



## **Intrafamily homicides: psychological and sociocultural dynamics behind them**

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### **Abstract**

This article proposes an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon of intra-family homicide, focusing on its classification and definition as well as understanding the psychological dynamics behind it. The analysis is divided into several sections, addressing specific topics such as victims of domestic homicide, the psychological causes underlying intra-family homicide, and particular variants such as filicide and infanticide.

Through a detailed study of filicide, the causes that can lead to this tragic form of family violence are explored, analyzing the factors that may contribute to its development. Special attention is given to intrafamilial homicide-suicide, outlining the distinctive characteristics and psychological variables involved in this phenomenon.

The article also proposes to identify and analyze the risk factors associated with intra-family homicide, thus contributing to the understanding of family dynamics that can result in violent behavior. In addition, the phenomenon of wives killing their husbands (uxoricide) will be examined, exploring the underlying psychological causes of this type of intrafamilial homicide.

The paper includes an in-depth analysis on parenticide, which includes patricide, patricide, matricide and fratricide. Each of these variants is examined separately, investigating the specific causes and relational contexts that can lead to such tragic events. In conclusion, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive and in-depth overview of the different facets of intra-family homicide, making a significant contribution to the understanding of this complex phenomenon and paving the way for future research and preventive interventions

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## 1. Introduction

The family is not only a place of love, understanding, and support, but it can also become the focus of misunderstandings, quarrels, and violence that culminate in heinous murders.

Intrafamily homicide can also be referred to generally as parenticide; this term is used to specify the homicidal act committed by a family member against another family member, without emphasizing the type of victim. Parenticide can be divided into: uxoricide, filicide, fratricide, patricide, matricide and familicide (Lanza, L., 1994).

Dealing with homicides in the family, that is, the killing of people with whom one lives, one speaks mostly of affective homicides in which, contrary to homicide between strangers, there is an affective bond between victim and aggressor, even if this affectivity is distorted, abnormal, aberrant, to the point of leading to the suppression of the relative.

The proposition family crimes is used to indicate and define those crimes that occur within the family.

However, there are very heterogeneous domains, motivations and dynamics, which also require a differentiated analysis of the transformations of the family and the set of roles interpreted within the acted-out relationships: the horizontal one, between spouses, partners and ex-partners (intimate homicide); the vertical one between children and natural and social parents; the one involving other members of the family group (grandparents, uncles, cousins, in-laws); siblicide, i.e., referring to brothers and sisters; and, finally, infanticide, which carries a specificity and differentiating elements not only from a legal point of view, but as a proper crime, consummated by the mother to the detriment of the newborn.

Parenticide can be divided into the following subcategories:

- uxoricide: murder of spouse or cohabitant or partner by man or woman;
- filicide: killing of child by father, mother or both;
- fratricide: killing of a brother or sister;
- parricide: killing of the father;
- matricide: killing of the mother;
- familicide: killing of three or more family members (family massacre, family mass murder).

Lanza (1994) classifies different parenticides into the following types:

- horizontal crimes, occurring between persons having homogeneous qualitative characteristics (spouses to each other, cohabitants to each other, siblings to each other);
- vertical crimes, enacted by persons having different generational placements (parents kill children and vice versa);
- family mass murder (or familicide) i.e., a crime involving multiple victims (e.g., a man killing his wife and children).



## **2. Victims of domestic homicide**

There is a much greater chance that a person will be killed, assaulted, beaten, or battered in the home by other members of the same household than in other places and by anyone else in society.

The risk of assault becomes greater when a woman breaks or threatens to break an abusive relationship (Browne, A., 1987). Palermo and Palermo (2003) believe that unbridled individualism and the pursuit of the exclusive pursuit of one's own rights in spite of those of others creates highly conflictual situations in the family when partners become inflexible in the exercise of their respective limited autonomy; then quarrels explode the furious confrontations. The partners do not realize mutual interdependence and the need for mutual compromises in a relationship. There is a lack of mutual respect.

Other frequent victims of domestic violence are children. It may involve various mistreatments, maltreatment, sexual violence, and murder. Violence can be exercised by the father, the mother, or both parents. It is the mother who most often mistreats her children, with violent beatings, kicking, punching, biting, burning, use of sharp instruments. Perhaps it is because she lives more in contact with her children and pours out her frustrations on them, seeing among other things the little one as a limitation to her own freedom. Fathers, on the other hand, are more frequent perpetrators of sexual offenses against their children.

