

Till Death Do Us Part: A Study of Spouse Murder

GEORGE W. BARNARD, MD
HERNAN VERA, PHD
MARIA I. VERA, MSW
GUSTAVE NEWMAN, MD

Killers of members of their own families have long fueled the archetypal imagination. Our myths, literature, and popular arts are full of such characters as Cain, Oedipus, Medea, Othello, Hamlet, and Bluebeard. In our time the murderous children of movies like "The Bad Seed" and "The Omen"; the homicidal father of "The Shining"; the killer spouses of Hitchcock's "Midnight Lace" and "The Postman Always Rings Twice" bespeak a continuing fascination with the topic. In contrast, until recently the human sciences paid "selective inattention"¹ to the topic of family violence. Only in the past decade has violence in the family become "a high priority social issue,"² an "urgent situation,"³ on which privileged research energy needs to be expended.

We deal here with the murder of one spouse by the other, a topic on which research remains sparse⁴ despite the growing interest in family violence. Based on data derived from twenty-three males and eleven females accused of such crime, we contrast and compare the two groups attempting to identify common and gender-related characteristics in the offense, the relationship between murderer and victim, as well as the judicial disposition of the accused.

The importance of the doer-sufferer relation in acts of family criminal violence has been well established. In major sociological studies⁵⁻⁸ it has been found that about one out of five (or nearly one out of four) deaths by murder in the U.S. involved a family member. Family violence also has been reported to be a significant social problem in Great Britain, Germany, The Netherlands, Israel, and in Africa.⁹ In the State of Florida,¹⁰ where the murder rate was 10.6 per 100,000 population in 1978, the murder of one family member by another accounted for 19.3 percent of all murders. Of these murders, one spouse killing the other accounted for 12.75 percent of all murders. In 1980, the proportion of relative and spouse homicide had decreased to 13.7 percent and 8.2 percent respectively, but this reduction appears to be a result of sharp increases in other types of homicide.

In his classic study, *Patterns of Criminal Homicide*, Wolfgang examined 588 homicides in Philadelphia to determine the extent and character of family criminal violence. He reported that "half of the family killings involved a spouse killing a spouse. In these murders, the wife was the victim

* All authors are from the University of Florida. Address correspondence to G.W. Barnard, MD.: University of Florida; Dept. of Psychiatry; Box J-256, JHMHC; Gainesville, FL 32610.

in 52 percent of the incidents and the husband in the remaining 48 percent."¹¹ Female offenders killed their husbands in 45 percent of the cases, while male offenders killed their wives in 12 percent of the cases.

In the past decade, psychiatric literature on family violence reveals the same increased interest in the topic evident in the other human sciences. Thus, while in 1969 Tanay¹² found that clinical studies on the topic of homicide were "conspicuous by their absence," in 1979, Pagan and Smith¹³ researched the same topic and found "extensive literature." Spouse homicide is recognized as deserving special attention, even when it often has been grouped in the category of "homicides of passion"¹⁴ and lumped together with the homicides of lovers.¹⁵ Recently Showalter *et al.*¹⁶ have identified a "spousal homicide syndrome" derived from the study of an all-male sample. Spouse murder has also been seen as the arrival point in relations of intense ambivalence in which the eventual victim plays the role of tormentor of the murderer.¹⁷ Given the cyclic nature of conflict and reconciliation that characterizes the relation of the murderer and the victim spouse, the possibility of preventive intervention also has been discussed.^{18,19} Avison has identified a clear need to study the "sociocultural nexus" in which the offender-victim relationship developed.²⁰

Subjects and Methods

This study is based on data derived from 34 offenders who were psychiatrically evaluated for the courts of north central Florida by the senior author between 1970 and 1980. The 11 women and 23 men in this series were selected from a larger population of felons (a total of 1,508) who were also evaluated during that same period. All subjects included in the sample stood accused of having murdered his or her legal or common-law spouse. In view of our interest in the violent destruction of the family unit, we excluded from the sample murderers of occasional lovers who did not have a stable relationship with their killers.

