

# FEMALE OFFENDER PARRICIDES: THE ASYMMETRICAL DISTRIBUTION OF HOMICIDE FOR PARENTS AND STEPPARENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Research suggests that parricides parallel other homicides in that they too »uctuate with shifts in social structure and patterns. Research also suggests that their declination is largely attributable to the decrease in homicides committed by juvenile males. Absent from the literature, however, is an examination of parricides committed by female offenders. In this study, we use the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) to examine the parricides committed by females in the U.S. from 1976 to 1999. Our analyses reveal two noteworthy findings: (1) consanguineous relationship does not necessarily mitigate violence and (2) parents do not face the greatest risk of homicide in their eldest years, as evolutionary psychology of violence suggests.*

**Key words:** Parricide, female offenders

## INTRODUCTION

While patricide and matricide respectively refer to the murder of one's father and mother, the term parricide has also been used to describe the killing of one's close relatives and kings (Heide, 1992). And although parricide has been the topic of research in the psychological sciences (Millaud et al., 1996; Weisman and Sharma, 1997), a cursory review of the literature reveals that the principal thrust of research has been generally directed toward male offenders (e.g., Campion et al., 1985). When homicides involving female offenders have been investigated, research has usually been limited to intimate-partner homicides and infanticides (see Brown, 1987; Brown and Williams, 1993; Ogle et al., 1995; Jensen, 2001; Walker, 1989, 2000). Thus, little attention has been paid to parricides committed by female offenders. This article seeks to fill in that void.

We used the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) to examine parricides committed by female offenders in the United States from 1976 to 1999. To illuminate the different classifications of parricide, and for the sake of clarity, this study used three acronyms to classify parricides in accordance with the sex of the offender and the victim: Female Offender Parricide (FOP), Female Offender Patricide (FOPat), and Female Offender Matricide (FOM). Specifically, we disaggregated FOPs based on variables such as age of victim and offender, relational categories (natural vs. stepparents), and weapon usage. By doing so, we investigated the tenability of one theory of homicide that has been particularly influential, evolutionary psychological theory of homicide (Daly and Wilson, 1988a). In the conclusion, the policy implications of our findings are discussed. We proffer specific policy recommendations to pre-

vent parricides in the future, especially in light of the projected surge in the elderly population.

### FEMALE OFFENDER PARRICIDE IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERAL HOMICIDE

That men constitute the central cast of characters, as victims and usual suspects, in the drama played out in the daily scenarios of lethal violence, past and current, across different historical periods and settings, is a well-established criminological truism (Block and Block, 1991; Lane, 1997; Short, 1997). That is, whether the men involved are mired in a petty dispute over a crap game or reacting to an assault on their "honor," the participants in the homicide event are equally likely to be strangers and/or passing acquaintances, and more likely than not, young, poor, and members of ethnic minorities (Lane, 1979; Butterfield, 1995; Wolfgang, 1958). Thus, while studies of and theories about masculine violence have received much attention in the literature (e.g., Newburn and Stanko, 1994; Polk, 1994), gender specific theories of FOPs remain rather thin (see Heide, 1999: 29).

That there is a noticeable absence of theory and empirical work specifically directed toward parricides committed by females may be partly attributed to the grossly skewed distribution of gender in such offenses. For instance, in one of the first major studies of parricide using the SHR, it was found that fathers were more than twice as likely to be killed by their offspring than mothers (Heide, 1993a). In a more recent analysis it was found that male offenders were responsible for over seventy-percent of parricides in the U.S. from 1976-98 (Shon and Targonski, 2003). Thus, while parricides are relatively infrequent homicide events, they also mirror general ones in that the killing of one's parents is a predominantly male phenomenon (Heide, 1992); and that men are overrepresented as victims and offenders may partly explain the underrepresentation of women as subjects in the literature on parricides.

The neglectful treatment of women in the parricide literature, furthermore, reflects a bias in the activity of theorizing itself. Canonical criminological theory intimates that a theory of crime be "general"; by general it is meant to be applicable to both sexes, irrespective of structural, historical, cultural, and situational forces that might facilitate or militate against such rule-breaking behavior. Consequently, a gender specific theory of crime is often deemed unnecessary (Smith, 1979; Smith

and Paternoster, 1987). It is this theoretical drive toward gender neutrality that has been a warrantable source of criticism in the criminological literature since it ignores differences while fictitiously creating generic sameness (Messerschmidt, 1993). This tendency toward gender blindness is reflected even in the extant typology of parricide offenders.

Heide's (1992) influential work on adolescent parricide classified adolescent parricide offenders (hereafter, APO) into three typologies.

