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Filicide–Suicide in Chicago, 1870–1930

Todd K. Shackelford

Viviana A. Weekes-Shackelford

Shanna L. Beasley

Florida Atlantic University

Filicide (the killing of a child by a parent) followed by the offender's suicide is a tragic but, fortunately, rare event. The contexts and circumstances surrounding filicide–suicide may provide insight into parental psychology. The authors test several hypotheses about filicide–suicide using a database including incident-level information on 11,018 Chicago homicides during 1870–1930. The results provide some support for the hypothesis of differential risk of suicide following filicide by genetic parents and stepparents and replicate previous research indicating that filicides with multiple victims are more likely to end in the offender's suicide than are filicides with a single victim; parents are more likely to commit suicide following the filicide of an older child than of a younger child; and older parents, relative to younger parents, are more likely to commit suicide following filicide. The discussion situates these results within the existing literature and highlights important directions for future research.

Keywords: *filicide; filicide–suicide; genetic parents; stepparents; evolutionary psychology*

A filicidal parent sometimes commits suicide after killing his or her ward. Although less frequent than filicides not accompanied by suicide, these filicide–suicides are doubly tragic, producing a special grief among the remaining family members (Daly & Wilson, 1988, 1998). Filicide–suicide has been a topic of recent empirical work (e.g., Adler, 2003; Cooper & Eaves, 1996; Daly & Wilson, 1994; Shackelford, Weekes-Shackelford, & Beasley, 2005; Somander & Rammer, 1991). In the current study, we use a detailed Chicago homicide database for the years 1870–1930 to test several hypotheses guided by an evolutionary psychological perspective (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988) about the contexts and circumstances surrounding filicide–suicide,

Authors' Note: Address correspondence to Todd K. Shackelford, Department of Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, 2912 College Avenue, Davie, FL 33314; e-mail: tshackel@fau.edu.

each of which is designed to replicate and extend previous findings. Shackelford et al. (2005) presented data on filicide–suicide in Chicago for the years 1965–1994. The current research presents parallel data for Chicago nearly a century earlier, providing the opportunity to comment on cross-time similarities and differences in several aspects of filicide–suicide.

Genetic parents and stepparents may be differently at risk for killing themselves after killing their ward. Using a province-level Canadian database, Cooper and Eaves (1996) reported that 15 of 26 filicides (57.7%) perpetrated by a genetic parent were followed by the offending parent's suicide compared with just 1 of 9 filicides (11.1%) perpetrated by a stepparent. Analyzing a national-level Swedish database, Somander and Rammer (1991) reported that 29 of 58 filicides (50.0%) perpetrated by a genetic parent ended in the offender's suicide compared with just 1 of 4 filicides (25.0%) perpetrated by a stepparent. Daly and Wilson (1994) analyzed a national-level British database and found that 29 of 235 filicidal genetic fathers committed suicide (12.3%) compared with just 2 of 131 filicidal stepfathers (1.5%). In parallel analyses of a Canadian database, Daly and Wilson found that 44 of 155 filicidal genetic fathers committed suicide (28.4%) compared with just 1 of 66 filicidal stepfathers (1.5%). Shackelford et al. (2005) analyzed a database that included homicides in Chicago during 1965–1994 and found that the percentage of filicidal genetic parents who committed suicide (24 of 396; 6.1%) did not differ significantly from the percentage of filicidal stepparents who committed suicide (4 of 63; 6.3%).

The weight of previous research indicates that filicidal genetic parents may be more likely to commit suicide than are filicidal stepparents. This difference might reflect different psychological processes and motivations operating in genetic parents and in stepparents (see Daly & Wilson, 1988, 1998). If stepparental psychology motivates behaviors such as filicide to dispose of a resource-draining ward to whom the person is not genetically related (Buss, 2005; Duntley, 2005; Shackelford et al., 2005), then it would not make adaptive sense for the filicidal stepparent to subsequently kill himself or herself, in which case the stepparent would not reap any benefits associated with eliminating the ward. Using a database of filicides committed in Chicago during the late 1800s and early 1900s, we expected to replicate the findings of previous research indicating that filicidal genetic parents are more likely to commit suicide than are filicidal stepparents.

