

Deadly Dads

Men who murder their children

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Every ten days a child in the UK is killed by a parent. In the US the largest number of mass killings are within families. Whilst Australian statistics on this issue are yet to be compiled, we know from the headlines that here too children are being murdered by their parents, predominantly fathers, with alarming frequency. This article discusses the recent spate of fathers killing their children and why experts believe it is a trend likely to continue.

There is nothing new about perpetrators of domestic violence threatening to harm or kill children as a means of controlling their partners. And as we know all too well, a high number of children are in fact killed as a result of child abuse by their step/father. In fact the most likely cause of death for a child is at the hands of a parent or stepparent (Cavanagh, Dobash and Dobash, 2007) and the number of parents killing their children is increasing (Stoppard, 2008).

However a new trend is emerging of fathers who may have never previously exhibited physical violence toward their children or their partner suddenly murdering their children in what is purported to be a tragic moment of despair.

Astounding news reports are telling of fathers drowning their children, burning entire families in their homes, stabbing children to death and, in the case that horrified Melbourne earlier this year, throwing a child off the West Gate Bridge.

These reports are frequently accompanied by accounts of the perpetrator as a loving family man and a devoted dad. Indeed, many of these murders are described as a desperate act by a man who simply could not bear to lose his family. Of course, this argument is predicated on the notion that his partner and children are lost to him if they are living without him – worse still with another man – but not if their lives are ended altogether. And in most of these cases access to the children was not being denied. So perhaps it is more about his having lost *control* of his partner and

children, than them being gone from his life.

There are of course also mothers who kill their children – acts which are no less reprehensible than those by the fathers. But the frequency and the circumstances are vastly different, as are the ensuing community and media portrayals. As Minna Nikunen's research into news reports of murdering parents showed, 'It is striking how idealized the image of fathers is'. Although 'as men or as spouses they may have had some shortcomings', their fatherhood prior to the murders is often lauded. 'When mothers commit the same kind of [murder], their motherhood is not praised' (Nikunen, 2005).

There is no disputing the higher incidence of murder by fathers. In only '5 per cent of cases it is the mother who is responsible' (Martin, 2006), and 'psychologists agree that the majority of women who kill their children are seriously mentally ill. But fathers who do so rarely are' (Craig, 2006).

Psychiatrist, Alex Yellowlees, states that there are 'distinct differences in the minds of men and women who harm their children. Women ... tended to be mentally ill, often suffering from postnatal depression. In contrast, men tend to be struggling to deal with feelings of rage, jealousy, revenge and hatred' (in Martin, 2006).

The current phenomenon of paternal filicide appears to have two variations – the altruistic killer and the vengeance murders.

Killing for Revenge

Those who kill for revenge are no less abhorrent, but perhaps easier to comprehend. Fathers kill children and their mother out of hatred for their ex/partner, or they murder the children and *not* their mother because they believe their ex-partner will suffer more by living and experiencing the death of her children.

These murders are almost always precipitated by events in which the father feels slighted – his partner leaving him, moving on with a new relationship, or restricting access to children. Professor Jack Levin, of North-Eastern University in Boston, who is an expert on this issue, states: ‘There’s a catalyst that is seen as catastrophic in the mind of the killer’ (in Kelley, 2009).

The news reports contain a common refrain: ‘He was distraught because of the relationship coming to an end’ (Shaver and Johnson, 2007); ‘[He] reacted badly to the breakup of his marriage’ (Daily Express, 2008); ‘the bottom fell out of his world. He just cracked up’ (Daily Mail, 2007); ‘The ‘breakdown of his marriage was an emotional earthquake’ (Bird, 2008); ‘The final straw ... was his belief that his wife was pregnant by another man’ (Bunyan, 2003).

Jack Levin states it clearly: ‘The children are killed because the husband blames the wife and kills everything associated with her’ (in Kelley, 2009). Miriam Stoppard (2008) also explains: ‘the man now hates his wife so much that he will do anything to get back at her’ and forensic psychiatrist Neil Blumberg elaborates: ‘They want to inflict pain like they feel the woman inflicted upon them. ... what’s the most horrible thing you can do to a woman with children but kill the children?’ (in Shaver and Johnson, 2007).

