

Familicide: Psychological and Social Characteristics of the Aggressors. A Case Study

Andrei Armeanu

Lawyer, "Al.I. Cuza" University Iași, Romania, andrei_armeanu@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT: Generic defined as a multiple-victim homicide incident in which the killer's spouse and one or more children are slain, familicide is an atypical crime, with little incidence compared to other acts of domestic violence. In the present article, we will list several psychological and social features identified in the literature as common to aggressors in familicide cases. Given the fact that familicide acts are almost exclusively committed by men, we will assume that the aggressor is a man and the victim a woman. We will analyze data on the age, social status of the author and the victim, and their relationships. We will also analyze the contextual factors, the characteristics of the crime (modus operandi, premeditation, place of the deed), and the prevalence of mental health problems, relationship problems, and financial difficulties. As the scientific literature on the topic is relatively scarce, due to the low number of cases and the fact that access to relevant information is often restricted because of the confidentiality of legal and health documents, we will carry out a case study of a familicide that took place in Romania in 2018, focusing on the analysis of motivational factors and the pre-existing conditions, without claim of a comprehensive conclusion.

KEYWORDS: familicide, domestic violence, abusive relationship, substance abuse, forensic psychology

Introduction

Familicide is defined as one family member who murders other members of their family, commonly taking the lives of all. It is most often used to describe cases where a parent usually the father kills his wife and children and then himself. Familicides are horrifying acts that can wipe out an entire family, often leaving relatives, friends and colleagues stunned and confused. Usually, no outward signs are visible to suggest the imminent danger of such a horrific action taking place.

Most researchers agree that familicide is a form of mass murder, due to the multiple victims involved. It is a crime that has invoked horror and fascination in equal measures and is commonly intertwined with the term "family annihilation". Furthermore, in most cases, the killer takes his own life after the act, leaving no opportunity to find out why he committed the crime and whether or not this was a premeditated planned murder, or an act which was spontaneous.

Criminologists have been conducting increasing research into the phenomenon of familicide, and in the process have produced many terms and definitions to describe such acts, varying from "familicide", "family annihilation", "murder-suicide" and "family murders". These are all terms, which have been used to describe cases where a family member has killed other family members, and the varied definitions of the term familicide can make a comparison of studies in cases challenging.

Familicide sits among several types of family murder all utilizing the term "*cide*" which means the "*act of killing*" in Latin, often adding to the confusion over terminology.

Such examples are "*matricide*" the killing of one's mother, "*patricide*" the killing of one's father, "*siblicide*" side the killing of one sibling, "*fratricide*" the killing of one's brother, "*sororicide*" the killing of one's sister, "*filicide*" the killing of one's child, "*uxoricide*" the killing of one's wife and "*parricide*" the killing of one's parents.

The psychological profile of the family annihilator and the prevalence of male family annihilators

A research study published in the "Howard Journal of Criminal Justice" in 2013 (Yardley, Wilson and Lynes 2014) has been particularly influential in this field. They analysed newspaper articles over three decades, from 1980 to 2012, where cases of familicide were reported, and found a total of 71 cases, where 59 of the perpetrators were male and over half were between the ages of 30 to 40 years old when they committed the crime.

Also, they reported that 57% of cases they studied occurred inside the family home, compared to 17% in an isolated country spot, no doubt pre-selected by the offender. In 32% of cases, the method of killing was stabbing, followed by 50% of cases involving carbon monoxide poisoning from car exhaust. Most offenders were employed and aged between 30 and 39 years old at the time of the murders, and in 68% of cases, the male annihilator committed suicide after the murders.

Professor Wilson has stated that family annihilators "have received little attention as a separate category of killer" and they are "often treated like spree or serial murderers of you which presupposes traits such as the idea that the murderer snaps or that after killing their partner or children the killer may force a stand-off with the police, which is not an entirely accurate representation of these killers". In contrast to other groups such as serial killers or mass murderers, these were found to be individuals with good backgrounds. They were not known to the police or the criminal justice system. They often had good jobs, families and friends around them. They can be very successful people in their lives and not the kind of person who it is perceived would kill anyone, never mind their entire family (Wilson 1995). As highlighted by Jack Levin, professor of sociology and criminology Emeritus at North-Eastern University in Boston, the profile of a man who kills his family is a middle-aged man, a good provider who would appear to neighbors to be a dedicated husband and a devoted father (Levin 2011).

