: the prevailing range is the school age, when sons have between 7 and 10 years. On the contrary the youngest children are the least affected ($\chi^2 = 20.2$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$).

As well as the authors the majority of victims (91.5%) have Italian citizenship, only 3.2% are foreign children residing in Italy and 5.2% are children of mixed marriages or unions. The 77.9% of the victims lived in the same house of the father. The remaining part lived in a different house, presumably as a result of a separation or divorce.

In most of the cases examined ($N = 34$, = 44.7%) victims are two: son/daughter and wife (76.5%) and the incidence is significant ($\chi^2 = 33.8$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). When is killed only the son/daughter ($N = 28$) in 67.9% of cases is an only child. In eight cases, however, only one child is killed even if the author has two or more children.

Incidentally, the sample is divided into two halves perfectly. Except for two cases in which other relatives were involved, we found that only 37 fathers have killed exclusively the children and 37 killed both children and wife, ex-wife, partner or ex-partner. For this reason, we analyzed the differences between the two groups with respect to the possible risk factors involved and the potential methods of murder.

Finally, it was noted also if the author has hurt - and then allegedly attempted to kill - other family members. In four cases the author has attempted to kill his other children, who escaped from of the murderous rampage. In many cases the murderer tried to kill his own wife, and failed. In only one case was wounded an acquaintance. This behavior seems to be related to the economic condition of the author: the greater the economic difficulties, the greater the attempts to make a family massacre ($r = .226$ *, $p < .001$).

3.3 Author's characteristics

The authors of the filicides are 76, aged between 25 and 63 years ($M = 40.9$, $SD = 7.6$). Of these, 92.1% are Italian, only 6 are Italian citizens with foreign origins. The 68% of murders fathers live in province areas rather than in a large urban centers ($\chi^2 = 10.3$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$).

The 49% of the authors involved in an occupation with low professional quality; 25% do not have a job, but only in 13.2% of cases the reference to contingent economic difficulties (such as job loss) is specified. Table 1 shows the occupations of the authors. As can be notice the most played an executive role as workman or employee. The professions that require an high intellectual profile and endorsements are rarely counted in familiar and paternal homicide cases ($\chi^2 = 99.8$, $df = 11$, $p < .001$).

Profession	Frequency	Percentage
Workman	28	36.8 %
Executive employee	12	15.8 %
Unemployed	8	10.5 %
Freelance professional	7	9.2 %
Retailer	5	6.6 %
Conceptual employee	4	5.3 %
Serviceperson	4	5.3 %
Pitchman	3	3.9 %
Teacher	2	2.6 %
Various work	1	1.3 %
Male nurse	1	1.3 %
Other	1	1.3 %

Table 1 – Profession of the authors of the filicide

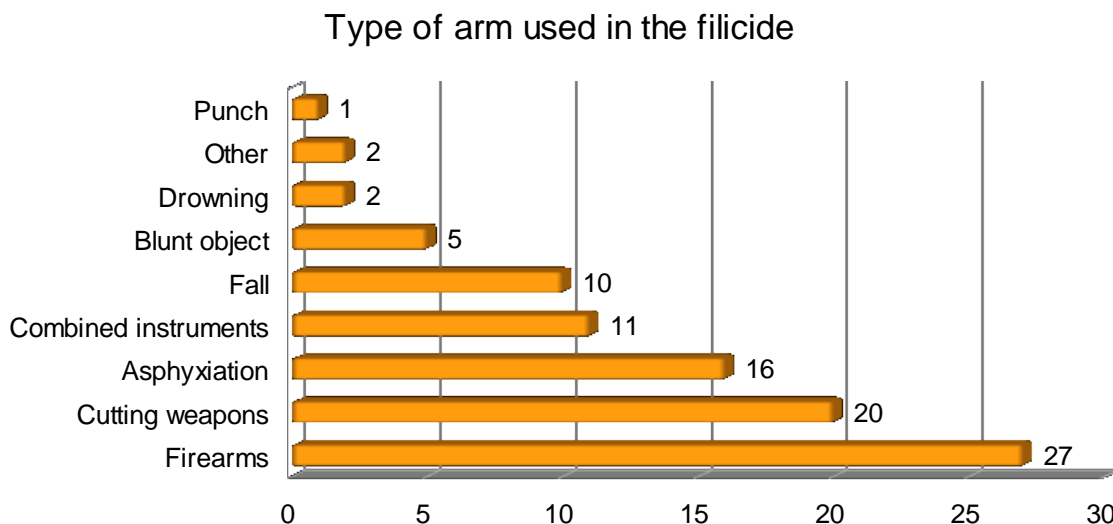
As regards the employment status 59.2% of the authors are busy, the 25.4% unemployed, 11.3% is occasionally busy and 4.2% is retiree. Crossing the data emerged that successful suicide attempts are related to specific professions (* $r = .241$, $p < .005$). More specifically: the higher the qualification, the higher the likelihood of suicide ($r = .246$ *, $p < .005$). All teachers (2) military (4) and almost all traders (4 of 5) committed a suicide. The most numerous are the workman fathers: on 28, 18 have committed suicide and 5 have attempted suicide.

