

Female parricides: a descriptive study

Paula I. Cunha Gomide¹, Valdirene Cropolato¹, Eliane Sampaio Antt¹, Carla Schwalbe Koda¹

Parricide is a crime where victims are the parents and aggressors are children. Most crimes are committed by men against male parent. Only 14% of homicides are committed by women. The objective of this study was to pick up, in reports made in Brazilian newspapers, from 1994 till May, 2017, parricides committed by adult/adolescent women. 64 cases were found, where 51.6% of the victims were fathers, 37.5% were mothers and 9.4% were double parricide. A sharp weapon was used in 57.8% of the cases and a fire gun, in 23.4% of them. Abuses (maltreatment and rapes) were the reason for these crimes, as reported by 54.7% of them. Most of the bodies, 79.7% were found at the residence of the victim. To understand the determinants for this type of crimes will avoid this background is neglected by the legislation.

Key words: Parricide; women; homicide; mistreatment; forensic psychology.

Introduction

Parricide is defined as homicide, or the murder attempt, involving fathers, mothers, stepfathers and stepmothers as victims¹. It is a rare crime. It includes only from 2% to 4% among the homicides, in general.^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6} From the perspective of many, killing a parent is an incomprehensible act. Fathers are historically recognized as protectors of their women and children⁷. And rupture of family relationships, settled during many centuries for preserving mankind cause big social commotion.⁸

Studies made in several countries found consistency among the features of aggressors. Crime is committed mostly by adult males. Holt³, in a survey made on 693 parricides committed in England and Wales, from 1977 to 2012, found out that 89.7% of the aggressors were found to be males. In France, Raymond et al.⁵ assessed 40 cases, from 1996 to 2010, in Psychiatric hospitals, from which 39 were men and, only one woman, with average age

28 years old, single, jobless and living with the victim. Gomide, Teche, Maiorki & Cardoso⁹ found that in 246 parricide cases reported by the Brazilian newspapers, between 2005 to 2011, 862% of the crimes committed by men (63.5% adults / 15,4% adolescents) and 13.8% by women (7,3% adults / 6,5% adolescents). Studies made in Finland by Liettu, Säävälä, Hakko, Joukamaa and Rasanen¹⁰, between 2003 to 2006, out of the 18 parricides investigated, 17 of them were male aggressors, who committed 10 parricides, 8 matricides and 1 case of double parricide, committed by a woman. Galleguilos, Leslie, Tapia & Aliaga¹¹ reported that in Chile, the highest amount of parricides were committed by adult males (92%), with prevalence of psychiatric disorders (schizophrenia, drug/alcohol users). Wick, Mitchell, Gilbert & Byard¹² reviewed the forensic folders in Australia, from 1985 to 2004, identified 11 cases, 10 of them committed by men.

Studies show a change regarding prevalence

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¹ Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná (UTP)

of matricides and parricides in the various countries, according to the origin of the used data (files, trials, newspapers reports, medical protocols) or inclusion criteria (with/without people with mental disorders, stepfathers and stepmothers, adolescents, adults, homicides and homicide attempt). Liettu et al.¹⁰ from 1973 to 2004, found 192 cases, 45% were parricides and 55% matricides. This sample include homicides, attempts and also foster parents. In Brazil, Gomide et al.⁹ by watching newspaper reports identified that 71.1% were parricides, 25.2% were matricides and 3.7% were double parricide. Holt³, using the Home Office Homicide Index as a source of data, gathered 693 cases, from 1977 to 2012, from which 55% were parricide, 41.7% were matricides and 3.3% were double homicide, with ages ranging from 7 to 78 years old.

In general, parricides use weapons available at home: sharp weapons (knives, machete, axes), fire guns (pistols, shotgun), domestic utensils (hammers, pressure cook, stones, sticks), poison and their own hands (choking or asphyxia).¹³ Wick et al.¹² identified the use of fire guns (27,2%), sharp weapon (27,2%) and other objects, such as stones, leather belts and immersion (45.6%) to commit the crime. Gomide et al.⁹ found that mostly, a sharp weapon (55,4%) was used, followed by fire guns (17,1%) and other domestic utensils (16,3%). Holt³ found that most people (60%) used sharp weapons and utensils for committing the crime. Weisman & Sharma¹⁴ investigation including 45 parricides, proving that 47% used sharp weapons, 22% used fire guns, 23% killed by hitting and other by choking. Ferreira¹⁵ in 32 studied cases in the StatE of São Paulo, Brazil, they found that 32,5% used fire guns, with same proportion using knife, 25% various instruments (iron, choking and sticks). Liettu et al.¹⁰ described that 55% committed the crime with a sharp weapon, 16,2% with fire guns and the rest with other tools. Dantas, Santos, Dias, Oliveira and Magalhães¹⁶ found that 72% of the crimes were committed with cutting objects and 29% with fire guns. In general, the proportion between sharp weapons, fire guns and use of other instruments remain the same in various studies.