There are a litany of headlines: ‘Murdered his three-year-old daughter in revenge for his wife’s affair’ (Vallely, 2006); ‘Father killed children to punish estranged wife’

(Glendinning, 2003); ‘Father kills five children over wife’s affair’ (Australian Associated Press, 2009); ‘Father suffocated his two young children as revenge on their mother who he feared was cheating on him’ (Hull, 2007).

Dr Vince Egan, a forensic psychology lecturer, asserts ‘these men are thinking “How do I get back at somebody if I cannot otherwise upset them, because they care so little about me”’ (in *The Scotsman*, 2009).

This motive is incredibly blatant in some cases, where the father actually tells his estranged partner that he is killing the children to exact revenge against her. A father who drowned his three sons had vowed to kill the boys to pay back his wife, so that she would ‘suffer for the rest of her life’ (News.com.au, 2007).

Amy Castillo, whose children were subsequently murdered by their father during a court ordered visit, had written in a court petition for a protective order: ‘He has never actually hurt them, but did tell me that the worst thing he could do to me would be to kill the children and not me so I could live without them’ (MSNBC, 2008). Iain Varma rang his wife to tell her he was about to kill the children and himself, after learning of her affair (Daily Mail, 2007), and a father who suffocated his three-year-old daughter as revenge for his wife’s infidelity sent her a text message saying “Now you have the rest of your life to deal with the consequences” (Pearson, 2008).

Psychologist, Dr Tony Black, also believes that ‘what many child-killers are dealing with is their reaction to their wife leaving them. They struggle with feelings that are a cocktail of rage, jealousy, revenge and hatred’. Disturbingly though, Dr Black continues ‘they are people who lack strategies for giving vent to the turmoil in the way that many women can ... cutting the sleeves from their unfaithful husband’s suits, destroying his favourite CDs, giving away his fine wine – attacking whatever he values’ (in Vallely, 2006).

Describing men's CDs as analogous to women's children is disturbing on many levels, including the assumptions that men value these types of items above their children, that women value nothing in their lives other than their children, but most of all, that children are objects to be possessed and controlled – or destroyed.

However, as discussed earlier, this mindset does permeate many of these cases. Quotes such as: 'If I can't have my children, you're not going to have them either' (Stoppard, 2008) and 'These children are mine and they go with me' (in *The Scotsman*, 2009) show that children are indeed seen as possessions by these fathers.

However, while custody issues are frequently cited as the catalyst for these killings, with fathers preferring their children dead than in a separate home, they are not the only 'possessions' he fears he will lose. Frighteningly, a report in *The Scotsman* (2009) exposed a common feature amongst child murders as being *preemptive* revenge against a wife who *might* be planning to request a large divorce settlement (my emphasis).

Robert Farquharson, who was found guilty of drowning his three sons in a dam was reportedly 'bitter that in their separation she had taken the good car, and had also moved on with another man. And maintenance payments had left him financially strapped ... "There's no way I'm going to let him, her and the kids live together in my house and I have to f---ing pay for it and also pay f---ing maintenance for the kids"' (in *News.com.au*, 2007).

Child support is increasingly cited as the reason for filicides, most notoriously in the recent US case where Danny Platt, who owed his estranged wife money confessed to killing their 2-year-old son over the child support dispute. According to *Sky News* (2009), Platt had recently been ordered to pay child support and 'had said he would kill either his wife or his child before he

paid'. Also in the US, Cameron Brown has this month begun retrial for murdering his daughter by throwing her off a cliff, allegedly to avoid paying child support¹ (*Associated Press*, 2009).

In cases such as these, the fathers are detached enough from the children to see them as simply a problem which can be disposed of. The more frequent killings however, are by fathers who have hitherto been active in their children's lives, and yet are still able to view them as objects – a means to an end. Professor Levin is cited as saying: 'He doesn't hate his children but he often hates his wife and blames her for his miserable life. He wants to execute revenge and the motive is almost always to "get even"' (in Stoppard, 2008). Dr Egan believes this is 'a phenomenon that is likely to continue as increasing numbers of families experience painful break-ups' (in *The Scotsman*, 2009).

Altruistic Murder

The other type of filicide becoming increasingly common in recent years is the supposed 'altruistic' murder. These killings involve the slaying of children and their mothers, usually culminating in the father's suicide. These deaths are supposedly committed out of 'misplaced love'. Dr Black explains that 'the ones who try to kill themselves along with their children can feel they have let the family down in some way – debt, lost job, gambling... They feel that their suicide will leave the family without a breadwinner, so they've got to take the family with them – though some botch the job, or lose their nerve, or are brought to their senses by the act of killing their own children and then survive themselves' (in Valley, 2006).