The primary purpose of the psychiatric evaluation was to determine the defendants' competency to stand trial and their legal sanity at the time of the alleged crime. In order to make this evaluation, a complete psychiatric examination was performed. The psychiatric interview unearthed a wealth of information about the personal history of the defendants — including employment, previous arrest records, medical and psychiatric histories, the behavior at the time of the criminal event, and adjustment after arrest. In each case a report was prepared summarizing the information elicited and the psychiatrist's opinions on the competency to stand trial and sanity of the defendant at the time of the alleged crime. The information contained in these reports, supplemented with the psychiatrist's notes and occasional information supplied by the defense counsel or State Attorney, was coded using a 140-item questionnaire. In addition, the authors, independently and as a team, coded the information for more complex patterns. The nature of our sample precludes any claim to representativeness of the data by refer-

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ence to any larger population. Nevertheless, we detected a number of patterns and substantive associations.

Results

Background variables Table 1 reflects selected background variables of the alleged perpetrators under study and shows both groups are composed primarily of whites. The males tend to be older, less educated, and to have more previous arrests and a history of alcohol abuse than do the females. On the other hand, more of the females have a history of previous psychiatric treatment and suicide attempts than do the males.

Table 1. Selected Background Variables of Males and Females Charged with Spouse Homicide

	Males [N=23]		Females [N=11]	
	N	%	N	%
Race				
Non-white	10	43.5	2	18.2
White	13	56.5	9	81.8
Age				
20 and under	1	4.3	1	9.1
21-30	6	28.6	4	36.4
31-40	6	28.6	3	27.3
41-50	5	21.7	2	36.4
51 and older	5	21.7	1	9.1
Education				
Did not finish high school	15	65.2	3	27.2
High school	6	26.1	7	63.6
College graduate	2	8.7	1	9.1
Previous Criminal Record*				
No record	6	26.1	7	63.6
Against property	1	4.3	2	18.2
Against persons	6	26.1	2	18.2
DWI	9	39.1	0	
Other	7	30.4	0	
Occupation				
Never worked	0		1	9.1
Unskilled	11	47.8	5	45.4
Skilled	8	34.8	2	18.2
Sales & clerical	0		2	18.2
Managerial & professional	2	8.7	1	9.1
Retired	2	8.7	0	
Medical and Psychiatric Histories				
Surgery	17	73.9	9	81.9
Psychiatric hospitalization	4	17.4	4	36.4
Out-patient psychiatric treat.	6	26.1	8	72.7
Veneral disease	5	21.7	0	
Suicide attempts	3	13.0	5	54.5
Alcohol abuse	13	56.5	1	9.1
Family				
Number of siblings (mean)	4.7		4.6	
Parental loss before age 16	12	52.2	6	54.5

* Reflects offenses charged by police excluding minor traffic offenses

Problems in the marital relationship To characterize the marital relationship the defendants had with their spouse-victims, we coded the type of problems they mentioned in their accounts of the homicidal event. Table 2 shows the relationships reported by both male and female defendants appear marred by frequent arguments and a history of separations. More importantly, a number of significant differences emerge between the men and the women in this series.

Women's accounts are dominated by the problems grouped under verbal and physical violence and alcohol abuse by their husbands. Of special importance is the fact that eight (72.7 percent) of the women reported having been battered by their spouse-victim compared to only five (21.7 percent) of the men who reported having been the victims of violence on the part of their spouse-victim.

In contrast, the male defendants reported significantly more incidents of infidelity and desertion on the part of their victims as well as having been separated from them on the day of the crime. These data will be discussed in the conclusions where we will integrate them into the patterns of homicide that appear to be prevalent among the men and the women studied.

Table 2. Problems in Marital Relationship Mentioned by Males and Females Charged with Spouse Homicide^a

	Males [N=23]		Females [N=11]	
	N	%	N	%
Verbal and Physical Violence				
Frequent arguments	13	56.5	10	90.0
Battering by victim	1	4.3	8	72.7*
Battering by alleged offender	5	21.7	2	18.2
Desertion and Unfaithfulness				
History of separations	13	56.5	5	45.5
Unfaithfulness by victim	14	60.9	3	27.3*
Unfaithfulness by alleged offender	4	17.4	0	
Desertion by victim	12	52.2	1	9.1*
Desertion by alleged offender	3	13.0	0	*
Separated day of crime	13	56.5	1	9.1
Alcohol and Drug Abuse				
Alcohol abuse by victim	7	30.4	8	72.7*
Alcohol abuse by alleged offender	13	56.5	1	9.1

^a Figures represent presence of variable in defendants' accounts. Frequencies and percentages add to more than 100 percent because defendants mentioned multiple problems.