Hypothesis 1: Filicidal genetic parents are more likely to commit suicide than are filicidal stepparents.

Previous research has investigated several other factors that might predict suicide following filicide. These factors include the number of victims

killed in the incident, the age of the victim (for single-victim incidents), the age of the offender, and the sex of the offender. We address each of these potential predictors of filicide–suicide in turn. Where possible, we distinguish between the findings for filicide–suicide by genetic parents and filicide–suicide by stepparents, given the key relevance of genetic relatedness to filicides documented by many researchers, notably Daly and Wilson (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988, 1998). Adler (2003; see also Daly & Wilson, 1988) offered an additional motive for maternal filicide–suicide: Mothers who are committed to killing themselves might kill their children because they feel it is cruel to leave their children motherless. This is an intriguing speculation that we are not able to empirically assess using the archival data that are the focus of the current research.

Filicidal parents occasionally kill more than one child, in addition to their spouse—a crime known as familicide. Using a Canadian database, Daly and Wilson (1988) found that 26 of 290 filicides (9.0%) were familicides. Sometimes the filicidal parent kills himself or herself. For example, in a national-level Canadian database, Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995) reported that familicidal perpetrators were more likely to commit suicide than were perpetrators of uxoricide (wife killing) and perpetrators of single-victim filicide (50.9%, 25.3%, and 25.3%, respectively). Shackelford et al. (2005) analyzed a Chicago database that included homicides committed during 1965–1994 and found that 38.0% (19 of 50) of parents who killed multiple victims subsequently killed themselves, whereas just 2.2% (9 of 409) of parents who killed a single victim subsequently killed themselves. We expected to replicate this finding using a database of homicides committed in Chicago during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Hypothesis 2: Filicides that include multiple victims are more likely to end in the offender's suicide than are filicides that include a single victim.

Although the risk of filicide decreases with the child's age (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988, 1998), the risk of filicide–suicide increases. Parents who kill older children are more likely to commit suicide than are parents who kill younger children (see Daly & Wilson, 1988). According to parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972), parents value an offspring more as that offspring ages and, therefore, approaches reproductive maturity. Filicide of an older child (who is closer to reproductive maturity) may therefore be partly attributable to the parent's abnormal psychological functioning and, accordingly, be more likely to be followed by the offending parent's suicide. The results of previous research corroborate this hypothesis.

Using a Canadian database, Daly and Wilson (1988) found that 15.8% (15 of 95) of mothers who killed a child older than 1 year subsequently committed suicide compared with just 2.3% (2 of 88) of mothers who killed an infant within the first year of life—a subset of filicides known as infanticide. Fifty-eight percent of maternal filicide perpetrators were labeled by the investigating officer as mentally incompetent or insane, but only 35.0% of maternal infanticide perpetrators received this label. As with mothers, fathers who killed older children killed themselves more often than did fathers who killed infants (44 of 101 [43.6%] vs. just 4 of 38 [10.5%], respectively). Paternal filicide perpetrators were also more likely to be labeled mentally incompetent or insane (20.8%) than were paternal infanticide perpetrators (15.8%). Using a Chicago database for 1965-1994, Shackelford et al. (2005) found that a greater percentage of filicidal parents who killed older children (compared with those who killed younger children) subsequently killed themselves (12.4% and 3.6%, respectively). We expected to replicate this finding using a database of homicides committed in Chicago during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Hypothesis 3: Parents are more likely to commit suicide following the filicide of an older child than following the filicide of a younger child.