- (1) The severely abused child has endured physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal abuse from his/her parents and sees killing as the only avenue of escape. Heide (1992) asserted that this type of offender represents the most commonly occurring type of APOs, those who act out of desperation.
- (2) The severely mentally ill child, as the category denotes, refers to APOs who, in a delusional, psychotic, and/or schizophrenic fugue, kills his/her parents.
- (3) The dangerously antisocial child is motivated by self-interest, without the regard for others, and capable of only the "shallowest emotions." Heide (1992) stated that this type of APOs is similar to serial predatory offenders in that their offenses demonstrate a sequential and progressive logic to them: APOs usually have compiled a list of offenses against property, animals, and nonfatal assaults against persons as harbingers of violence to come (see Merz-Perez and Heide, 2004). In a word, sociopathic.

While Heide's (1992) typology has been influential in providing a structural framework for classifying, describing, and understanding APOs and their correlates, the typology itself contains certain limitations. First, Heide's (1992) work explicitly focused on adolescent parricides. Without becoming mired in an entirely different debate about the constitutive elements of adolescence (i.e., entry, duration, exit, and ritual ceremonies that mark such stages), parricides committed by those less than eighteen years of age have remained relatively stable, 25% between 1976-1986 (Heide, 1993a), and 25.4% between 1976-1999 (Heide and Petee, 2003). If adolescence is generously defined to include eighteen and nineteen-year-olds (legal adults) for the same two respective periods, the figure increases to 36% and 36.6% respectively. In essence, then, Heide's (1992) typology of parricide is applicable to about one-third of all cases. The remaining two-thirds (adult cases) require a different classification and further exegesis.

The tripartite typology is also based upon seventy-five adolescents "charged with murder or attempted murder" (Heide, 1992: 36). Only seven out of the seventy-five (9.3%) involved completed cases of parricide. Although Heide acknowledges that seven "appear[s] to be a small number of cases" for purposes of generalizability, they serve a valuable function because they "describe the characteristics of these individuals, particularly in relation to the literature on APOs" (Heide, 1992: 36). That is, while the case studies do offer a glimpse into the tragic lives of abused adolescents, the limited sample casts a warrantable doubt about the validity of the typology itself. Moreover, the seven cases themselves illustrate the theoretical critique noted above.

Out of the seven APOs only one involved a female offender, who was overtly and covertly sexually abused by her father; and her idiosyncrasies are explained as a function of "personality development" rather than as a "gender difference" (Heide, 1992: 171). The lone female APO's experience as a sex crime victim already connotes vulnerability and potential source of conflict that is differentially stratified by gender; in other words, girls (daughters) shoulder risk factors that are qualitatively different from sons. Subsuming girls, women, and men into one gender-neutral analytical category without having examined the dynamic, contextual factors unfairly denies the experience, victimization, and theory of female APOs. This begs the question: are there gender differences not only in parricides but in general ones as well? How are the contexts in which women kill structured differently from those of men?

Extant research indicates that the distribution of victims of women's homicidal behavior tends to be relationally situated in accordance with normative social arrangements. The killing of wives and girlfriends by their male partners represents a logical extension of their violence and overall attempt at sexual control (Buss, 2005; Daly and Wilson, 1988a); and as researchers have noted, there is a prolonged period of verbal, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse that precedes the homicide (Browne and Williams, 1999; Walker, 2000). Women, on the other hand, kill in the context of self-defense rather than as the culmination of a constellation of related sibling offenses. That is, women who kill their male partners do so as a last resort, often in defense of self, children, or other family members (Browne, 1987). Or, their homicidal act is one of desperation directed at the most accessible, available, and defenseless targets of opportunity—their infants (Ewing, 1990; Hanawalt, 1986).

That women's involvement in homicide, as offenders in infanticides and victims and offenders in intimate-partner homicides, can also be partly explained by the fact that their role is structurally circumscribed from the outset: women are normatively and culturally expected to internalize their anger and frustration rather than direct them outward (Messerschmidt, 1993). Researchers have maintained that as the primary caretakers and "nurturers" in families, this "mothering" role is inconsistent with violent behavior in general (Jensen, 2001). Consequently, one theory of homicidal behavior amongst women theorizes that these social inhibitors, in conjunction with situational stresses, produce relatively stable rates of violence while "punctuated by occasional instances of extreme violence" (Ogle et al., 1995: 173).

It has also been speculated that the decline in FOPats after the age of twenty to be attributable to girls who run away from home and their abusive fathers without the intervention of the criminal justice authorities. Shon and Targonski (2003) stated that females killed less than their male counterparts, but when they did, they were more likely to kill their fathers (see also Heide, 1992). According to Shon and Targonski (2003) if there is a point of convergence between FOPats and male offender parricides, it is that fathers bear the brunt of lethal violence, from sons and daughters alike. And the declining trends in U.S. parricides were largely attributable to a drop in parricides committed by male juvenile offenders. Thus, the underrepresentation of women in homicides in general, aside from intimate-partner homicides and infanticides, is also reflected in parricides as well.