* Difference is significant at the .05 level or better with Fischer's Exact Test.

The homicidal event In Table 3 we have assembled some key circumstances of the criminal events as reported by the defendants. No significant differences appear between men and women. Nonetheless, it is important to call attention to the high incidence of reported alcohol use on the day of the murder by both men and women. This supports the well-established association between alcohol consumption and homicide, an association also found in other crimes of violence.²¹

Table 3. Circumstances in the Defendant's Account of the Homicide by Males and Females Charged with Spouse Homicide

	Males [N=23]		Females [N=11]	
	N	%	N	%
Place of Homicide				
Victim's home	7	30.1	0	
Couple's home	7	30.1	6	54.5
Public place	6	26.1	5	45.5
Other	3	13.0	0	
Defendant's Use of Chemicals				
Alcohol	16	69.6	6	54.5
Drugs	2	8.7	1	9.1
Weapon				
Hand gun	11	47.9	7	63.6
Shotgun, rifle	5	21.7	2	18.2
Knife, piercing instrument	4	17.4	1	9.1
Other (fire, strangulation)	3	13.0	1	9.1

Handguns are the preferred weapon for men and women in 47.9 percent and 63.6 percent of the cases, respectively. Shotguns and rifles account for an additional 18.2 percent and 21.7 percent of murder weapons. We had expected wives to prefer stabbing and husbands to prefer shooting and beating to death, as Wolfgang²² had reported. There is no significant difference in preferred weapon between the men and the women in our series.

The places where men committed their murders are about equally divided between the victim's home, the couple's home, and a public place. On the other hand, women murdered about half of the time in a public place and the remainder of the time in the couple's home. These frequencies are associated with the different proportions of men (56.5 percent) and women (9.1 percent) who were separated from their spouses on the day of the crime.

The behavior patterns of spouse homicide were derived by considering the type of relationship the alleged offender reported having with his/her spouse and the events reported in each case. We arrived at an identification of these patterns through an independent examination of the defendants' records by each of the authors and a subsequent joint evaluation. These patterns are the subject of our discussion and conclusions.

Psychiatrist's opinions of competency and sanity of defendants All but one (95.7 percent) of the male defendants and all the female defendants, were believed to meet the criteria to be considered competent to stand trial. In the opinion of the examining psychiatrist, all but two (82.6 percent) of the female defendants were judged sane at the time of the alleged crime. Four male defendants (17.4 percent) were judged to have been insane at the time of the alleged crime: one was diagnosed as having a schizophrenic disorder, paranoid type; one was found to present a depersonalization disorder; one had an organic brain syndrome with delirium; and one had an acute paranoid disorder. Of the two female defendants judged to be insane at the time of the alleged crime, one was considered to have had a major depressive episode and one a depersonalization disorder.

Court disposition The courts were contacted by the senior author to learn the initial and final charges, the verdict of the court, and the judicial disposition of the defendants after the trial. It is apparent that reduction of charges was more likely to occur in the cases of male defendants (47.8 percent) than in the cases of female defendants (18.2 percent). Yet males (82.6 percent) were found guilty more often than females (54.5 percent). These results are concordant with the differences in pleas entered by males and females. Men pleaded guilty or *nolo contendere* in 3/4 of the cases, while only 2/3 of the women so pleaded. The not-guilty-by-reason-of-insanity ruling favored women: 27.3 percent of them received this verdict, in contrast to only 9.1 percent of the men (Table 4).

Table 4. Initial and Final Charge, and Court Disposition of Males and Females Charged with Spouse Homicide

	Males [N=23]		Females [N=11]	
	N	%	N	%
Charges at Time of Arrest				
First degree murder	17	73.9	7	63.6
Second degree murder	6	26.1	4	36.4
Final Charge				
First degree murder	7	30.4	5	45.5
Second degree murder	5	21.7	4	36.4
Third degree murder	2	8.7	0	
Manslaughter	6	26.1	2	18.2
Charge reduced	11	47.8	2	18.2
Court Disposition*				
Guilty	19	82.6	6	54.5
Pleaded guilty or <i>nolo contendere</i>	14	60.9	4	36.4
Jury trial	5	21.7	2	18.2
Not guilty by reason of insanity	2	8.7	3	27.3
Unknown	2	8.7	1	9.1

* Court verdict and disposition was available for 19 male defendants and for 11 female defendants

The psychiatrist's opinion regarding the defendants' sanity at the time of the alleged crime was in agreement with the final court verdict of sanity in 78.2 percent of the male defendants' cases and in 81.9 percent of the females'. In one case the court's verdict was not obtainable.