Double parricide is rare and happens,

approximately in 4% of all cases and it consists of killing both parents³. Fegadel and Heide¹⁷ analyzed 45 cases of double parricide. They proved that in 35 cases, the parricide acted alone, around 91% were males, with an average age around 30 years old. Among the 10 who asked for help, with average age 21 years old, 6 were males and 4 women, and were supported by siblings, friends, relatives, were hired and used to commit the crime.¹⁷

Unlike the other homicides, where the crime is co in the street, bars, empty lots, parricide is a crime committed at home or in its surroundings.^{3,9} Raymond et al.⁵ reported about 95% of the bodies were found at home, mostly in a room or in the living room and 77,5% of them lived with their parents under a context of violence. Dantas et al.¹⁶ found that all crimes were committed at home.

Various cases reported physical abuses, sexual abuses, psychological abuses, negligence, and other types of maltreatment exerted by the victim during the childhood and adolescence of the aggressor.^{8, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22} Gomide⁸ provided psychotherapy assistance to an adolescent who was under socio educational treatment due to matricide was found to be victim of maltreatment, physical abuse (beaten), psychological abuse (humiliation, negligence) even sexual abuse committed by the mother against the adolescent at an early age. Heide¹⁹ analyzed 11 cases of parricide in USA. In all cases he identified maltreatment suffered by the aggressors. The author reported the case of a 16-year-old adolescent who killed her father with a gunshot, to be free from years of verbal/physical abuse committed by the father against the whole family and sexual abuse against her sister. Ferreira¹⁵ described a daughter who killed her father with an iron bar when he was attacking her mother with a knife. Her father was alcoholic and drug user. He was well known by the police He was charged with robbery and he was violent with all his family. Jorge and Gomide¹⁸ assessed the process of a woman who hired a killer for her father, after she was raped by him when she was 9. She had 8 children from her own father. She decided to kill him when he threatened to rape his daughter-granddaughter. Raymond et al.⁵ found that 87,5% of cases had a history of

the cases had a history of domestic violence. Teixeira²² provided psychological assistance to a parricide adolescent and identified a history of violence from the victim to his mother and him, even the day of the crime.

According to Heide¹⁹ these adolescents feel threatened physically/psychologically or feel life of other is in danger. They kill because they feel terror and desperation. One of the parricides studied by Pinheiro²¹ reported he killed his father to become free from the stress he exerted on him. When studying the parental practices making up the life history of three parricides in the penitentiary system, Teche and Gomide²⁰ proved the correlation among the parricides and their fathers (the victims) was marked by a high level of physical/psychological violence, apart from food/medical/education negligence. The 3 participants of this investigation were drug users and did not have a history of mental disorders.

The authors, Heide and Petee²³ in USA and Canada, between 1976 to 1999, proved the aggressor had a mental illness and psychiatric morbidity, apart from family abuse. Raymond et al.⁵ found 72.5% of the participants had a psychiatric disorder. Gomide and Pinheiro² in Paraná, Brazil identified that 43.5% of parricides who were in the Medical Penitentiary Center had mental disorders, out of these 82% were matricides.

Another significant common component in most parricide cases is the phenomenon described by Heide and Boots²⁴ as “overkill”, or excessive violence¹⁴. Such feature was observed in most crimes committed with extreme violence, excessive hitting or stubbing, using more strength during the act than what is necessary to kill.¹⁸ This way of acting is usually analyzed in order to qualify the homicide, by using “brutal force”. Gomide⁸ describes the “modus operandi” of the crime committed by an adolescent who stubbed 60 times his mother to death because of 17 years of physical/psychological/sexual abuses. Teixeira²² interviewed an adolescent who shot his father, using all the bullets of the gun twice when his father bursted into the house to beat his mother.

