

Filicidal Abuse in the Histories of 15 Condemned Murderers

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This paper describes the family characteristics of 15 Death Row inmates. It documents extraordinary physical and/or sexual abuse in 13 cases. It describes murderous behaviors of parents toward children in 8 cases and documents ongoing hostility and neglect throughout childhood and adulthood. The paper explores the mechanisms by which such abuse may contribute to violent behaviors. It highlights the relevance of these findings to the outcome of sentencing in capital cases.

In the United States each year, approximately 20,000 arrests are made for murder or nonnegligent homicide.¹ Given this high number of homicides, remarkably few murderers are sentenced to death (i.e., approximately 200–250) and, among those so sentenced, only a small number have been executed to date (i.e., 46 since 1976 when the Supreme Court lifted the moratorium on executions).²

Little is known about the clinical characteristics of condemned prisoners, much less about those who fail all appeals and are executed. In a previous paper we reported the neuropsychiatric characteristics of 15 condemned individuals.³ This paper documents the nature and prevalence of extraordinary abuse (i.e., potentially filicidal acts) and other intrafamily violence in the childhood of these 15 subjects. It will also explore the possible relevance of particular parental

characteristics not only to the development of adult violent criminality, but also to the harshness of the sentences imposed.

The Literature

A controversy exists regarding the association of physical abuse and the development of violent behavior. The literature focuses mainly on children and adolescents. Tartar and associates⁴ and Reidy⁵ found violent behaviors to be more prevalent in abused children than in nonabused children. Others have reported that adolescent offenders who committed violent crimes including homicide were distinguished from less violent offenders by a history of severe abuse.^{6,7} In contrast to these findings Gutierrez and Reich⁸ and Rolston⁹ reported that withdrawal, placid behavior, truancy, and running away were often characteristic of abused children. Other authors found no difference between the aggressive behaviors of abused and nonabused children.^{10,11}

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Follow-up studies of abused children usually focus more on the immediate effects on child development such as emotional, cognitive, and neurologic sequelae.¹²⁻¹⁶ Several studies have explored the relationship of childhood abuse to adult criminality. McCord¹⁷ found that home atmosphere, including parental aggression and conflict, was related to later criminal behavior in terms of the numbers and types of crimes committed. Smith asserted that child abuse and other factors such as modeling, brain damage, and parental psychopathology could lead to adult violence.¹⁸ Few studies have addressed specifically and in depth the issues of child abuse in the backgrounds of murderers. Duncan and coworkers,¹⁹ in case studies of six adult murderers, found that four of these subjects had been victims of severe physical brutality. Similarly, Satten and associates²⁰ reported extreme violence in the backgrounds of four murderers. In a study of 54 homicidal offenders, Tanay²¹ found that 67% had histories of severe corporal punishment. In contrast to these findings, Langevin and coworkers,²² using questionnaires and case records, found no difference in family violence between murderers and nonviolent offenders.

Although the preponderance of studies document an association of early victimization and subsequent aggressive behaviors, few address specifically the effects of violence between parents. Lystad²³ discussed studies on violence between husbands and wives and noted that the effects on children have not really been explored. Levine²⁴ studied

50 families with interparental violence and distinguished families in which violence was restricted to the parents from families in which violence was beginning to be expressed toward children. In all cases, the children were affected. They displayed psychiatric and behavioral problems including aggression. In his study of 19 families that abused their children Stratton²⁵ found a 61% prevalence of interparental violence. Thus, it would seem that child abuse is but one aspect of family violence.

Just as there are degrees of criminal behavior, so there are degrees of parental abuse, the most extreme manifestation of which is filicide. The literature on filicide focuses primarily on characteristics of parents, especially on mothers.^{26,27} D'Orban²⁸ classified filicidal mothers as battering mothers, mentally ill mothers, mothers of unwanted children, neonaticides, retaliating women, and mercy killers. To the best of our knowledge no studies of filicide to date have explored the long-term effects of having been the victim as a child of attempted filicide. Moreover, none have documented the extent of ongoing parental rejection by formerly filicidal parents.