Most of the fathers in our sample is married (56.6%), while 22% is separated or divorced. Considering the context of the murder emerges that cohabitants have a greater fear of abandonment. This element seems to be very specific: the younger the father the greater the fear of loss ($r = -.244$ *, $p < .005$) especially when the victim lives in a different residence from the father's one (* $r = .268$, $p < .005$).

3.4 Homicide details

In most cases the degree of violence with which was the murder is relatively low (59.8%). As shown in figure 2 firearms are the most used, 13 (48%) of which were regularly held.

Figure 2 – Type of arms utilized in the paternal filicide



Once the filicide is completed 58% of fathers commits suicide ($\chi^2 = 20.7$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$); 11 fathers have attempted suicide without carrying out the intention. Because of this, the 82.9% of the authors doesn't give himself up to authorities, despite of those fathers who not attempted suicide.

A portion of the sample (26.3%) had left a letter, a ticket or made a phone call to announce the gesture, leaving infer that the murder was premeditated. In the 66.2% of cases, in fact, the crime of impulse can't be excluded ($\chi^2 = 7.7$, $df = 1$, $p < .005$).

Where possible and clearly expressed in the news reported, we found some elements of the personal life of the author who may have acted as risk factors in the paternal filicide¹. Table 2 shows the large number of detected cases and the related impact significance.

In a second step, we calculated the Spearman Rho correlations to analyze the relationships between between 15 risk factors identified in the data collection.

The correlations show that the criminal history are strongly and predictably related to sexual offenses ($r = .327$ **, $p < .001$), violent behavior ($r = .286$ *, $p < .005$), stalking ($r = .239$ *, $p < .005$) and drug use ($r = .468$ **, $p < .001$). But the most interesting fact is that violent and persecutors behavior had been previously reported to the authorities ($r = .409$ **, $p < .001$).

The author's familiar violent behavior show significant relationships with stalking (* $r = .290$, p

¹ We used the following categories: (1) Abnormal lived: cases in which the murder appears linked to a pathological lived fostered by a condition of psychiatric or existential suffering (incurable diseases, loneliness, old age). (2) Separation or abandonment actual or dreaded: cases in which the murder is directly or indirectly related to problems, suffering or anger related to a threatened or acted separation. (3) Ongoing family conflict: homicide cases in which the couple was in a situation of protracted animosity, fostered by jealousy, abuse of power, conflicting economic interests, character incompatibility, difficulties of living together. To this category belongs also the "fight or altercation" in which the interpersonal relationship between the murderer and the victim, not distinguished by particular conflicts until the time of the murder, is suddenly disturbed by a transient situation of conflict, which triggers precisely the criminal fact. (4) Existential precariousness and subcultural values: we have included in this category those cases in which the murder is the tragic end of a life situations extremely poor or heavily influenced by the typical values of a behind subculture.