The court's disposition was also disparate between men and women. Thirty-six percent of the female defendants were released as not guilty, or not guilty by reason of insanity, while no male defendants were released for these reasons. Of the males 8.7 percent (but none of the females) were committed to a mental hospital by the courts. Even in sentencing these defendants found guilty, the courts meted lighter punishment for the women. Some 27.3 percent of them received probation or a short (less than five years) sentence, while only 13 percent of the men received similar sentences. On the other hand, 69.6 percent of the male defendants received a sentence of five years to life, but only 27.3 percent of the female defendants received such a sentence. These figures suggest the courts treat women more leniently than they treat men in cases of spouse murder. Wolfgang²³

reports very similar trends. Nonetheless, the different treatment of these offenders is a reflection of the type of homicide in which each gender engages more often. In fact, wives are more frequently provoked by their husbands than vice versa (as shown in Table 2), a circumstance that mitigates the seriousness of the offense.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our results show there is both commonality as well as significant differences between these two groups of defendants charged with spouse murder. The common features are reflected in similar family and occupational backgrounds, use of alcohol by the alleged offender on the day of the crime, a gun as the most common murder weapon, and the home as the most likely place of homicide. Background differences between the two groups reveal that a larger number of male defendants did not finish high school, had a history of previous arrests, gave a history of alcohol abuse, and perceived their wives as unfaithful. A higher percentage of female defendants reported a history of psychiatric treatment and being battered by their husbands who abused alcohol. Themes and events reported as triggering the homicidal act were different for the two groups. For the males the precipitating event was some form of perceived rejection by the spouse, whereas for the females it was a verbal or physical act of provocation by the spouse.

Unlike Showalter *et al.*,²⁴ we distinguished not a singular "spouse homicide syndrome," but four distinct types: psychotic homicide, drug-related homicide, victim precipitated homicide, and for lack of a better name what we have called "sex-role threat homicide." Psychotic homicides are characterized by the murderers being afflicted with gross distortions of reality to the extent they were not aware of the actions of others or of their own behavior. In our series six murders were of this type. Three cases involved chronic mental conditions and three temporary conditions. The chronic conditions included one man afflicted with paranoid schizophrenia, another judged psychotic with a paranoid condition, and one woman afflicted with psychotic depression. The temporary conditions included an acute secondary brain syndrome that afflicted one man, and acute dissociative reactions that afflicted one man and one woman.

Murders committed by a person while under the influence of drugs or alcohol were marginally represented in this series. In such cases the perpetrators' consciousness is seriously impaired by the chemical substance and the actual killing could well have been accidental. Three cases were classified as belonging to this type. One female had consumed a mixture of "uppers," "downers," and alcohol over several days and could not even remember having been at the scene of the crime. In another case, a man had spent the morning drinking amiably with his victim. The wife decided to engage in target practice, an activity which at first was seen as innocent, then as threatening by the offender, finally leading him to shoot her in believed self-defense. In the third case a man was told, as he recuperated

from his alcoholic stupor, that he had killed his wife of 35 years with whom, he said, he got along well.

The third type of homicide we could identify corresponds to the "victim-precipitated homicide," described by Wolfgang.²⁵ As the label indicates, the victim is a major contributor to the criminal event with his or her role being characterized by having been the first to use violence directed at the subsequent slayer. In the cases under study, verbal and/or physical abuse initiated an exchange of violence. After excluding three cases of psychotic and drug-related homicides, the remaining eight women engaged in this type of homicide. Two men also engaged in this type of homicide.

While victim-precipitated homicide was the most common for women, for men the most frequent was the type that we have called "sex-role threat homicide." The men who engaged in this type of uxoricide felt they were reacting to a previous offense on the part of the victim. This offense, by contrast to the previous type, was not immediately provocative or endangering of the physical integrity of the men. Rather, a walkout, a demand, a threat of separation were taken by the men to represent intolerable desertion, rejection, and abandonment. Thus, our data confirm Simon's²⁶ observation that the threat of separation is usually the trigger for violence in these cases. Furthermore, we also see the key to this type of homicide in the murderers' unspoken sense of dependency on the victim.