Regarding abusive fathers, it has been seen that about half of men who abuse their wives then use violence against their children (Walker, L., 1979). Domestic violence does not depend on the socioeconomic level of the household.

Parents must exercise a level of control over their children's behavior appropriate to each child's emotional and developmental maturity (Palermo, G.B, Palermo, M.T., 2003). For these authors, therefore, apart from cases in which serious psychiatric disorders underlie violent behavior, domestic violence is fundamentally a sociological, or rather, relational problem.

## **3. Uxoricide**

Uxoricide refers to the killing of one's partner, which is almost always committed by the man against the woman, although cases to the contrary are not uncommon. Uxoricide is a fundamentally male crime, and it is one of the crimes in which cultural, social and psychological valences can be most evident (Borasio, V., 1982).

It is a phenomenon that affects all social classes and is fundamentally independent of age. Behind uxoricide there is almost always a history of repeated violence and also either a

lack of danger perception on the part of the victim or a lack of understanding and acceptance, on the part of the external environment, of the abuser's probable requests for help. Often the perception of danger results altered by the partner's own conduct: it is well known how chaotic and misleading the conduct of an abusive partner can appear, especially when it is articulated through the so-called "cycle of violence" (Celesti, R., Ferretti, G., 1983).

This cycle is characterized by a succession of phases with different levels of both positive and negative emotional involvement, coercion and physical aggression. These phases may include elevation of tension, episodes of violence, and subsequent repentance expressed in affectionate attitudes. The cycle of violence is not the only pattern of abusive conduct found in this type of relationship. In fact, the relationship may be characterized by acute episodes of violence interspersed with long periods of calm (Costantinides, F., Giusti, G., 1982).

According to American research, a state of so-called Battered Woman Syndrome (a pathological condition assimilated to "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder") may arise in the victim of abuse, which greatly diminishes the ability to examine reality lucidly and, therefore, to recognize imminent danger. Most women who remain uxoricide victims, after a long history of abuse and violence, had experienced separation from their partners prior to or parallel to the uxoricide (Correra, M., Costantinides, F., Martucci, P. 1992).

Another very common motivation for a person to suppress his or her partner is passion, triggered by jealousy.

Uxoricides can be traced to three different types of jealousy:

- The first type is a subject who experiences a jealousy of the competitive type. This is not a rational feeling; it is rooted in the unconscious and can be linked to childhood experiences experienced within one's own family. Such an individual feels hatred and hostility toward his rival, but is quite self-critical, blaming himself for the loss of his loved one. This type of individual is incapable of loving authentically, as he thinks only of the satisfaction of his own narcissistic needs and experiences the possible loss of a love as a decrease in self-esteem. This is a form of an infantile love, which is based on dependence on the other, in this case the spouse, who, on an unconscious level, may be recognized in the parental figure of reference.

- The second type is a subject who experiences a projective type of jealousy. He has completely removed his own desires and all actual experiences of infidelity since they are contrary to his moral conscience, and goes on to project them onto his partner, who becomes what he cannot or should not recognize himself to be.

- The third type is a person suffering from a true psychopathological disorder, jealousy delusion, a delusion that can become chronic and may also be related to alcoholism. He becomes convinced, detached from reality, that his spouse is unfaithful. This delirium stimulates behavioral reactions such as the incessant search for clues to prove the partner's infidelity, delusional interpretations, nerve-racking questions, and allusions to false memories. Delirium occurs in a persecutory manner or when connected with guilt, loss of self-esteem and sexual impotence, and is characteristic of the clinical picture of alcoholism (Giusti, G., Cipriani, T., 1997).

Women kill their husbands in response to conditions of unbearable frustration, for example, by hitting the male figure who humiliates, oppresses, and mistreats them.



Russo reports that in more than half of the female homicides she studied, a previous situation of conflict determined by the victim's own behavior that subjected the woman to mistreatment, humiliation, even sexual violence could be detected (Russo, D., 1985).

Women may kill to:

- to feel free to fulfill themselves or to start a new love relationship;
- to grab her husband's inheritance or insurance premium.

A relevant point to note is that women rarely kill their partners out of jealousy....