This particular type of mass killing has become so prevalent in the US, with 10 such murder-suicides a week, that they

¹ Brown was first tried three years ago, but a mistrial was declared when a jury deadlocked on the severity of the crime (*Associated Press*, 2009).

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have coined a phrase for the perpetrators. They are known as family annihilators. Having studied many of these men, Professor Jack Levin describes the typical family annihilator as 'a middle-aged man, a good provider who would appear to neighbours to be a dedicated husband and a devoted father' (in Vallely, 2006).

In another interview, Levin is cited as saying these men 'have a profound need for control that drives them to destroy their family when they can no longer provide for them financially or when the family has been divided by divorce' (Kelley, 2009). 'He wants to take his own life, but as the breadwinner and the person responsible in his own mind for the welfare of his offspring, he decides he will ... spare them the pain and suffering of growing up without a father' (Levin in Rawsthorne, 2006).

The catalyst for these murders is usually financial problems or the ending of a relationship. The father feels he can no longer take care of his family, and as he believes they couldn't – or shouldn't – survive without him, his solution is to end all of their lives. Professor Levin notes 'the most significant factors are family break-up, male sexual jealousy, a need to be in control and extreme possessiveness (in Martin, 2006).

That someone could believe the lives of others were so dependent on them as to necessitate their deaths requires not just narcissism, but again, the underlying conviction that children are objects, property to be managed and dispensed with. So pervasive is this attitude that these murders have also been labeled 'suicide by proxy' (Peek, 2003). A man's wife and children are considered not autonomous individuals, but simply an extension of himself, which he therefore has the right to do with as he sees fit.

As Raina Kelley (2009) points out, 'It seems unfathomable that an ostensibly stable and loving man could kill the people he loves

most; but unfortunately, it is more common than we may like to consider' and it is feared by many of those who study these types of murders that we will see more and more of them as the world's financial problems take their toll.

Killer Fathers

Naturally, everyone who hears of these child murders wonders what kind of man could commit such an atrocity. Common perceptions are that he must be mentally ill and/or have an extensive history of physical violence against the children. The community would like to believe that these men are unique, that the problem lies within a few pathological individuals. It is certainly easier to believe that than to admit we may be living in a society which still allows men to see women and children as their (disposable) property, and as incapable of dealing with their emotions in a rational way.

But like perpetrators of family violence in general, murderous fathers are usually regular, ordinary men. In fact, as Minna Nikunen (2005) writes, 'Generally, when fathers have killed their children, ordinariness and unexpectedness are the material for the headlines'.

Jack Levin debunks the myths, stating that 'We're not talking about psychotics. They don't suffer from schizophrenia or a profound thinking disorder or mental illness. You can't say that they're psychopathic ... they don't have a character or personality disorder' (in Kelley, 2009), 'they know the difference between right and wrong' (in Rawsthorne, 2006).

The traits which experts agree are common, significant factors, and should be heeded as a warning are possessiveness, jealousy, and control. 'Such men are often individuals who place a great premium on being in control. ...Killing the children... is a grotesque way of regaining control' (in Vallely, 2006).

Sarah Heatley, mother of two young children strangled by their father, concurs with this assessment: 'he killed them in a desperate attempt to prove to me he was still in control. He controlled me during our marriage by using verbal and physical abuse, and when I left him, he lost that control over me and the children. By killing them, he ensured he had the last word and that his actions would control the rest of my life' (in Rawsthorne, 2006).

In the absence of any diagnosis with which to explain the horrific actions, these deaths are almost always portrayed – particularly by those defending the killer – as spontaneous, tragic moments of distress. The father is alleged to have been suddenly pushed over the brink with despair, and to have acted impulsively. However research shows that this is not the case at all.

Having investigated these men closely, Levin described his findings to Lorna Martin (2006):

These are executions. They are never spontaneous. They are well planned and selective. They are not carried out in the heat of the moment or in a fit of rage. They are very methodical and it is often planned out for a long time. There are certain people the killer blames for his problems. If a friend came along, he wouldn't kill him or her. He kills his children to get even with his wife because he blames her and he hates her. The killer feels he has lost control. It is a methodical, selective murder by a rational, loving father. That's why it's so terrifying.