What then are the clinical issues in these cases of spouse murder? The data show that, although the defendant and victim may have lived together for years, the relationship was marred by conflict as demonstrated by the histories of violence, separation, and alcohol abuse. Clinically it seems to us there was a different set of dynamics and triggering events operative in the males than there was in the females. Most of the women previously had been physically abused by their husbands. Although there may have been separations, the females remained in the strained marital relationship and endured the spouse abuse. On the day of the alleged crime, either verbal or physical provocation by the husband was the usual precipitating event for the homicidal act.

While most of the male defendants did not describe a history of physical abuse by their wives, they did voice strong resentments toward their spouses for real or imagined previous episodes of unfaithfulness or desertion. Most of the males were separated or divorced at the time they murdered their wives. The theme most often expressed by them as the precipitating event for the homicide was their inability to accept what they perceived to be a rejection of them or of their role of dominance over their eventual victims. The sociocultural nexus²⁰ at the base of these dynamics is, most immediately, the culturally prescribed image of what it is to be man or what it is to be a woman.

Thus, to understand spouse homicide, one needs to understand not only individual dynamics and cultural prescriptions but also the point at which these factors meet. In our view, this meeting point can be conceptualized as

individuals attempting to solve by their actions the riddles of culture that the events of life force on them. By definition, those who engage in a criminal solution resolve the contradiction in socially disapproved ways. Given the limitations of our data, we can only contribute a conceptualization and a description of how the homicides under study can become more intelligible considering a differential set of contradictions for each sex. In our view, this necessitates an understanding of sex roles as prescribed at any given time. Masculinity, as Balswick and Peek²⁷ put it, is "expressed largely through physical courage, toughness, competitiveness, and aggressiveness, whereas femininity is in contrast, expressed largely through gentleness, expressiveness, and responsiveness."

As these behaviors are not interchangeable between the sexes, the identification with one role makes the traits of the other role undesirable for oneself. Thus, a marital situation that calls for involvement, sensitivity, and expressiveness can be specially threatening for a male who has always identified with an aggressive, dominant, and detached image. This threat results in aggression toward oneself as well as toward the threatening spouse. One of the male prisoners said, "She had been running around on me, and I should be dead." He killed her and then shot himself in a suicide attempt.

In some cases the threat is reported to be a potential or actual desertion. In other cases the threat is the denial of right the eventual killer believed he had to dominate his wife and to exercise control over her actions. In other cases the threats are intertwined. A male prisoner related a long and elaborate chain of fears of desertion and suspicion of infidelity on the part of his wife. He followed her for days and ended up murdering her when she insisted she "must have more freedom" so she could go alone to a nearby health spa. It was with surprise and pain he discovered that, despite his denials, it bothered him that she expressed independence. Besides, he was having intense feelings. He was bonded to her but could not admit or deal with his emotions without bringing his identity into question, an identity rooted in widely accepted cultural definitions of masculinity.

In fact, the cultural images of what it is to be a man leave little room for sensitivity and dependency in men. The room for the expressiveness, which might allow men to cope with those very needs, is even smaller. These feelings of dependency, subordination, and rejection could not be accepted without denying what had been internalized as constituting masculinity. In other words, the men would have had to deny what in our society is one of the earliest acquired and most stable identities — the one deriving from gender-based roles.

In our experience, over 70 percent of women report having been battered by their eventual victim. There is no doubt this situation is an antecedent of victim-precipitated homicide. One has to wonder if early intervention or an earlier termination of the relationship could have averted the murder. Certainly our data give no base for an answer. But they do suggest the importance of a direction for clinical and sociological research. In fact,

recent studies²⁸⁻³⁰ of family violence have shown that women in relationships in which they are objectively and subjectively dependent are more likely to tolerate abuse than wives in more balanced relations. This suggests that in the case of victim-precipitated spouse murders dependency could well be, even when far from a cause, a culprit again, albeit in a sense quite different from the way in which dependency was operative in sex-role threat homicide. We find it paradoxical that dependency, a trait so strongly identified with a family's strength, might also be identified with its violent destruction.

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