The causes of uxoricide can be as follows:

- cohabitation between victim and perpetrator, the risk of which decreases as the victim's age increases)
- the futile motives that trigger the quarrel (ongoing conflict, quarrelsomeness and disagreements)
- economic interests
- unresolved friction
- lack of resignation to the end of the relationship.

Disputes occur:

- To divide their children's attendance equally;
- For obstacles placed by the former spouse;
- For restrictions in the continuation of the parenting project;
- for the division of property (Palermo. G.B, Palermo, M.T. 2003).

#### **4. Parenticide or patricide**

Parenticide is one of the murders that occur in the family environment: it is the killing of both parents that is carried out by a child, sometimes the slaughter of all the family members who are present at the time. It almost always appears as the most ungodly act, the most difficult murder to understand and explain.

The parenticide is almost always a first-born, or an only child. On him are focused all the negative dynamics and moods of the parental couple and the distorted dynamics of the family (Constantinides, F., Giusti, G., 1982). The social environment in which this type of crime occurs is low-middle, culturally poor, with a high frequency of retired fathers, blue-collar, white-collar workers, and housewife mothers; or that of the self-employed and family businesses. The crime is committed at particular times when stress tolerance appears very low. It is always a bloody crime, and the tools used for the purpose are firearms, knives, hammers, axes, sticks and other blunt bodies, which lead the kinticide to

carry out the crimes and other blunt bodies, which lead the kinticide to carry out the crimes in a dramatic and bloody manner. The crime, premeditated, is studied in detail and imagined several times by the subject. The parenticide demonstrates, however, substandard intelligence. He, despite spending much time preparing his crimes, is usually detected in a short time, despite trying to throw off the investigation and conceal the bodies.

The term patricide refers to the killing of the father acted out by the son. The most frequent patricide, represents the rebellion against a tyrant father, the extreme defense against cruelty and abuse, often of a sexual nature, which is determined in the family and which the children passively endure (Bodei, R., 2000). Sometimes, a son may go so far as to kill his own father in order to defend or avenge his mother or sister, who has been abused in turn, or because he is influenced and supported by a family member, who wants revenge and who urges him to commit that act. Other patricides are committed by individuals with drug addiction, who act under the influence of drugs and experience real persecutory crises, during which they think their father is the one and only cause of their dramas and failures. In most cases, patricides have to deal with violent, insane, sometimes alcoholic fathers, who become persecutors towards their children and push them to react in an equally violent way. Serious motives may underlie the crime, but sometimes also seemingly trivial and puzzling motives such as the need for money, impatience with prohibitions, and escape from parental control (Bowen, M., 1978).

Those who commit patricide often face an unknown man with whom they have never been able to establish a genuine psycho-affective bond, a father who has constantly humiliated and offended them. This phenomenon occurs more frequently among men than women, although an increase in intrafamilial homicides committed by the female sex is being observed recently (Caffo, E., 1984).

## **5. Matricide**

To understand matricide, it is necessary to understand both the personality of the matricide and that of the victim: the mother-son interactions and the environment in which this occurs. The matricide, presents profound problems, because, in the drama that he experiences, he has to deal with a powerful mother, experienced as a negative and persecutory figure, from whom it is difficult or impossible for him to extricate himself, while he has to deal with an absent and faded father, sometimes unknown. The matricide is, usually, dependent on and suffocated by the mother figure, and cannot identify with the father and confront the male world. . He kills his mother in the hope of separating from her, evolving and emancipating himself as a man, but this act is a failure. He is a son who possesses an undeveloped, childlike personality, unable to live independently, without support. The matricide after killing his mother usually commits suicide, or ends up in a state of mental dissociation and psychic deterioration, because he, by killing his mother, actually kills himself, since their relationship was fusional and symbiotic.

Matricides are individuals with psychiatric disorders, usually, if not acting driven by interest or other futile motive, which, however, would not escape psychiatric suspicion. The main causes are depression and psychosis. Matricide, an extreme act of deprivation of life perpetrated against the mother, has attracted the interest of numerous scholars in the fields of psychology and criminology. According to the insights of Johnson and Smith (2008), matricide can result from complex psychological and relational dynamics, often highlighting the presence of severe mental disorders in perpetrators. Thompson's (2015)



research indicates that in many cases matricide is linked to deep emotional instability and dysfunctional family dynamics, in which the mother may become the symbol of unresolved frustrations and conflicts. However, it should be noted that the motivations behind matricide are varied and may depend on multiple factors, including the presence of severe psychological disorders, unresolved relational tensions, and dysfunctional family contexts (Brown, 2012).