Researchers also identified four common areas, which may be the causes of such family murders: a breakdown in the family relationship and issues surrounding access to children, money worries and financial hardship, cultural honor killings, and mental illness. These findings echoed the conclusions drawn from a 2009 study (Liem, Levin, Holland, Fox) which examined various cases of familicide in USA (2000–2009). They found that social loss, economic reasons, mental illness, and partner loss were the most common likely causes of murder-suicide within the family.

Other literature reviews carried out into familicide also provide some key points when focusing on the profile of the family annihilator (Léveillé, Marleau, Dubé 2007). Some psychologists found aggressors to be predominantly male and in a long-term relationship with possessive tendencies over his family. Employment issues, problems with substance misuse, and a history of domestic violence also featured across the cases she studied. Also, divorce or separation was found to be a trigger point.

In 2017 researchers from the Tampere University of Finland examined the background factors that may be involved in familicide cases in Western countries (Aho, Remahl, A., Paavilainen 2017). They found familicide offenders were mostly highly educated men with psychological problems, depression, self-destructiveness, and substance abuse issues. Past violent behavior and unsteady social relationships were also prevalent.

Researchers have focused on any link between borderline personality disorder and familicide and while some evidence was found, that could conclude a causal link, in such a rare crime it is difficult to draw any solid conclusions as to the role of such mental disorders within this crime (Liem, Koenraadt 2008). Mental health is often discussed in these cases with an assumption of the disordered mental state from the father who has decided to kill all members of his immediate family.

In Léveillé's 2007 study they found that 68% of those who killed their family had a history of depressive symptoms and 38% showed borderline traits for personality disorder.

It's not to be ignored that in an estimated 95% of familicide cases the perpetrator was male and the head of the household. This traditional idea of the man providing for and looking after his family may become a factor, when he no longer feels he is meeting this role adequately or his finances and employment breaks down.

Another key factor in these types of killings appears to be rage from the male when he feels he has been wronged by his partner, whether this is due to the partnership breaking down, an affair in the marriage, and or difficulties surrounding access to the children. There can also be a revenge aspect, where the killer leaves the mother alive to suffer, after he takes the lives of her children.

However, this is by far not the main reason as perceived by some for this type of murder. Research into family annihilators is still in its infancy. The rarity of cases coupled with most killers taking their own lives does not allow for research to take place into this phenomenon easily.

For other authors (Websdale 2009) the idea of the male societal role and no longer meeting that role is a common trait among family annihilators. Websdale follows the more traditional view of the reasons behind male father figures killing their families being rage, revenge, and altruism. He has categorized such family killers into two groups. The first one "the livid coercive killer" is motivated by anger and rage. They show control issues and may have abusive tendencies, achieving their self-worth by exerting authority within the home. Should this marriage begin to fail, maybe because of such controlling issues, and the wife and children try to leave, a lack of control and feelings of humiliation could prompt such acts of violence against his family. The second type, "the civil reputable killer" in contrast is motivated by altruism where his identity is wrapped up in his family. Murdering all family members is there for a while way of saving them from the hardship and shame of financial troubles and bankruptcy, and they will almost always commit suicide afterward. If suicide after the act fails, in most cases which get to court the perpetrator will almost always plead some form of insanity as a defense.

However, not all believe this is an adequate explanation for such acts. As in all types of mass murder, there are different motivations and different methods of murder.

In a more recent study, a team of researchers (Karlsson et al. 2019) carried out a comprehensive literature review within the peer-reviewed research published on familicide. They examined 63 research papers covering 67 studies from 18 countries that were published between 1980 and 2017, including familicide cases where the offender killed their current or former partner and at least one child. In almost all cases the offender was male, and in around 50% of the cases the offender committed suicide after the murders. Problems in mental health, relationships, and physical health were frequently noted across the cases studied. In most cases studied the offender lived in the same household with all of the victims and in agreements with previous studies problems in the relationship, a breakup and financial problems were prevalent within the families involved.

Within this literature review, two types of familicide emerged. First, we mention the despondent type: the despaired defender who kills as an extended suicide. This offender kills the family due to pseudo altruistic reasons. Second, we mention the hostile type: the jealous offender who is motivated to kill their family out of jealousy and revenge. The primary victim of this offender is usually the spouse. Both types, it was concluded, have a sense of ownership over their family, although they have different motives for the murders. The despondent offender possibly believes the family will not hope without him if he just kills himself. The Hostile offender is motivated by jealousy and may believe he has the control and can make such a decision for the entire family.