While Shon and Targonski's (2003) work explored the shifts and trends in parricides across time (1976-98), and multiple numbers of cases (N=6629), there are two notable empirical and theoretical weaknesses in their work: (1) they do not systematically examine the extent and characteristics of parricides committed by females (e.g., FOM) although they note its relative stability across time. (2) Their analysis conflates the relationship-specific categories of victims as they pertain to the logic of parental conflict (biological vs. stepparents). Although Heide and Petee's (2003) work does make that distinction the readers are given a descriptive summary rather than trends across time. These two shortcomings are particularly noteworthy since female parricide offenders stand at the theoretical crossroads of three key variables that may shed light on these types of

homicides: (1) definition of "family" (2) sexual access and (3) social networks.

Although the family is a primary social unit, criminologists have deemed it one of the most violent social groups: "A person is more likely to be hit or killed in his or her home by another family member than anywhere else or by anyone else" (Gelles and Strauss, 1985: 88). When Daly and Wilson (1988a, b) examined Detroit homicide records, they found that forty-eight percent of the homicides occurred between unrelated acquaintances, twenty-seven percent of the homicides between strangers, and twenty-five percent of homicides between "relatives." When they disaggregated the homicides involving relatives they found that two types of murders were most common in families: intimate-partner homicides (e.g., husbands and wives killing one another) and child homicides. Daly and Wilson make a critical distinction between genealogical victims, those related by blood, and affinal victims, those who are related by marriage. This qualification is important since it reconfigures the constitutive elements of a "family."

Research suggests that murder is the culmination of a prolonged abuse in intimate-partner homicides, and most likely to occur when women attempt to leave the relationship (Walker, 1979). Prior to that, women are abused by their husbands in various forms: men control women's movements, time, and social networks (Browne, 1987; Dobash and Dobash, 1979, 1984). According to the evolutionary perspective, men engage in these types of behaviors because they are two complete strangers—share no genetic history—who have formed a social union through a verbal promise; and because the "fitness" of the marriage and its partners depends on the woman's faithfulness and ability to produce children, men attempt to control every aspect of their partners' lives, to guard against being a cuckold—a sucker (Daly and Wilson, 1997; Daly et al., 1982b).

Daly et al. (1982b: 17) write that male jealousy is more likely to be centered around sexual activities of women because "the reproductive threat in a wife's infidelity lies in the risk of alien insemination, whereas the reproductive threat in a husband's infidelity lies more in the risk of resources." This simply means that there is fifty-percent certitude that the offspring will inherit the mother's genes, irrespective of who impregnates her, while the same is not true for men. Thus, cuckolded men run the risk of investing their precious resources on the rearing of someone else's offspring.

The important concept in evolutionary social psychological theory of violence is fitness: "the evolutionary view is that the basic perceptions of self-interest shared by any normal members of a given species are products of a long history of natural and sexual selection and thus may be expected to exhibit 'design' for promoting fitness (genetic posterity)" (Daly and Wilson, 1999: 59). In plain words, this simply means that humans will act more violently toward those who do not share our blood: our family members and relatives share similar genes, and harming the carriers of those genes endangers the survivability of the genetic pool. In theory, then, humans should be less violent toward members of one's own family: "natural selection creates 'nepotism' or inclinations to discriminate in favor of blood relatives" (Daly and Wilson, 1988a: 18). In the second type of killings common in the family this position can be further substantiated. When Daly and Wilson (1988a) examined child killings, they found that stepparents were overrepresented in the murder of their stepchildren; moreover, they found a qualitative difference (i.e., wound severity) between violence committed by genetic fathers and stepfathers. Again, the nepotism rule predicts that violence between parents and offspring should be mitigated since they share a genealogical bond (Daly and Wilson, 1988a).

But if there is a "bone of contention" between parents and children, as Daly and Wilson (1988a: 119) proclaim, it involves the "allocation of parental investment." Accordingly, parental value decreases with age: they are at the gravest risk as they grow old and become a liability for their offspring. This is especially true if the offspring have been "born at a later parental age than [national] average" (see Daly and Wilson, 1988a: 103). For female parricide offenders the nepotism rule and age distribution of parental risk intersects in two principal ways, one that is related to the logic of parental conflict.

First, while boys are often targets of sex offences by non-familial offenders (e.g., pedophiles), victimization patterns demonstrate remarkable consistency in the sex of the targets chosen (Rice and Harris, 2002). In fact, girls are almost twice more likely to be victims of sex crimes than boys (Dube and Hebert, 1988). And if girls are the victims there is a high probability that the offender is a family member and resides in the home (Murray, 2000). Thus, sex crime victimization in the home is grossly biased toward female victims, and the perpetrators of these offenses are overwhelmingly male: the father-daughter relationship constitutes the most

tenuous social relationship even within the primary social unit (deChesnay, 1985). The risk of victimization is compounded if there is a stepfather present in the household (Finkelhor et al., 1988).