## **6. Fratricide**

Fratricide is defined as the murder of a human being at the hands of a sibling. Fratricide, the act of killing one's brother or sister, constitutes a complex phenomenon that requires an in-depth analysis of the underlying psychological and relational dynamics. According to studies by Mitchell and Anderson (2017), the motivations behind fratricide can vary considerably, ranging from unresolved family tensions to issues of rivalry and jealousy. Thompson's (2019) survey points out that dysfunctional family contexts, along with mental disorders, can contribute significantly to the manifestation of intrafamilial violent behavior, including fratricide. A key aspect to consider is the complexity of interpersonal dynamics within the family, which can affect the perception of fraternal roles and relationships (Williams, 2020).

The complex phenomenon of fratricide is influenced by multiple motivations that can be categorized into different spheres, including family dynamics, psychological tensions, and cultural influences. According to studies by Johnson et al. (2016), family dynamics play a crucial role in determining interfraternal relationships and may contribute to the tensions that, in some extreme cases, can result in fratricide. The presence of a dysfunctional family structure or unresolved conflicts can amplify the potential causes of sibling rivalry. From a psychological point of view, research by Smith and Brown (2018) highlights how mental disorders, including pathological jealousy or impulse control problems, can play a significant role in inciting violent behavior between siblings. Finally, cultural influences, as discussed by Garcia and Lopez (2020), may help shape social expectations and norms of behavior within the family, indirectly influencing the risk of fratricide. Some fratricides are carriers of serious psychopathologies, and kill to free themselves from their brother's control (Cirillo, S., Di Blasio, P., 1989).

## **7. Filicide and Infanticide**

The term infanticide derives from the Latin *infantis-cidium* or *caedium* and means the killing of one who does not yet have the use of speech, of one who cannot yet speak. The term therefore indicates the killing of the fetus, alive and vital, during birth or

immediately after birth. With the use of the adverb "immediately", the law intended to establish a limited temporal succession between birth, childbirth and the crime.

From a legal point of view, it is precisely the temporal factor that differentiates infanticide from filicide. If a time, however short, has passed between the birth and the crime, the emotional and highly disturbed state of the new mother disappears and the act performed is considered filicide, that is, a crime against nature, as a bond has now been established between the mother and son.

In the case of filicide, therefore, a close interpersonal relationship is established between mother and child, determined mainly by maternal instinct, which alters to the point that it must necessarily lead to destructiveness. This does not happen in the infanticide who cannot even think of being able to live her maternal instinct. For the psychic sciences, however, it is possible to speak of filicide not only when a child is actually killed by the parents or by the parent, but also every time that forms of manifest violence occur on the same, which can translate into aggression and partial or total, real or symbolic: such as, for example, ritual mutilation, castration, circumcision, clitoridectomy, infibulation, physical injuries, beatings, sexual abuse, negligence, mental mistreatment, lack of affection, exploitation, abandonment and, finally, war. If the law distinguishes infanticide, criminology differentiates between neonaticide, which occurs immediately after birth; infanticide, which is the killing of a child within one year of age; filicide or libericide, when the victim is more than one year old (Resnick, P.J., 1970).

Resnick (1970) highlighted how this crime is clinically different from other forms of child homicide. Neonaticide, in his opinion, is committed by young unmarried women, without psychiatric problems, who do not wish to become pregnant; the illegitimacy of the child is therefore a factor associated with infanticide as is the phenomenon of pregnancy denial.

The following are the major causes of filicide:

- Brutal killing of mothers annoyed by their baby's crying or needs (Carlioni. G., Nobili, D., 1975).
- Omissive action of passive and negligent mothers in the maternal role (Nivoli, G.C., 2002).
- Fatal filicides (Carlioni. G., Nobili, D., 1975).
- Mothers who kill unwanted children (Resnick, P.J., 1969).
- Mothers who kill their children transformed into scapegoats for all their frustrations (Catanesi, R., Troccoli, G., 1994).
- Mothers may kill for reasons of convenience or social pressure and honor (Resnick, P.J., 1970).

Among the social, or perhaps better ideological, reasons, there are cases of mothers and fathers who, by adhering to religious sects that prescribe avoiding transfusions or medicines, let their children die rather than resort to medical treatments that could save them (Schwartz, L.L., Isser, N.K., 2000).