Given the dearth of data regarding the association of filicidal acts and family violence to adult violent crimes, we welcomed the opportunity to study and report the childhood histories of 15 adult condemned murderers. Although we would have liked to compare murderers not condemned to death with our sample, access to such a comparison group was impossible to obtain.

Methods

Sample Our subjects were 15 condemned individuals (13 men and two women) who were sentenced to death in five different states in the United States. These subjects were not selected because of suspected histories of abuse. Thirteen were chosen because of the imminence of their executions and the desire of their attorneys, in the interest of clemency appeals, to investigate areas of functioning that might previously have been overlooked. In two cases, subjects were the first man and first woman to be charged with capital offenses in states in which the death penalty had recently been reinstated. Their attorneys requested evaluations to determine the possible existence either of grounds for an insanity defense or of mitigating factors relevant to sentencing. In both of these cases, the subjects were tried, found guilty as charged, and sentenced to death, and thus are included in this sample. Since the beginning of our study in 1984, four of our subjects have been executed.

Sources of Data Family histories were obtained from several sources. All 15 subjects received psychiatric evaluations ranging in duration from four to 16 hours, in which detailed family, social, educational, and medical histories were obtained. In three cases, parents and/or siblings were interviewed by the psychiatrist. In nine other cases, close relatives were interviewed by investigators and/or attorneys from the public defenders' offices. Thus, in 12 cases, information gleaned from the subjects was confirmed by close relatives.

In 10 cases, records from psychiatric hospitals, general hospitals, psychiatric clinics, and/or other clinical evaluations were reviewed. Other sources of data included army, prison, school, and juvenile court records. Thus, in addition to our own psychiatric record, there were, on the average, four independent sources of information for each subject. In only one case did we have to rely exclusively on our psychiatric evaluation.

Definition of Variables

Filicidal Acts Parental behaviors were considered filicidal if they were likely to result in death were they not forcefully curtailed. Threats with lethal weapons, such as guns, or statements of intent to kill a child, accompanied by severe physical assault, were also considered to be filicidal.

Using these criteria for filicide, 5 independent raters reviewed all data on parental behaviors and, in this instance, agreement was perfect.

Physical Abuse A subject was considered to have been abused if he or she had been punched, beaten with a stick, board, pipe, or belt buckle; or had been beaten with a belt or switch other than on the buttocks. A subject was also considered to have been abused if he or she had been deliberately cut, burned, or thrown downstairs or across a room. A subject was not considered to have been abused if he or she had been struck only with an open hand, beaten with the leather part of a belt, or beaten with a switch only on the buttocks.

In 13 of the 15 cases, abuse was cor-

roborated by records, relatives' accounts, or physical evidence of specific traumata (e.g., scars on back, evidence of depressed skull fractures).

Physical abuse was rated by five independent raters, using the above criteria. Agreement was at the .757 level using intraclass correlations.

Sexual Abuse A subject was considered to have been sexually abused if, as a child, older persons had fondled his/her breasts or buttocks, or fondled or penetrated genitals or anus. Sexual abuse was also considered to have occurred if the child had been forced to perform sexual acts on an older person.

The occurrence of sexual abuse was rated by five independent raters, using the above criteria. Agreement was at the .910 level using intraclass correlations.

Violence between Parents The criteria for violence between parents were reports of severe physical fighting between parents, ranging from punching and beating each other to the use of weapons. Verbal abuse was not considered evidence of interparental violence.

The occurrence of violence between parents was rated by five independent raters, using these criteria. Agreement was at the .986 level using intraclass correlations.