Second, as the logic of parental conflict relates to mothers, they ought to be the least likely targets of FOP, according to the logic of evolutionary theory of violence, since they pose no direct threats to daughters like their fathers (i.e., sexual abuse), and since their variance in paternity is reduced by half. Furthermore, the evolutionary theory of violence predicts that parents would face the gravest risk of homicide in their eldest years as they become more of a burden on their children. From a different perspective, biological mothers would also be the least likely targets of FOM since mothers are the cultural purveyors of traditional feminine roles, as nurturers and caretakers; mothers, as integral personal support networks and coping mechanism for daughters, serve to mitigate stressful life circumstances (Jensen, 2001). And if there is any truth to the cross culturally ubiquitous myths and fairytales about evil stepmothers, then they, not biological mothers, would, theoretically, be the most logical targets of FOM.

## DATA AND METHODS

This project utilizes data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR). The SHR is one of the most extensive datasets on homicide in the United States. For each homicide, data are collected on the weapon used, circumstances surrounding the crime, victim-offender relationship, and the race and sex of both the victim(s) and offender(s) (see Riedel, 1999). Police agencies from across the country submit data on a monthly basis, and they are compiled by the FBI's Program and Support Services division. Although the SHR data is not immune from inaccuracies in police data reporting, it is one of the most reliable, comprehensive, and up to date means available for homicide research. The SHR is an incident based dataset; that is, data are collected on each homicide incident rather than monthly summaries. Therefore, each incident can have more than one offender and/or more than one victim. The data are coded into two separate files, a victim-based file and an offender-based file. In each file, a case represents either a victim or an offender.

Both the victim-based and offender-based datasets are used in this study when appropriate. Of the 452,965 homicide victims recorded between 1976 and 1999, 1026 (.2%) were FOP. We selected

cases based on the variable "relationship of victim to offender" being coded as father, mother, stepfather, or stepmother. We acknowledge that this may have inevitably led to loss of cases for the simple reason that the FBI does not include figures who may have acted like "father/mother-figures," such as live-in boyfriends or girlfriends, but this limitation is inherent in the data. Some cases appeared to be miscoded; for example there is an obvious flaw in the coding if a parricide case involves a victim who is 12 years old and an offender who is 39. This resulted in a loss of 95 cases. Furthermore, we eliminated from our data cases where victims ages had been classified as 99 (unknown) and 98 (all ages greater than 98) since the true age of the victim could not be determined; all cases involving multiple victims and offenders were eliminated as well, reducing the total number of cases to 791. To calculate rates, population figures for the United States were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Using this rich, extensive dataset, we were able to examine FOPs on a national basis. Our purpose was to examine the totality of FOPs, and to see how they compared to the findings and theories based on studies with small samples. We were concerned with several elements of FOP that were discernable from the SHR. They include gender, age, weapon, and relationship-specific categories of victims (natural vs. step). Circumstance and race were not examined because of the high amount of missing or ambiguous data.

Out of the 791 victims of FOP 502 (63.4%) were "white," 279 (35.2%) were "black," 3 (.3%) were American-Indian, 5 (.6%) were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2 (.2%) were unknown. The figures, however, must be interpreted with caution, for the categories themselves are indicators of race, not ethnicity. For instance, the FBI does not differentiate between white Caucasians and people of Hispanic descent, thereby conflating two distinct ethnicities into one racial category; similarly, peoples of Caribbean and African descent are classified under the racial code as being 'black'. Furthermore, there is no variable that indicates social class in the SHR. Thus, while a traditional social structural analysis of race and class would have made the paper more complete, we were unable to do so due to the inherent limitations of the data.

Rather than relying on a statistical analysis, we primarily use a graphical analysis to display trends in parricide (see Tufte, 1983). This technique has been applied to homicide studies, and has been found to be a powerful analytic tool (Maltz, 1998).

In this article, we primarily incorporate graphical methods of analysis.

## RESULTS

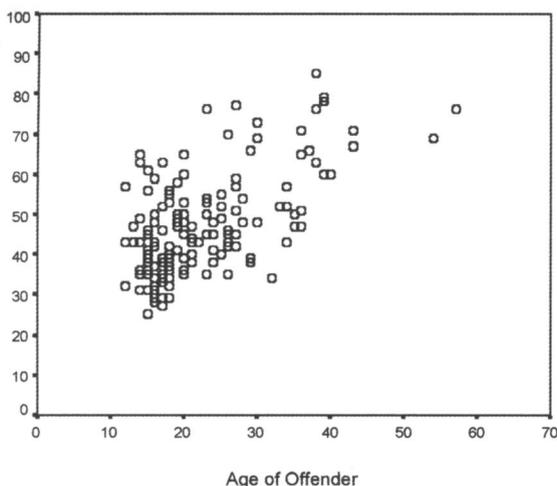
### Age and Relation Specific Victim Categories

Female Offender Parricides (FOP) appear to be similar to general homicides and parricides: out of the 791 cases of FOP, 466 (58.9%) involved fathers as victims; and out of the 466 victims, 318 (68.2%) were biological fathers while 148 (31.7%) were stepfathers. Thus our data indicate that a genealogical relationship-nepotism rule-does not necessarily mitigate violence between two blood-related relatives.