Few studies describe the features of parricide women.^{6, 25,26, 27, 28} Heide and Petee²³, in 5558 parricides, gathered from 1976

to 1999, identified 43.8% matricides and 56,2% parricides, from which only 16% were matricides and 13% were parricides committed by women. Marleau et al.²¹ studied 38 parricide women, 21 matricides (16 adolescents and adult women, 5 of them older than 20 years old) and 17 parricides. The authors consider there is no consistent pattern between the aggressors and victims, thus proposing to assess, according to the context and age of the aggressors involved. Shon and Williams²⁸ by means of newspaper reports, from 1881 to 1899, found out 231 cases of parricides from which only 11 (4.76%) were committed by women, 2 parricides and 9 matricides. The authors identified abuses, relationships among father – daughters full of violence and financial income as reasons for the crimes. D’Orban and O’Connor²⁵ assessed 17 parricide women residing at custody hospitals, 14 matricides and 3 parricides. 15 of them had mental disorders (schizophrenia, psychosis, personality disorders and alcoholism). These were middle age women, single, socially isolated who lived with their mothers in a hostile relationship. Shon et al.⁶ by searching on Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) do FBI, from 1976 to 1999, 791 found out that cases of parricide women, from which 63.4% were white and 35.2% were black. Most of them (58.9%) were parricides (68.2% killed their biological parents and only 4.3% killed their stepmothers). The weapon used for killing their parents were fire guns (59%) and sharp weapons or utensils for killing their mothers.

The global study on Homicide made by the UN (Global Study on Homicide, Unodoc, 2013)²⁹ has revealed that, as an average, only 5% of people sentenced for homicide were women. According to the lack of data on parricides committed by women and the lack of a data base, similar to the SHR in Brazil, data was obtained from the on line Brazilian news, for cases of female parricides.

Method

By using 18 big/medium reports at a national level information was obtained about parricides committed by women during 1994 to 2017. The words used for searching were “daughter killed mother”, “daughter killed father”, “mother

was murdered by her daughter”, “father was murdered by his daughter after rape”, “daughter killed father and mother”. Data were obtained only for biological fathers and mothers. All research used from processes or newspaper articles do not require authorization to inform or any permit from the Ethical Committees.³⁰

The information was classified considering variables, such as: type of weapon, age of the aggressor, age and sex of the the victim, location and modus operandi of the crime, report on help received to commit the crime, presence of mental disorders or abuse of the psychoactive substances both by the aggressor as by the victim, history of the domestic violence prior to the crime and consequences reported after the crime (jail, sentence, escape).

Results

64 parricide cases committed by women in Brazil, between 1994 and 2017 were identified. Most of them were adults (60.9%), with an average age of 34 years old (DP=5,83), minimum age 18, maximum age 50. Adolescents (39,1%) were 15 years old, as an average (DP = 3,87) changing from 13 to 17. Average age of the victims was 60.5 (DP=7,77), with minimum age, 31 maximum age, 90. In 7 cases the age of the aggressor was not reported. In one case no information about the victim's age. There was no history about children under 12 years old committing parricide.

Table 1 shows that 51.6% of the victims were fathers; 37.5% were mothers and 9.4% was a double parricide (mother and father). In 2 other cases, other members of the family were killed, it seems that happened at the time of the crime: in one case the aggressor made an agreement with a man in order to kill her father. The killer was caught by the mother and grandmother who were killed as well; in another cases, the grandmother tried to help the mother when the aggressor was choking her and ended up to be another victim as well, being choked..

Sharp weapon (knives, machete, saw and scissors) have been used in 57.8% of all cases. Fire guns have been used in 23.4% of the parricides, despite in 7 of them their daughters hired some one to kill and in 8 of them daughters shot the victim. 4 crimes (6,3%)

were committed by choking: in one of them a choking technique named as “lion killing technique” was applied with the mother (the aggressor practiced fighting); in another case, the victim, was first poisoned with rat poison, that took too long to have an effect, so the aggressor asked for help from a partner to choke the mother using a pillow; in another case a rope was used and in the last case the daughter choked the victim with her own hands with the help of her couple. Death caused by other type of weapon, such as stones, chains, fire, sticks, iron bars, and medication were the 9.4% of all cases. No report of a weapon used in 2 cases studied. There is no difference between adults and adolescents when it comes to using a sharp weapon (60.5% and 58,3%, respectively). Still there is a slight increase in the frequency of fire guns used by adolescents against the adults (29.2% and 21.1% respectively) (Table 2).

Half of the women asked for help to commit the crime. As accomplices 17 fiancés, 2 friends, 6 hired, 3 husbands, 2 mothers, 1 cousin and 1 fiancé's father.