Previous research has suggested that not only are the victims of filicide-suicide older than the victims of filicide, but also that the offenders of filicide-suicide are older than the offenders of filicide. Working from an evolutionary perspective, Daly and Wilson (1988) suggested that psychiatrically normal older parents tend to value their children more than do psychiatrically normal younger parents, because older parents have lower “residual reproductive value” (expected future reproduction) than do younger parents. Filicide by an older parent might therefore be more likely to be accompanied by psychiatric problems than filicide by a younger parent. These psychiatric problems, in turn, may include depression and other correlates of suicide. Daly and Wilson (1988) analyzed a Canadian database and presented evidence that corroborated this hypothesis: Infanticidal mothers who committed suicide were significantly older (mean age = 29.5 years) than infanticidal mothers who did not commit suicide (mean age = 22.5 years). Similarly, infanticidal fathers who committed suicide were significantly older (mean age = 30.5 years) than infanticidal fathers who did not commit suicide (mean age = 25.8 years). Using a database of homicides committed in Chicago during 1965-1994, Shackelford et al. (2005) found that 21 of 194 (10.8%) older filicidal genetic parents committed suicide, whereas just 3 of 202 (1.5%) younger filicidal genetic parents committed suicide. We

expected to replicate this finding using a database of homicides committed in Chicago during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Hypothesis 4: Older parents, relative to younger parents, are more likely to commit suicide following filicide.

There is some evidence that filicidal fathers are more likely to commit suicide than are filicidal mothers. Using a province-level Canadian database, Cooper and Eaves (1996) reported that 13 of 23 paternal filicides (56.5%) were followed by suicide, whereas only 3 of 11 maternal filicides (27.3%) were followed by suicide. Analyzing a national-level Swedish homicide database, Somander and Rammer (1991) reported that 24 of 39 filicidal fathers (61.5%) committed suicide compared with just 6 of 23 filicidal mothers (26.1%). In a national sample of Canadian homicides, Daly and Wilson (1988) reported that 75 of 177 fathers (42.4%) killed themselves following filicide compared with just 23 of 188 mothers (12.2%). Using a database of homicides committed in Chicago during 1965–1994, Shackelford et al. (2005) found that 20 of 209 filicidal fathers (9.6%) committed suicide, whereas just 4 of 60 filicidal mothers (6.7%) committed suicide. We expected to replicate this finding using a database of homicides committed in Chicago during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Hypothesis 5: Fathers, relative to mothers, are more likely to commit suicide following filicide.

In summary, we secured access to a database that includes incident-level information on more than 11,000 homicides committed in Chicago during 1870–1930 to replicate and extend research that identifies several predictors of filicide–suicide. This database is unique in that it provides a glimpse into historical homicides recorded consistently and without interruption across 6 decades in Chicago. In addition, this database is one of just two city-level U.S. databases that code for the suicide of the homicide perpetrator (see Shackelford et al., 2005, for information about the other such database).

Method

Database and Procedures

The Chicago Homicide Record Index provides incident-level information on 11,018 homicides recorded in handwritten files by the Chicago Police Department for the years 1870–1930 (Bienen, 2004). We selected for

analyses the 232 cases in which a child was killed by a genetic parent or by a stepparent. Of these filicides, 222 were committed by a genetic parent (76 men, 145 women, and 1 parent sex not recorded). Seventy-three filicidal genetic parents (26 men and 47 women) committed suicide. Ten filicides were committed by a stepparent (8 men and 2 women). One filicidal stepparent committed suicide, and in this case it was a stepfather.

Results

According to Hypothesis 1, filicidal genetic parents are more likely to commit suicide than are filicidal stepparents. The results provided some support for this hypothesis. The percentage of filicidal genetic parents who committed suicide (32.9%; 73 of 222) was greater than the percentage of filicidal stepparents who committed suicide (10.0%; 1 of 10), and this difference was marginally significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 232) = 2.31, p < .10$ (one-tailed; all hypotheses are directional, and therefore all p values are one-tailed; for analyses that include expected values less than 5, we also report Fisher's exact probability. Fisher's exact probability for the first analysis = .117).

Previous work has indicated that a key predictor of child abuse, neglect, and filicide is residence with a stepparent (see, e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1985, 1988, 1998; Wilson & Daly, 1987; Wilson, Daly, & Weghorst, 1980). For tests of Hypotheses 2-5, we first conducted the relevant analysis for all filicides (i.e., collapsing across filicides committed by stepparents and genetic parents). We then conducted parallel analyses separately for genetic parents only and for stepparents only, where possible. Although there was just one case of stepparental filicide-suicide, we nevertheless conducted the analyses for stepparents only (where possible) to allow for a qualitative comparison with the results of analyses for genetic parents only.