**FOPat (Natural fathers) 1976-1999**



**FOPat (Stepfathers) 1976-1999**



The ages of victims and offenders involved in FOPs reveal noteworthy findings as well. There is a cluster of biological fathers who are killed in their late thirties and throughout their forties. When daughters kill their biological fathers, they are most

likely to do so when their fathers are between 41-50 (31.1%), 51-60 (24.2%), and 61-70 (15.7%) years of age. And, contrary to the evolutionary theory of parricide, fathers are killed less in their eldest years: 81-90 (2.5%) and 71-80 (11%). This finding is applicable to stepfathers as well, for only 6.1% of stepfathers were killed in their twilight years (71-80); between the ages 61-70 (8.8%), 51-60 (16.2%). Thus, our findings do not substantiate the assertion of evolutionary psychologists who claim that parental risk of homicide increases with age.

As figure 1 illustrates, however, there are noticeable differences in the victimization patterns of biological fathers and stepfathers. There is a discernible period of victimization for biological fathers, but that pattern for stepfathers is distributed equally throughout their adulthood (30s, 40s, and 50s); the latter's risk of homicide is more prolonged. According to our data, stepfathers were most likely to be killed by their daughters between the age 41-50 (33.1%) and 31-40 (29.7%). This pattern may be related to the "bone of contention" between fathers and daughters. In our data, 57.4% of the daughters killed their stepfathers when they were less than twenty years of age. Daughters who killed their biological father were less than twenty years of age at the time of their offense in forty-four percent of the cases; their demise was heavily clustered in their mid-late thirties to forties. The fact that biological fathers and stepfathers are killed at different points in time merits a further discussion.

That a history of verbal, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse permeates the domestic lives of parricide offenders is almost a criminological, psychiatric, and clinical postulate (Campion et al., 1985; Corder et al., 1976; Ewing, 1990; Heide, 1996; Millaud et al., 1996; Raizen, 1960; Tanay, 1975). In addition, as prior research has noted, juvenile parricide offenders are primarily the victims of physical, psychological, verbal, and sexual abuse, or witnesses to those events, finally "standing up" to their despotic and abusive fathers (Shon and Targonski, 2003); but when abused daughters rise up against their fathers, their situation may be related to the living arrangements of their mothers and their domestic affairs.

Biological fathers' presence in the home is "longitudinal" whereas a stepfather's presence is "cross-sectional," which may relate to the "bone of contention" between fathers and daughters: daughters are potential targets of fathers' sexual advances (Rice and Harris, 2002). Biological fathers are also more likely to be involved in the caretaking and raising

of children, a factor that may inhibit their sexual preference for their daughters (Rice and Harris, 2002). Consequently, biological fathers' presence may serve to militate against incestuous relations with their daughters. Stepfathers, however, do not have the support of the aforementioned Westermarck Hypothesis since their entry into the household determines the amount and level of nurturing and caretaking that they invest—if they do so at all. It is their presence in a new household, along with available victims, as potential sexual partners, that is relevant to understanding the logic of stepfather-stepdaughter conflict (Daly and Wilson, 1988a). That distinction between stepfathers and daughters, in addition to time constraints, is also exacerbated by a nongenealogical relationship. Thus, this distinction between biological fathers and stepfathers may account for their age specific victimization patterns.

FOMat (Natural mothers) 1976-1999

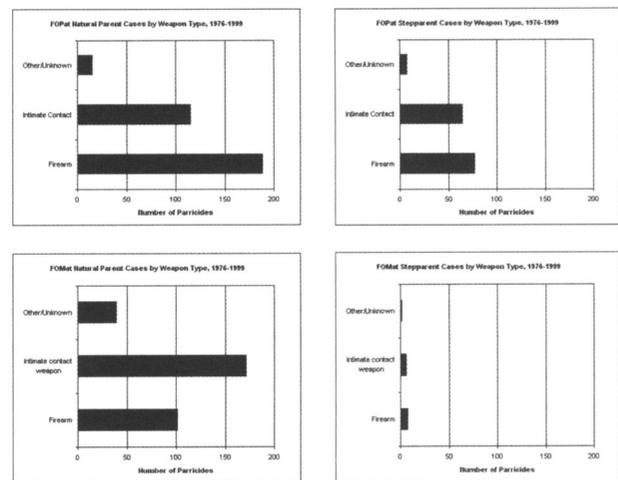


Mothers are most likely to be killed by their daughters between ages 71-80 (26%) and lowest between ages 31-40 (9%); but they are almost equally likely to die in their 40s (12.5%), 50s (19.6%), and 60s (18%); in fact, they are relatively safe in their eldest (81-90, 13%) and youngest (31-40, 9%) years. As figure 2 illustrates the victimization of mothers is distributed equally throughout their lives. But what is especially noteworthy is the genealogical bond between the killers and their victims. Out of 325 victims of FOM, 311 cases (95.6%) were biological mothers; only 14 cases (4.3%) involved daughters who killed their stepmothers. This finding contradicts the evolutionary theory of parricide in two ways: (1) mothers aren't necessarily at the gravest danger of parricide in their oldest years, when they are most vulnerable, and

most likely to be a financial burden (2) daughters do not discriminate in favor of blood relatives. In fact, the reverse seems to be true.