<.005), gambling (which assumes an impulse control disorder) ($r^* = .235$, $p < .005$), and organic disorders ($r = .235^*$, $p < .005$). The latter, in fact, more easily commit a crime of impulse ($r = .233^*$, $p < .001$).

Instead, there is a negative relationship between violent behavior and the psychosocial stressors: the more the author has suffered a severe stress such as sorrow, job loss, economic hardship, or serious illness of his son's or wife, divorce, the less exhibit violent behavior ($r = -.277^*$, $p < .005$).

Furthermore, were also assessed correlations between risk factors and the methods of murder, which showed that: when only children are killed there is a greater fear of loss ($r = -.240^*$, $p < .005$) and stalking behaviors ($r = .253^*$, $p < .005$) against the ex-wife or partner.

Finally, the greater is the fear of loss, the lower the degree of violence, ($r = -.281^*$, $p < .005$). These issues occur with a significant incidence in the cases in which the child had a serious illness ($r = -.248^*$, $p < .005$). In these conditions the murder take place more likely in a public place, such as in hospital ($r = .413^{**}$, $p < .001$).

Risk factors	count	percentage	Chi square (df=1)	significance
Fear of loss	18	23.4	21.83	.000
Wife pathologies	2	2.6	54.87	.000
Child pathologies	6	7.8	68.21	.000
Criminal history	15	19.7	27.84	.000
Sexual crimes	4	5.3	60.84	.000
Reported mistreatments	3	3.9	64.47	.000
Violent behaviour	25	32.9	8.89	.003
Stalking	3	3.9	64.47	.000
Drug use	6	7.9	53.89	.000
Alcoholism	4	5.3	60.84	.000
Gambling	2	2.6	68.21	.000
Organic disease	2	2.6	68.21	.000
Severe psychosocial stressors	15	19.7	27.84	.000
Psychiatric disease	31	40.8	2.5	.108
Anamnesis of psychiatric disease	23	30.3	11.84	.001

Table 2 – Incidence of risk factors in the paternal filicides

3.5 What differences between those who kills only children and those who kill children and wife?

Except for two cases in which other relatives were involved, we found that 37 fathers have killed exclusively their children and 37 killed both the children and the wife, ex-wife, partner or ex-partner. For this reason, we analyzed the differences with respect to the murder methods and the risk

factors involved, by comparing the two groups with the Mann and Whitney test.

With respect to the methods of murder the only variable that significantly differentiates the two groups is the fear of loss: the fathers distressed by the fear of losing their children tend to kill only the latter ($U = 555$, $p < .05$).

The tendency to kill only the children is also more common among fathers with a specific employment status ($U = 444$, $p < .03$): on one hand they kill both sons and wife persons when employed (57%); on the other hand fathers kill only the children when unemployed (55.6% of cases), retirees (66.7%) and occasionally occupied (75%).

In relation instead to the risk factors, the fathers who had committed sexual offenses have killed both the children and the wife ($U = 610.5$, $p < .04$). Finally, a significant correlation between the sex of the victim and the degree of violence was found ($r = .262^*$, $p < .005$): against female victims is exercised a greater degree of violence ($U = 779$, $p < .01$) and emerge more violent behavior ($U = 546$, $p < .02$).

4. Discussion

The study has as its object the identification of the characteristics of fathers who committed filicide in Italy. Findings showed a higher prevalence in some regions such as Lombardy and Lazio, followed by Emilia Romagna and Sicily. These correspond also to the most densely populated. Hence we have reason to think that this result is proportionally connected to population density.

As regards the period of the year in which paternal filicide mostly occurred, emerged a higher incidence in Winter. Christmas is a major holiday in Italy, this is the time of year when many families stay together, free from work and school. On the other side, the materialistic aspects of the holiday are associated with less happiness and more stress and unpleasant affect. Ramsey (2002) underlined that on holiday homicide significantly increase.