The reasons listed in the reports changed among maltreatment (39.1%), rape (15.6%), money (15.6%) and psychological problems (10.9%). Maltreatments reported dealt with constant verbal arguments, physical aggressions caused by alcoholism of the parent against the family (mother, children and sibling, including the aggressors) and arguments caused when the father prohibited love relations. In 10 cases, parricides were raped by the father. In 1 case there was a rape suspicion of grand children being raped by the victim. Among other 10 cases, the reason of the crime reported was a financial reason: parents' inheritance: the mother reported abuse of the credit card or to receive the mother's pension. Even there was allusion to the mother using drugs, no permission to go out, overburden of the mother (3 mothers had psychiatric disorders) and prohibition to enter the mother's house, as reasons for the crimes. In 8 cases no reason for the crime was found.

Reports mentioned that 28.1% of the crimes happened when the parricide/matricide tried to defend himself/herself or to defend a member of the family: “She was being maltreated physically/sexually/psychologically and grabbed a gun and killed her parent”, “she killed

Table 1. Parricide vs Matricide

	Adult	Adolescent	Total
Father	24 (37.5%)	09 (14.1%)	33 (51.6%)
Mother	11 (17.2%)	14 (21.9%)	25 (39.0%)
Father/Mother	04 (4.7%)	02 (3.1%)	6 (9.4%)
Total	39 (60.9%)	25 (39.1%)	64 (100%)

Table 2. Percentage of the type of gun used by adults and vs Adolescents

	Adult	Adolescent	Total
Sharp weapon	23 (60.5%)	14 (58.3%)	37 (59.7%)
Fire gun	08 (21.1%)	07 (29.2%)	15 (24.2%)
Others	07 (18.4%)	03 (12.5%)	10 (16.2%)
Total	38 (100%)	24 (100%)	62 (100%)

in self defense of a parent (mother, children or sibling) who was being beaten by one parent, “she killed to defend her children not to be raped by her grandfather” or “defending the mate who had been raped by her father in law”. In 17.2% of the cases the crime happened when the victim and aggressor had an argument. 7.8% were fighting before the crime. In 10 cases (15.6%) crimes were committed using cruelty, according to the report: tortured body, poisoning where the victim agonized till death, body beheaded after death, the victim was burned while sleeping or the victim was thrown to the river with stones tied to his/her feet.

More than half (64.1%) had a record of domestic violence before the crime, with constant conflicts and arguments among the members of the family. In 10 cases (15,6%) there was a report on robbery, fraud and revenge among the members of the family. In of them there was no reference about domestic violence before the crime.

Most of the bodies (79.7%) were found at home: 62.5% were inside the house, in rooms,

such as the living room and the bedroom, the kitchen. 17.2% were outside(yard, a well, in the field, garage, at the door entrance and in the sewage in the front of the house of the victim). The other bodies were found in various places: at the highway, on the way to the hospital, in the river, etc.

2 thirds (67.2%) of them were caught (adolescents) and arrested (adults), 78% could run away and 3.1% were under psychological treatment. 2 parricides, during the investigation reported to have been abused by the victim and were subject to psychological treatment. There was one case of suicide after the crime and another where the parricide was released during the investigation. Reports no don provide data about 5 cases.

As a summary, 64 cases were analyzed, 51.6% of the victims were fathers, 37.5% were mothers, 9.4% was a double parricide. Sharp weapons were used in 57.8% of the cases; fire guns were used in 23.4% of the cases, other cases were asphyxia and use of other instruments. Half of the women asked for help

to commit the crime. Fe of them (11%) had psychiatric disorders. Abuses (maltreatment and rape) were the causes reported by 54.7% of the cases, psychiatric disorders (10.9%) and financial conflicts (15.6%). Most of the bodies (79,7%) were found at home. Most (67.2%) of the aggressors was caught (adolescent) and imprisoned (adult); 7.8% could run away and 3.1% were under psychological treatment.