Findings

Of the 15 subjects, eight had been victims of potentially filicidal assaults. For example, one mother shot at her son with a gun as he tried to get away from her. She threatened him with a knife, kicked him, and whipped him all over his body with horse whips, ironing cords, sticks, and belts. When she tied him to

a water heater and horse whipped him, police were called to intervene. One father held his four-year-old son outside a car as it sped down a highway. Both parents frequently beat the boy all over his body. One mother burned her son on the chest with a hot iron and tried to choke him. She also held him outside the window of a moving car when he was an infant and attempted to throw him out. The child's father restrained her. Another subject's mother tried to choke him. His father knocked him unconscious, slashed him with a metal slide, hit him in the head with two by four boards, and strapped him with belt buckles. One subject's father on several occasions threatened the subject and his siblings with a shotgun. He also forced them at gunpoint to watch him beat their mother. Other times, he tied his children to the bed and whipped them. He also threw an axe at the subject, injuring the boy's ankle.

In addition to the eight subjects who were the victims of potentially filicidal acts, four subjects were brutally assaulted to a point considered by raters to be short of actual attempted murder.

Thus, of the 15 subjects, there was evidence of extraordinary abuse in 12 cases.

Of these subjects, four also had been the victims of sexual abuse, and one subject, who had not been otherwise physically abused, had been sexually abused throughout childhood.

Examples of sexual abuse are as follows: One mother forced her son to sleep with her throughout his childhood and forced him to stimulate her orally and to fondle her breasts. Another subject

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was fondled and forced by a parent and several close relatives to have sexual intercourse throughout childhood. A neighbor also brutally forced oral sex on this subject. One subject's mother played half-naked on her bed and teased the subject by placing hot dogs in her panties. She lay naked with legs spread and had her son fondle her. This subject was also raped by a male cousin. One subject's father inserted objects into the subject when the subject was a small child, forced penetration when the subject reached adolescence, and continued to force sexual relations with his child until the child left home at 18 years of age.

Violence in these families not only was directed toward the children, but also occurred between parents and/or stepparents. Eleven of the subjects came from families in which parents or stepparents threatened each other with extreme violence. In six of these cases, these acts were homicidal. For example, one subject's mother tried to stab his father with a knife. Another father threatened his wife with a gun and she threatened him with a butcher knife. Another father was jailed for assaulting his wife. In one case, the subject was brought up by a single, violent mother who threatened a man with a gun in the presence of the subject. Thus, in 12 of the households there was extraordinary violence between adults.

Although it was not possible to ascertain the degree of psychopathology in the parents and stepparents of these subjects because of lack of clear documentation, there were indications that severe psychopathology existed in 10 cases. For example, one father would experience

episodic rages lasting a week at a time, during which he brutalized his hunting dogs, stomping on their heads. Another extremely brutal father was idiosyncratically religious, setting up a shrine in the woods, at which he would prostrate himself and pray regularly. One mother was so suspicious that she thought that the investigator for the defense was an escaped convict coming to kill her. She therefore called the FBI to check the validity of the defense counselor's letters. Two subjects' mothers were psychiatrically hospitalized. Several parents showed severe symptoms of mood disorders. Seven of the 16 subjects had at least one alcoholic parent.

We wondered what, if any, family support was offered to our subjects. Although this was difficult to quantify, we were able to count the number of actual contacts each subject had with family members while he or she was incarcerated.

Nine subjects received no visits at all. Of those six subjects who did receive visits while on death row, one received no visits from parents, who were both alive, but was visited weekly by a daughter. Another subject's parents were both dead and he was visited once in the 10 years he was on death row by an aunt. She visited him just before he was scheduled to be executed. One subject's father was dead, but he was visited occasionally by his mother and siblings, who lived in another state. Two subjects, whose parents were both dead, were visited by siblings. In one of these cases, the subject's siblings visited once on the day before his execution and once six years earlier. For the other subject the fre-

quency of visits could not be determined.

Thus, with the exception of one subject, who received frequent visits by a young daughter, five subjects received occasional visits and nine received no visits at all.

Discussion

Many studies have reported the transmission of abusive behaviors from one generation to the next. None, however, to the best of our knowledge, have reported the transmission of murderous behavior. We believe that the definitions of abuse in such studies do not do justice to the filicidal abuse experienced by our subjects.