Findings regarding victims, on the other side, revealed that the prevailing range of the victims is the school age, between 7 and 10 years and that the youngest children are the least affected. This result is consistent with the review conducted by Bourget, Grace & Whitehurst (2007) in which emerged that fathers, compared to mothers, rarely commit neonaticide.

The paternal filicide emerged as having specific features. The majority of the little victims lived in the same house of the father. In fact, most of the fathers in our sample was married. This result is not self-evident. Being married is not an equivalent of being satisfied. Financial considerations seem to play the most important role in whether a couple avoid separation or divorce, but can't avoid a familiar emotionally stressing climate (Mento et al., 2019). In fact, one of the most important factors found in association with the murder of both son/daughter and wife was the economic difficulties, strictly linked to the attempts to make a family massacre. The most popular employment found in the reference sample was the executive role - as workman or employee. The professions that require a high intellectual profile and endorsements are rarely counted in familiar and paternal homicide. Findings suggest that the higher the qualification, the higher the likelihood of suicide. Securing employment is critical to the psychosocial health of individuals. Job displacement or unemployment benefits were found in association with domestic violence (Bhalotra et al., 2021).

We found also a relevant role played by age: the younger the father the greater the fear of loss.

Indeed, the fear of loss is the only variable that significantly differentiates the two groups identified, i.e. between fathers who have killed exclusively their children and fathers who killed both the children and the wife, ex-wife, partner or ex-partner, especially when the victim lives in a different residence from the father's one. Literature shows that the presence of social father can play a protective role for young male (Mackey & Immerman, 2004).

In most cases the degree of violence with which was the murder is relatively low. We observed that the more the author has suffered a severe stress such as sorrow, job loss, economic hardship, or serious illness of his son's or wife, divorce, the less exhibit violent behavior. This findings could indicate that homicide is guided by emotion such as sadness and depression, despite anger or rage. A recent review by Bruno *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that paternal perinatal depression is underestimated and may predict mental disease comorbidities. The low degree of violence resulted associated also with a greater is the fear of loss and and stalking behaviors against the ex-wife or partner, as if homicide is heavily influenced by fear and anguish – which, from a psychological point of view is a mixed feeling composed by fear and sadness (Meloy, 2002).

5. Conclusions

Preventing violence means combating its cultural roots and causes, by empowering family support. For this, political strategies aimed at education, awareness raising, recognition and realization of equal opportunities in every sphere of public and private life are essential (World Health Organization, 2010).

Psychosocial interventions to reduce discrimination and stereotypes related to gender roles and sexism are needed, since they produce the contextual conditions conducive to the perpetuation of male violence against women. In this regard, the focus must be on the younger generation and investing in psycho-social training (Zun, Downey & Rosen, 2006).

The prevention actions supported by the Department of Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers through the National Strategic Framework therefore reflect the need to:

- raise the level of awareness in public opinion about the structural roots, causes on the consequences of male violence against women;
- strengthen the school system by improving the operational capacity of teachers and school staff on how to intercept, prevent, bring out and manage situations of violence, including witnessing violence;
- promote in the school's educational offerings gender equality education for overcoming gender roles and stereotypes, including through the revision of teaching and textbooks and the training of teaching staff at all levels;
- train public and private social workers on phenomenology, interception, emergence, taking charge, assessment and management of cases of violence against women including those involving migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women;
- Strengthen preventive efforts against recidivism through pathways for the re-education of male perpetrators of violence and crimes related to male violence against women;
- raise awareness in the private sector and the media about the influence of communication and advertising on issues such as gender stereotyping and sexism and their effects on the phenomenology of male violence against women and children.

The present study documents the main risk factors on which to intervene early to minimize the possibility of new episodes of paternal infanticide.

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Authors Contribution

L.D.V. & G.R. study design; A.R., N.R., G.I. D.C. data collection and analysis; A.R. and N.R. literature review. All authors contributed to critical revise paper and approved its final version.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no financial, general, and institutional conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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