### Weapons of Female Offender Parricide

While anecdotal and case reports seem to indicate that knives and other edged instruments are the favored choice of weapons of parricide offenders, the primacy of firearms as the weapon of choice in parricides has been unequivocally demonstrated (Heide, 1993a, b; Heide and Petee, 2003; Shon and Targonski, 2003). But as noted, parricide is a crime of creativity in that there are numerous ways offspring kill their parents. Thus, for this project, we recoded the weapon usage into 4 categories: (1) firearms (2) intimate contact (3) other (4) unknown.



Firearms category includes a broad range of guns, from handguns to shotguns to assault rifles. Intimate contact category includes methods such as knives, blunt objects, personal weapons (e.g., hands and feet), being pushed out of a window, drowning, strangulation, and asphyxiation; we used this category because strangling, choking, stabbing, drowning, and stomping someone to death requires an offender to come into intimate contact with the victim at a close distance. That is, unlike firearms, offenders can not stand at a distance and kill by impersonally pulling a trigger; a certain degree of physical force has to be applied in order to cause fatal damage to the victim (Grossman, 1995). This category is further different from the third: 'other' includes methods such as the use of poison, explosives, drugs, and fire, which allow the maximal amount of impersonal distance from the victim. 'Unknown' category represents cases in which the manner of death was not determined and coded as such in the data.

Consistent with Heide's (1993b) "physical strength hypothesis" our results indicate that fathers are murdered with firearms (59%, natural; 52%, step). Again, it is difficult for teenage girls to physically overpower their fathers; consequently, guns equalize an otherwise gross imbalance in physical power. But this discrepancy in physical strength is less pronounced between daughters and mothers, for our findings indicate that fifty-five percent of mothers (natural) were murdered with intimate contact methods. Daughters who killed their mothers with this method were nearly twice that of firearm usage (32.5%).

## DISCUSSION

According to the tenets of evolutionary psychology, parental liability is relative to the age of the offender rather than absolute in relation to the age of the victim; but how and why forty-five-year-old fathers and mothers become a burden and a liability to fourteen-year-olds is a point that has yet to be clarified. The reverse would be true. In that vein, those who are oldest, in an absolute sense, do become liabilities—for their caregivers. From our examination of 791 cases covering twenty-three years, the conflict between daughters and parents changes as they traverse different stages in life. What we find is that even the categories of homicide that we have used (FOPat, FOM), as well as the axiomatic typology of APOs, may do injustice to the dynamics that operate in FOPs. Thus, to understand parricides, in addition to the contextual, situational, and psychological events that precede them and the dynamics that operate in such environments, political, economic, and historical forces must be integrated into the discussion of parricides. Just as importantly, we have to consider the source and origin of the parent-offspring conflict as well as the gain that offenders acquire.

From our perusal of clinical reports and newspapers, FOMs appear to be distinct in character and nature of the conflict depending on the age and life stage of the offenders and victims. For instance, a typical scenario of a teenage FOM looks something like this:

*"On May 25, 1987, fifteen-year-old Andrea Williams, armed with a combat knife, and her eighteen year old boyfriend, Mario Garcia, wielding a machete, hacked Andrea's mother to death for trying to end their romance" (Ewing, 1990: 131).*

Reminiscent of a Shakespearean tragedy gone awry, the mother in the previous excerpt forbids

the union of two teenage lovers; but rather than directing their anger and frustration inward (double suicide or murder/suicide pact), the disgruntled paramours vent their rage at the source of their troubles. And typical of the rage that accompanies FOMs, an edged instrument rather than a firearm is used. But this homicide is more aptly understood as a love triangle/dispute, for its classification as a parricide tells us almost nothing about the crime itself. The mother is a liability of sorts, but only because she stands in the way of her daughter's love-life, not because she causes undue strain on her daughter's resources.

Consider the following case: a middle-aged woman (thirty-six) strangles her mother (sixty-eight) in order to steal her monthly social security checks; the offender is successful for three years in collecting the checks until she is finally caught.<sup>1</sup> This homicide resembles a well planned and executed robbery motivated homicide than a parricide. Conversely, consider cases where daughters inject their mothers with drugs to end their suffering in the course of a prolonged terminal illness; or a daughter who drowns her physically defiant Alzheimer patient-mother in the tub while giving her a bath. The mere classification of these homicides as 'parricides' is next to meaningless unless the contextual details are imported; and it is in the establishment of a source of conflict that the victims and offenders illuminate the nature of such offenses. The latter two examples are just as easily classifiable as a case of euthanasia and care-giving turned to elder abuse turned fatal.