It is difficult to know how to conceptualize the effects of filicidal rage on growing children. Is the transmission of murderous behavior a question of quantitative effects? Can one conclude that the more severe the abuse experienced by children, the more violent they will become, with filicidal parents creating murderous individuals? Or is there a more complex family pattern of disturbed behaviors that, in addition to battering, includes lack of filial commitment on the part of parents toward children? Our subjects had experienced filicidal violence or sexual abuse interspersed with periods of hostility and indifference.

Several theoretical frameworks can contribute to an understanding of a parent's contribution to murderous violence in their children.

Modeling Twelve subjects witnessed extreme violence directed not only toward themselves, but also toward siblings, between parents, and between relatives

and friends. Two subjects' fathers were shot to death. Two fathers forced their children to watch as they beat their mothers, one at gunpoint, one keeping his child home from school. Thus, one may simply learn to be violent and murderous because that is the way that people in one's environment act toward one another.

Organic Consequences of Abuse

Extreme abuse often results in brain injury, which in turn is associated with poor judgment and an inability to control impulsive behaviors.

Displaced Rage Irrational and life-threatening abuse must engender rage. Unable to direct this anger to the source because of immaturity and emotional and physical dependence on one's caretakers as a child, the rage is displaced onto outside targets.

Lack of Parental Attachment What factors might enable a parent to express violence of this intensity toward his or her child? Would not normal affectional ties limit the expression of anger? We noticed a striking characteristic about the family configuration of our 15 subjects. There was a great deal of confusion about who the subjects' biologic parents were. In one instance, the subject's father told his son repeatedly that the son was the product of his mother's extramarital affair. In two other cases, in spite of parental denials, subjects believed throughout childhood that they were not the natural offspring of their fathers. They felt themselves to be treated as outcasts in their families. Although the families denied these suspicions, in adulthood the subjects learned that their suspicions were true; they were

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not the biologic children of their fathers. Another subject was given up to his mother's violent, psychotic friend for adoption at age 18 months and he believed her to be his natural mother. He did not learn the truth, and the fact that he had several natural, living siblings, until his incarceration. Another subject was abandoned with a neighbor. His parents left the state and returned after two years to reclaim him.

In two other cases, subjects' mothers abandoned their families for extended periods, one to become a prostitute and one to carry on several extramarital affairs, which resulted in the birth of half-siblings. This mother made it clear to all her children that they were "accidents."

In three other cases, the subjects' fathers died before the subjects were aged 11. One father was shot to death.

The consequences of such confusion on the part of parents and children about who really "belongs" to whom and where one's "natural" alliances lie, are especially significant when considering individuals condemned to death. The obvious lack of investment on the part of family members was demonstrated not only by their brutality toward the subjects in childhood but also by the sparse contacts with them during incarceration. Thus, they were left without any passionate advocates to assist them in preparing their defenses. It is possible that this lack of passionate advocacy contributed to the fact that these men and women, among the thousands convicted of murder, ended up on death row.

Not only did most of these individuals lack supportive family testimony at their

trials for purposes of mitigation, but also in several cases family members actually assisted in the prosecution. For example, one psychotic mother wrote to the judge requesting that her son be condemned to death. In two cases, parents testified against the subjects. Another family encouraged the subject to plead guilty because it was too expensive to hire a lawyer. In this case, the subject's cousin testified against him.

Family members often concealed the history of abusive behavior, although revelation of such behaviors might have influenced mitigation and saved the lives of some of the subjects. One prisoner who was brutally sexually assaulted by several family members went to execution refusing to permit revelation of this family secret. These sexually abusive family members were still alive and urged the subject not to reveal this information even though it could have influenced commutation of the death sentence.

Clearly one cannot blame these families for the fact that their children became murderers or that they were condemned to death. Nevertheless, in the cases we studied, two factors emerged that may be significantly related to both of these facts. Not only were these subjects the targets of filicidal abuse during childhood, but they were also the victims of continuing family hostility, neglect, and emotional abandonment. These qualities of family interactions may have had significant effects on the subjects' behaviors and on the outcome of sentencing. As such, they should be examined further in the study of individuals condemned to death.

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