In the Yardley, Wilson and Lynes research, they looked at cases over a span of 30 years and groped their case studies into four categories looking at the motives behind the killings. Cases may not be straightforward in terms of falling into one of these categories exclusively, and as a result, it is common for male annihilators to fall into multiple categories, something which needs to be examined case-by-case. The "*self-righteous killers*" are individuals usually fathers who place blame on others for their actions. They often blame the mother of their children for being the cause of the family breakup or for preventing him from having access to his children. They see themselves as the provider of the family and if they are unable to meet that role they can enter dangerous territory. Often they are looking to cause pain and suffering to their partner or ex-partner and can use their children to do these fathers who fall into this category can kill their children and leave the mother alive to ensure maximum pain and suffering. As they blame the mother they can often make contact just before they commit the murders to tell her what they are about to do, knowing there is nothing she can do to stop it. The "*disappointed killers*" are people who believe they have been let down by

those around them most often their partner and their children. They often may believe that the members of the family are not good enough, or they're not meeting his standards or beliefs. Some cases of honour killings can fall into this category, where the father may be unhappy with his children's choices and do not feel they are being true to their cultural and traditional religious customs. The "anomic killers" are individuals that perceive the family as an extension of their economic success in life. Should any part of that economic status breakdown, for example a job loss or financial hardship, their family no longer serves this function and thus must be annihilated. The "paranoid killers" are individuals that often believe their family and especially their children are under some form of threat or they need protection against certain external factors. In these cases, they kill as to protect the family from the perceived outside threat.

These categories often overlap and are still being developed and refined for categorizing cases of familicide. Unfortunately, this means this kind of crime and the death of entire families will continue to happen and it is a phenomenon which has proved difficult to put it almost impossible to stop.

The 2018 Braşov City family murder case presentation

At the end of March 2018, around 13:30 hours, a 43-year-old man presented himself at the headquarters of the Braşov County Police Inspectorate (IPJ BV), saying he had killed his wife and his two children, an 18-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy. The man, called FB, had blood on his clothes when he arrived at the Police to testify the murder. FB said he killed his family while they slept at their own house, located in a new neighborhood of Braşov. This was the first widely publicized family murder case in the Romanian media.

As the case is relatively recent, and the final conviction of FB occurred about a year ago, we chose to anonymize the names of the people involved. Also, we mention that this is a case presentation, as it is pictured in the public sources of information available and does not have the character of a psychological assessment of the persons involved.

After handing himself over to the Braşov Police, the FB offered all details of the crime to the investigators. He killed his wife first and then put a pot of white flowers on her chest, which he had bought from the town earlier. At the same time, SB, his 13-year-old son, was in the next room and was playing on the computer. IB, his daughter, was not at home at the time, being in town with friends. FB called her home, and after the girl fell asleep, he killed her with eight knife strokes. Then FB went to the boy's room, which she stabbed with three blows and left the crime weapon on his bed.

FB told investigators that he does not regret his action because the three victims are now "angels" in a better world. Later the police found cannabis in his car, and stated that FB was under the influence of drugs when the crime was committed.

On the day of the crime FB went to work, as he did every day. Then, at noon he went to an old Monastery where he stayed 45 minutes, prayed and attended a lecture by a nun. According to the case prosecutor "on the return road at some point, he stopped on the side and, on the grounds that he had a revelation, an inner view of the sins he might have committed throughout his life, he claims he tried to kill himself with a hunting knife he had in his car and which he had infused in his heart area. But he failed, and then continued the road to Braşov" (Robu 2018).

On his way home he stopped in the old center of Braşov where he bought a white flower and a box of chocolate. He arrived home at night around 21:30 and told his wife that he wanted to kill himself. The woman didn't believe him. According to FB's statements "they had a Tesla bio-resonance appliance in the house, and a massage table that he was holding in the matrimonial bedroom. They both connected to the device, and then he offered his wife a massage. He sat there, waited for her to fall asleep, and at about 23:00, stabbed her in the heart area with three knife strokes, the same knife he stabbed himself with". After he killed her, he prayed for her, covered her with a blanket, and put the white flower on her chest. IB, the 18-year-old daughter, was in town with friends, and the man called her to see when she will come home. IB came before midnight, and after having

talked a little to her father, went straight to bed without knowing that her mother was dead. Half an hour later, the father went to the IB's room and killed her with the same knife, stabbing her eight times in his chest. Then he went to SB's room and stabbed him three times.

After praying for the three he killed in cold blood, FB went to his firm headquarters and stayed there until morning. He then called his cousin in Bucharest and told him what he did, but he didn't believe him. Later, FB called a friend, who didn't believe him initially, but advised him to turn himself in to the police.