If parental value decreases with age, as parents become a liability for their offspring, that's presumably so because the pool of material resources dries up as they age while the cost of care-giving for them becomes an additional expenditure of resources that could be allocated toward the rearing of offspring's own children. But a declination of economic value does not necessarily translate into parental liability; to conclude that elderly parents incur an elevated risk of homicide requires such a view to assume a hidden premise about the economic, kinship, cohabitation patterns, and inheritance structure of a society prior to any empirical expatiation. Parents become a liability and a burden to their children only if their children have to be primary caregivers, as in agrarian and foraging economies.

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See Las Vegas review Journal, Friday, April 13, 2001.

But even the idea that families in western societies throughout historical periods have relied upon extended family or filial piety to ensure comfort and security in their aging years may be more of a myth than a fact (see Postman, 1982). To understand the logic of the conflict between parents and offspring, the assumption that the parent-offspring relationship is one of unconditional love must be rejected, and its converse must be presupposed, its premise colored with a heavy heaping of self-interest and the principle of reciprocity. Bluntly put, parents provide food, lodging, education, and nurturing to their fledgling young in the hopes of acquiring a secure future for their young, with the tacit expectation that they too will be provided with security and comfort in their aging years (Hanawalt, 1993). And historical evidence suggests that aging parents have been only too cognizant of their tenuous condition, and appear to have taken great care to prevent becoming a liability. Thus, rather than relying on the kind-heartedness of their offspring, aging parents often entered into retirement contracts with extended family members, the clergy, and even complete strangers before they did so with their children (Hanawalt, 1986). Barbara Hanawalt states that retirees were often calculating about the provisions expected in return for their remaining possessions (e.g., land), being specific about the amount of meat, bread, and beer received per year; some going as far as demanding a certain amount of affection. But for aging parents who had neither kind-hearted children nor a hefty purse, they met their fate as beggars, as wards of religious houses, and subjects of coroner's inquests.

Old age indeed is a liability of sorts, especially for those who are penniless and have raised ungrateful children; but to claim that parental value decreases with age, as parents become a liability for their offspring, overlooks a crucial historical fact. Providing care to aging parents and rearing one's own children in the same household does not necessarily entail an expenditure of scarce resources. It may actually work the opposite way. Historical evidence shows that aging parents provided for their own, almost analogous to a parental-retirement dowry; aging parents took proactive steps to ensure their comfort and safety in their twilight years by entering into private contracts. Thus, liability is not necessarily a function of old age as much as it is defined by class and wealth.

Furthermore, it is unintelligible to discuss the uncertainty that aging parents face without mentioning an offspring's eager anticipation of transi-

tioning from adolescence into adulthood, for these two are merely different tributaries of the same river from which conflict may spring. Becoming an adult—from an offspring's standpoint—was a liminal experience in that adolescents remained under the control and custody of another adult through years of servitude and apprenticeships, while official entry into adulthood brought legal rights and privileges such as gaining access to one's inheritance—permitting males the opportunity to establish one's own household by increasing their marriageability; for young girls an opportunity to save up toward their dowries, thereby increasing theirs. What has not been discussed is the age at which men and women acquired such new identities, and the rituals and ceremonies involved toward its attainment, and the economic incentives for the prolongation of adolescence (Hanawalt, 1986). As historians have noted, inheritance customs and laws have been the major source of conflict between siblings as well as between parents and offspring (Gies and Gies, 1987).

It is also noteworthy that these changes in inheritance laws and customs have not been brought about by forces internal to the family. Such changes have been catapulted by political, religious, and economic forces, at times disease and famine, which have resulted in bonanzas to all-inheriting sons while creating an entire class of dispossessed younger ones; changes that have altered the marriage practices of societies by enabling daughters and widows with children to be attractive marriage partners, thereby contravening the claims of evolutionary psychologists, again (Gies and Gies, 1978). Thus, to frame the source of conflict between parents and offspring solely as parental liability and abuse grossly simplifies what history plainly attests to. In fact, there is evidence that changes in inheritance laws have resulted in mothers-in-law becoming co-conspirators in the killings of daughters-in-law, not fratricide or parricide (Oldenburg, 2002). This is to say that gender, in and of itself, may mean little without a critical examination of how it intersects with other macro-level forces.

In modern times, rather than leaving the aging old to negotiate their fragile years on the kindness of others, governments have assumed a greater burden than strangers, the clergy, and children in providing care through state sanctioned social programs such as Medicare/Medicaid and Social Security (Disability) Income (SSI, SSDI) (see Cowgill and Holmes, 1979). That is, westernized social systems have been designed to facilitate independence rather

than reliance on stem family structures and filial piety (Kumasgai, 1986). Thus, what was once a private and contractual matter between two parties has been formalized into a public and civic contract between the elderly and the state. But if evolutionary psychologists are correct—that parents incur more risks as they become a liability and burden to their children—then their thesis merits further analytical attention.