Not to Blame

As with other men who abuse their partners and children, killer fathers rarely accept responsibility for their actions. Levin notes that for the murders, and for the circumstances which precipitated them, the killers 'externalize blame. If they really blamed themselves alone, they'd take an anti-depressant or commit suicide'. 'From what I've seen, they never feel like villains, they feel like victims' (in Kelley, 2009). 'She is the villain and the annihilation is sweet revenge' (in Lomas, 2009).

Akin to a provocation defence, these fathers usually argue that they were driven to their crimes by their partner's behaviour. In one such case, Gavin Hall killed his three-year-old daughter and pleaded guilty to manslaughter rather than murder, 'arguing that his wife's affair had created an abnormality in his mind' (Martin, 2006).

News headlines sensationalise the killers' excuses, such as: '...sordid affair and the husband driven to murder'; 'Sex obsession of mother blamed for murder of innocent child' (in Martin, 2006). Explanations offered by relatives and friends of the men often suggest the woman caused her children's deaths, for example 'All he wanted was to be with [her] and look after their boys. But she took them away from him and didn't want to be with him' (in Bunyan, 2003).

Many others are now claiming the supposed Parental Alienation Syndrome as the trigger for their actions. As discussed earlier, society too wants to believe there are mitigating factors in these murders. 'Men are presented as finding themselves at a dead end, having no other choice, and as acting because they are coerced by circumstances' (Nikunen, 2005).

A female journalist in the UK proffers the supposition that 'at the very least, society is guilty of giving fathers mixed messages'. She goes on to state:

These days, we expect blokes to be New Dads. Bonding with babies over the 3am feed, and playing an equal part in raising them. Yet when it comes to life after divorce, things are often far from equal ... A sense of injustice is the dark background to these infanticides. Such cases are the extreme consequences of belittling the role of masculinity in children's lives (Pearson, 2008).

This thinly veiled dig at feminism and at single mothers once again sees men as the pivotal characters and children as their adjuncts and fails to recognise that the converse – the belittling of children in men's lives – might be a more apt explanation for their detachment.

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Unsurprisingly in a culture of woman-blaming, the emphasis on external factors as triggers does not extend to mothers who kill their children. Despite the fact that, as noted above, 'women who kill loved ones are more likely to have a history of health conditions like postpartum psychosis' (Kelley, 2009) whereas 'men are more likely to act out of jealous rages' (Shaver and Johnson, 2007), community and social commentators make many more allowances for the male perpetrators of child murder.

Nikunen's research showed that when a woman committed such a heinous act, 'she was not seen as a nice and normal woman in a difficult situation' and yet if reports are to be believed, 'a normal and nice man can kill his children and himself, when the external conditions force him to do so' (Nikunen, 2005).

It is often the very fact that these men are 'normal' that precludes worried mothers from receiving protection for their children, instead attracting criticism themselves. Sarah Heatley was a case in point: 'The court ordered contact. They said I was being a hysterical and over-reactive wife. He was ... an upstanding member of the community – an intelligent, generous and affable, loving father. People said he was the perfect dad' (in Martin, 2006).

Workers in the family violence sector will recognise many elements of these crimes and those who commit them. Men who want to control their wives and children, blame others for their own behaviour, and use children as pawns to hurt their former partners, are precisely the type of men that domestic violence workers are dealing with on a daily basis. And of course we have all seen the devastating consequences of a child protection system which favours shared care and casts mothers as overbearing and vindictive for trying to protect their children from abusive fathers.

But it seems the parameters have moved on the family violence continuum. Where once the extreme end of the spectrum for

controlling fathers was to kidnap their children, now it is to kill them. Figures from the UK showed that 'it is more likely that your partner is going to kill your children if you leave him than that they are going to be killed by a stranger' (Martin, 2006).

Abusive men have always threatened to harm children as retaliation against former partners, and while DV workers have never taken these types of threats lightly, we do need to be conscious of the increasing likelihood of the worst case scenario actually happening. We also need to bear in mind that the women we work with have seen and heard the news reports just as we have, and even if the threats against their children's lives are never realised – or perhaps even articulated – they may understandably be extremely fearful for their children's lives.

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