At 13:00 hours, FB came to the Brasov police headquarters and denounced himself, still wearing blood-dirty clothes. After the initial hearing of FB, the investigators reached the conclusion "that he does not regret the facts, because he was convinced that he had done them a good thing".

According to the case prosecutor "considering the motivation he presents for committing the acts, although he claims he has no psychiatric problems and he has never been admitted for specialized treatment for psychiatric disorders, an (psychiatric) examination of him will be ordered at the 'Mina Minovici' legal Medical Institute in Bucharest". Also, FB stated that after killing each of his victims, he would have communicated that, "telepathically" with their souls and he believes all is good for them (Dobrescu 2018).

Similar to other familicide cases, few elements of FB's biography, before the triple murder, could announce the tragedy. FB, was a 43 year old man, had a university education and was not known as a violent person. Prior to the murder there have never been complaints of domestic violence related to the killer. Also money were not an issue in the family either. The two spouses had a natural products store, FB was the company's manager, and the wife was keeping the accounts. FB was an engineer and the employees of the company he was managing said he was a Christian - Orthodox (Suciu 2018).

The people were shocked to find out the news and say the man understood well with his wife, they didn't know of fights in the family. After the murders it was found out that, while FB claimed the company was prosperous and made profits, the company lacked about 100000 dollars. The investigators found that the money was taken by FB, either in the form of products it sold, but whose value was not paid in the accounts or simply took from the accounts.

During the hearings, the FB made shocking confessions. He told the police that he believed in reincarnation and multiple lives. Moreover, the man confessed that he had communicated by telepathy with the two children he killed, and they would have told him that "they are better there". Also, the aggressor said he had talked to both his wife and his children while he killed them and until they gave their last breath. Daniel Danca, the spokesman for the Prosecutor's Office at the Braşov Prosecutor Office, said the man had an increased psychological lability. In the same context, the prosecutor said that the FB "motivated the deed by the belief that it facilitated access for its family members to a better world where they were more peaceful" (Dobrescu 2018).

But beyond his statements, the most shocking information comes from the journal kept by FB, discovered by investigators. In this diary, the man described his unrest ahead of the triple crime. Investigators found in the agenda, titled "Testament", evidence that man had great problems: alcohol addiction and an unfortunate marriage, to which he found no other solution than the assassination (Burcoiu 2018).

"Today Stefan, Monica, and Ioana went to God. Their soul is easy! Good heavens! They left before me, I would have gone, but God did not let me, the knife went all the way, but I did not die physically". FB wrote these words in his diary shortly after having slaughtered his wife and children. A week and a half before the assassinated triple he noted that he felt worse: "Seven days ago I went through an episode that can be labelled madness". Psychotherapist Constantin Cornea considered that these psychological episodes "can be the result of drugs" but "we can also talk about some dramas that led to a form of psychosis". Analysis of the "Testament" clearly showed that the man was growing in dismay. As the days passed, his writing betrayed the agitation, and he himself became confused: "Today is an important day, it seems. (...) I don't know where I am ...". The whirl of fragmented ideas and criminal thoughts was doubled by philosophical considerations: "On Earth, nobody ever understands anyone, the words thrown out are very often difficult, even in

the family. Families are broken (...) nothing is worth”. Finally, at the end of the agenda, prosecutors learned why he called his notes “Testament”: “why did I call my letter in this way? The will (...) when the man feels that his time has come, if he has a little consciousness, he will think about what he leaves behind him”.

The FB case has generated a lively controversy in the forensic and psychological legal circles in Romania. On one hand, FB was characterized by psychiatrist Gabriel Diaconu as a pervert manipulator, who is a chronic psychopath that secured an alibi for himself, by going to the monastery. Gabriel Diaconu rejected the idea of a religious-motivated crime. In his opinion, the FB “had an old internal psychological problem, around chronic aggression and frustration that was fed and which eventually reached a critical threshold. What could have triggered the threshold we have in today’s press. That he was no longer successful, that he had problems with chronic drinking, his relationship was no longer satisfactory to him”. Another well-known Romanian specialist, criminal psychologist Tudorel Butoi, said that FB showed extreme behavior, similar to other family-annihilation cases, followed by suicide. “As for this regrettable case”, noted Tudorel Butoi “there must be an external causal link, translated into economic shortcomings, into this despair of the human element, driven by frustration, anxiety, or depression. There can be revenge, but also jealousy” (Dobrescu 2018).

Before being sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime committed, FB has claimed in court that “I have been led by less worldly reasoning” and an attempt to explain the reason for killing his family would be similar to “trying to show the colour of a lemon to a blind man” (Dobrescu 2018).

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