It has been projected that the United States will undergo a major demographic shift in the coming decades, with an upsurge in the elderly—"baby boomer generation"—population (Fox, 2000). If this demographic trend is compounded with a decline in the availability of social programs for the elderly who are poor, then we may very well see a regression into a more agrarian kinship and stem family structures, with children becoming the principal caregivers, or we may see a reverting back to medieval times where parents rely on the graces of strangers and the church. Or, aging parents may meet a fate similar to undesired infants. To prevent the realization of such effects, then, it behooves the government to 1) implement programs that protect the financial interests of the elderly (i.e., retirement and life savings) so that they do not become prey to white collar criminals 2) fund social programs that reduce the burden of elderly care-giving from the offspring. If aging parents do become a liability, parricide may no longer be an occurrence in the cultural fables, myths, and works of fiction, but a much more pervasive and pressing social problem.

## CONCLUSION

This study has focused on a neglected and often overlooked facet of homicides involving women—parricides committed by female offenders. Using an influential theory of homicide as a reference point, we have sought to investigate its validity using the FBI's SHR. Evolutionary theory of homicide dictates that violence ought to be mitigated between blood relatives (rule of nepotism), and that parental risk of homicide increases as they age: "We now find...that children who grow up to kill their parents tend to have been born at a later parental age than average" (Daly and Wilson, 1988a: 103). While Daly and Wilson's (1982a, 1988a, 1997, 1999) analysis of Detroit homicide records supports their theory, ours do not.<sup>2</sup> And our findings indicate

that consanguinity does not necessarily mitigate violence, and as our analysis has shown, biological mothers are killed by their daughters from the time they become teenagers to the time they grow old themselves.

The weapons used in FOPs reveal that female parricide offenders resort to firearms to kill their fathers as a way of compensating for differences in size and strength, but use "hands on" methods—intimate contact—when killing their mothers, thus offering further support to the physical strength hypothesis (Heide, 1993b). Furthermore, the extreme violence—overkill—that often accompanies such murders necessitates a much more in-depth examination of mother-daughter conflicts, and the dynamic that transpires in them. Why do biological mothers bear the brunt of violence from their daughters? Why should their decision to mettle in the affairs of their teenage daughters be met with such unfathomable violence? Similarly, why would a middle-aged woman kill her mother during the course of care-giving? These are all research questions that can't be answered in this study due to the inherent limitations of the data, and the type of analysis we have undertaken here. To remedy such gaps some suggestions are offered.

First, the study of parricide need not be the monopoly of the psychological sciences. The extant descriptive studies delve into the psychopathology of offenders, but say little about the acts themselves (see Hillbrand et al., 1999). That is, how background forces influence the actions of parricide offenders is known, but not how they operate in the foreground of the offense, in crime scene characteristics and behaviors in parricide (i.e., wound severity, wound location). Assuming an offense-oriented approach rather than an offender-oriented one may permit a comparison of parricides to other types of homicides.

While juveniles have killed disproportionately and their desistance has been responsible for the decline in parricides in the U.S., there has been an overemphasis on adolescent parricides, thereby

<sup>2</sup> Daly and Wilson proffer support for their theory based on an examination of Detroit homicide records from 1972. In that year, there were

690 "non-accidental" homicides; in 47.8% of the cases, the victims and offenders knew one another; in 27.2% of the cases, the victims and offenders were complete strangers; and in 25% of the cases, or 127 homicides, the victims and offenders were related to one another. But out of the 127 victims, only 32 involved blood relatives, and out of that 32, 11 were parents who had been murdered by their children. But rather than relying on this sample alone (N=11), they used a second data source, Canadian homicide records (1974-1983). But even in this data, there were only 7 FOPats and 12 FOMs (N=19).

framing the source of conflict as parental abuse (Hart and Helms, 2003; Heide, 1992). While correct, this approach neglects to examine the changing social, legal, and philosophical sensibilities that may have redefined the notion of childhood, discipline, and punishment throughout the centuries. And because parricide has often been equated with mental illness or a desperate reaction against parental abuse, a complete picture of adult parricide offenders, with the exception of male matricide offenders, is lacking (see Holcomb, 2000; Campion et al., 1985). Broadening the study of parricides may remedy such gaps in the literature.

Psychologists, psychoanalysts, and clinical social workers who examine offenders as patients, and arrest data from criminal justice agencies need not be the only resource for scholars of parricide. In fact, the use of these two sources of data may obfuscate important patterns and trends. Data such as the

FBI's Uniform Crime Reports and Supplementary Homicide Reports only give a glimpse of homicide in parts of twentieth century. Coroner's inquests and newspapers, however, provide a much more panoramic view of crime and justice in earlier centuries. Thus, studying parricides by using archival data may fill a gaping hole in the literature by delineating historical trends. Historians of crime and justice are in a unique position to undertake this endeavor. Has the conflict between mothers and daughters and fathers and daughters waned over time? What was the source of conflict between them historically and how has it changed? These are all relevant questions that can be answered in future research. The findings from the present study have provided a small step in such a direction illuminating the different potential sources of conflict between daughters and sons and parents.

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