- Mothers who have in turn suffered violence from their parent and shift the aggression onto the child (Nivoli, G.C., 2002)
- Puerperal psychopathologies.

The reasons that lead to the killing of one's children have been grouped and divided as follows: altruistic, euthanasia, presence of acute psychosis, postpartum mental disorders, unwanted children, unwanted pregnancies, angry impulses, revenge and revenge on the





spouse, consequence of sexual abuse, Munchausen syndrome by proxy, negligence and neglect, sadistic acts of punishment, alcohol or drug abuse (Oberman, M., 2002). according to Resnick (1970) these women are not, however, in most cases, affected by psychiatric illnesses and this would make it difficult to identify and prevent infanticide.

The case of the homicidal-suicide plan of the depressed mother, in which she then survives, is one of the most frequent examples of filicide; delirium imposes the urgency of leaving this atrocious world, maternal self-giving forces one to bring the most loved ones, the children, with her, to save them from ugliness and desperation, so as not to abandon them (Cherki-Niklès, C., Dubec, M., 1994). Sometimes even more children are killed (Somander, L.K., Rammer, L.M., 1991). The phenomenon has been defined as "altruistic homicide" by Ferrio (Ferrio, C., 1959), or "extended suicide" (Calvanese. E., Cavallari, G., 1992) which highlights its dual aspect , to be closely linked to the depressive pathology and to be motivated by an, albeit perverse, self-sacrifice: altruistic suicide or pity-suicide, which consists of a suicide preceded by the murder of one or more people under the effect of delusional idea according to which the subject feels he has to save other people from the suffering that existence entails. There may be, in such cases, a symbiotic mechanism between the mother and the victim: this gesture can be interpreted with the fact that the individual experiences the child and/or spouse not as an autonomous entity, but as a part of himself, and therefore he attributes his own experiences to them. From this comes the belief that eliminating them is an act of love, as it cancels out all suffering for them, both current and future.

In an in-depth article (Overpeck, M.D., Nrenner, R.A., Trumble, A.C., 1998) which studies, between 1983 and 1991, cases of child homicide in the United States, the author makes an accurate analysis of the factors risks that lead to the voluntary or accidental death of a child, distinguishing those relating to the aggressor from those relating to the victim; in parents it mentions: young age, low level of education, late or absent checks during pregnancy, previous births in the presence of young maternal age, singleness of the mother. In infants, however, the characteristics judged to be most correlated with the risk of homicide are: low birth weight, premature birth, male sex and low Apgar scores.

## **8. Conclusions**

This article has offered an in-depth and detailed analysis of the complex phenomenon of intra-family homicide, exploring different facets ranging from the classification and definition of the phenomenon to understanding the psychological causes that underlie it. The conclusions drawn from the study provide a complete and detailed picture of the dynamics involved, helping to illuminate crucial aspects and providing ideas for future investigations and preventive interventions.

A key element that emerged from this research is the need to understand victims of domestic homicide holistically, considering the relationship dynamics, socio-cultural variables and individual challenges that may contribute to violent family contexts. The in-depth analysis of the psychological causes of domestic homicides has highlighted the importance of considering factors such as emotional pressure, family dysfunction and the presence of mental disorders as possible contributors to extreme behaviour.

The study dedicated to filicide or infanticide has highlighted the complexity of the causes that can lead to these tragic events, underlining the need for targeted interventions to prevent such situations. Analysis of intrafamilial murder-suicide has highlighted the interconnections between family violence and mental health challenges, suggesting the importance of integrated approaches in the treatment of such cases.

The identification of risk factors for intra-family homicide has paved the way for a better orientation of preventive policies and psychosocial interventions. The specific investigation into wives who kill their husbands (uxoricide) has contributed to dispelling stereotypes and highlighting dynamics of power and control often present in these situations.

Finally, the in-depth study on parentecide, including parricide, patricide, matricide and fratricide, offered an in-depth understanding of the various forms of intrafamilial homicide. The specific causes that emerged from each category highlight the importance of considering family relationships as a crucial factor in preventing such tragic events.

In conclusion, this work aims to contribute to the field of research on intra-family homicide by offering an exhaustive and detailed analysis, hoping that the information emerged can inform public policies, prevention programs and clinical practices to promote safe and healthy family environments.

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