DISCUSSION

Although this is a crime socially rejected, as death of a father or a mother by his/her own daughter implies a rupture in the natural relationships, parricide must be deemed as a unique crime, and exceptional, as its main motivation basically comes from abusive family relationships, i.e., is a domestic homicide^{3, 18, 31}. Reports tell us that women committing parricide they mostly (57.7%) made it, because they were victims of abuses (maltreatment and rape). The same reasons have been reported in investigations with male aggressors^{1, 20, 22}. The type of weapon and the crime scene also reinforce previous data obtained from parricide investigations committed by women or men; i. e. the crime is mainly committed at home, with available weapons (knives, instruments, pistols, choking poison)^{3, 14}. Proportion between matricide, parricide and double parricide (51.6% / 37.5% / 9,4%, respectively) is close to what was found with the sample from both sexes¹⁰. The difference found had to do with the need of help to commit the crime. Half of women asked for help from couples, gunmen, relatives to commit the crime, among men this proportion is lower (around 20%).⁹

Use of daily reports for retrieving data has significant limits to be reported. First of all, consideration must be made to the fact that some parricides have not been reported. However, as this is a crime of high social impact it is possible that mass media are motivated to cover the news. It is also recognized that the description of the facts does not provide details necessary for desired scientific studies, many pieces of information are not covered during the investigation. Usually, the reason for these crimes are obtained from the people, with no further interviews (reporters, police), specially

when dealing with data on maltreatment suffered by the aggressor and committed by the victim. On the other hand, as there is no data bank in Brazil about offenders of any nature, it is advisable to use that source of information as legitimate. Other studies were made by means of newspaper reports when the authors needed access to records prior to the existence of an official data bank.²⁸

Murder committed at home, by non professional criminals, possibly justifies the high rate of arrests against the parricides studied. In Brazil, official data state that only 0.7% of homicides are solved³². Among the parricides most crimes are solved, and the aggressor is identified, arrested or sent to a psychiatric Treatment Center.

The way how these crimes are committed, with many knives⁸, much shooting²² or cruelty, make it not feasible, due to the Brazilian legislation, that the fact is interpreted as legitimate defense (Article 25, of the Penal Code “who, using moderately the necessary means, rejects any unfair aggression, current or imminent, on behalf of himself/herself or others”).³³ the modus operandi, overkill²⁴, or exaggerated violence¹⁴, reflect the intense emotion of the moment (anger, fear), and that violence allegedly uncontrolled and used against the victim is understood as cruel or it is a resource that made impossible for the victim to defend himself/herself. These data subsidize Brazilian legislator to feature the crime as atrocious, thus putting more aggravation to the crime.

There is no specific penal type for parricide, so that makes legal study of these phenomena to demand an analysis, apart from the crime classification described in Article 121 of the Brazilian Penal Code 18. Article 57 of the Penal Code states to take into account “the victim’s behavior”, when considering the duration of the punishment.³³ In order to do so, the victimology study is fundamental and the information about the relationships between victim-aggressor are important in order to understand this crime, as it is in case of femicides³⁴. Another aggravation of parricide crime to be reconsidered is that Article 61, II a, of the Penal Code says “to have the committed crime as an ascendant”. When considering “the victim’s behavior” (art. 57)

the judge increases the penalty of the aggressor, ignoring that, as Antoni and Koller³⁴ said in families where abuses do not occur, people are perceived according to their affection relationships, whereas in violent homes, there are mere blood links marking these family relationships. After physical/psychological/sexual abuses have been confirmed, it is visible that the victim keeps that relationship of ascendance upon the aggressor only before the society, and it is likely that the parricide sees the victim only as his/her most cruel tormentor.³⁶

However, crime background is not considered by the legislation. Violence exerted by the parent against the parricide/matricide is the main motivation of the crime.^{8, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22} Several types of mal have been described against the parricide and family members. Inapplicability of diverse conduct (Article 22 of the Penal Code)³³ is, strictly, a construct of the doctrine stating that in some factual circumstances, in a situation of an alleged crime (homicide, for instance), the agent has no choice to the action that caused the crime. This is not a “crime” caused by exoneration, or, as a minimum, the crime will not be punishable, even though it is a typical and illicit conduct.³⁷ Motivation for the practice of that deed will be taken into account to aggravate/reduce the penalty. In all studied cases, maltreatment, threats and aggressions of all type, committed by the victim on his/her family – among them, the tormentor - , are clearly present, and the alleged homicide action (parricide) is a response to a history that finally ends up as an instrument of death. The tormentor, son/daughter of the victim as per definition, acts in the only way he/she could act, to protect himself/herself from an unfair aggression, whether current or imminent (the criteria of legitimate defense), more than that: to protect history, a history that so far was made only on maltreatment against the family (mother/father and brother/sister/siblings). It is not possible to demand from a son/daughter to act in a different way.

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Correspondence to:
Paula Inez Cunha Gomide
Calle Capitão Souza Franco, 1019,
ap 162, Curitiba, Paraná, 80730-420;
paulainezgomide@gmail.com