According to Hypothesis 2, filicides that include multiple victims are more likely to end in the offender's suicide than are filicides that include a single victim. The results supported the hypothesis across all filicides: 76.4% (42 of 55) of parents who killed multiple victims subsequently killed themselves, whereas just 18.1% (32 of 177) of parents who killed a single victim subsequently killed themselves, $\chi^2(1, N = 232) = 65.62, p < .001$. The results also supported the hypothesis for genetic parents: A greater percentage of filicides that included multiple victims (79.2%; 42 of 53) ended in the offender's suicide compared with filicides that included a single victim (18.3%; 31 of 169), $\chi^2(1, N = 222) = 67.81, p < .001$. The results did

not support the hypothesis for stepparents. A nominally greater percentage of stepparental filicides that included a single victim (12.5%; 1 of 8) ended in the offender's suicide compared with stepparental filicides that included multiple victims (0%; 0 of 2), but this difference was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 10) = 0.28, p > .10$ (Fisher's exact probability = .800).

According to Hypothesis 3, parents are more likely to commit suicide following the filicide of an older child than following the filicide of a younger child. To test this hypothesis, we defined older children as 6 years or older and younger children as 5 years or younger. Previous analyses of filicide risk make a similar distinction between older and younger children (see, e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988, 1994; Shackelford et al., 2005). Older filicide victims made up 30.6% (71 of 232) of filicide cases, and younger filicide victims made up 69.4% (161 of 232) of filicide cases. The results supported Hypothesis 3 across all filicides. A greater percentage of filicidal parents of older victims (49.3%; 35 of 71) than of younger victims (24.2%; 39 of 161) subsequently killed themselves, $\chi^2(1, N = 232) = 14.26, p < .001$. When we conducted the analyses for genetic parents only and for stepparents only, the results supported Hypothesis 3 for genetic parents. A greater percentage of filicidal genetic parents of older victims (54.0%; 34 of 63) than of younger victims (24.5%; 39 of 159) subsequently killed themselves, $\chi^2(1, N = 222) = 17.72, p < .001$. The same trend was evident for stepparents but was not statistically significant: 12.5% (1 of 8) of filicidal stepparents of older children killed themselves, whereas no filicidal stepparents of younger children killed themselves (0 of 2), $\chi^2(1, N = 10) = 0.28, p > .10$ (Fisher's exact probability = .800).

According to Hypothesis 4, older parents, relative to younger parents, are more likely to commit suicide following filicide. To test this hypothesis, we first conducted a median split of the data for which the offender age was coded (14 cases). The median age was 25.5. Accordingly, we defined older parents as older than 25.5 years and younger parents as 25.5 years or younger. Older parents made up 50.0% (7 of 14) of filicide offenders, and younger parents made up 50.0% (7 of 14) of filicide offenders. The results supported Hypothesis 4 across all filicides. A greater percentage of filicidal older parents (42.9%; 3 of 7) than of filicidal younger parents (0.0%; 0 of 7) subsequently killed themselves, $\chi^2(1, N = 14) = 3.82, p < .05$ (Fisher's exact probability = .096). The results also supported Hypothesis 4 for genetic parents only. A greater percentage of older filicidal genetic parents (50.0%; 3 of 6) than younger filicidal genetic parents (0.0%; 0 of 7) subsequently killed themselves, $\chi^2(1, N = 7) = 4.55, p < .05$ (Fisher's exact probability = .069). Among those cases coded for offender age, there were no cases in which a filicidal stepparent subsequently

killed himself or herself, and therefore we could not conduct the parallel analysis for stepparents only.

According to Hypothesis 5, fathers, relative to mothers, are more likely to commit suicide following filicide. Hypothesis 5 was not supported. There was no significant difference between the percentage of filicidal fathers (32.1%; 27 of 84) and the percentage of filicidal mothers (32.0%; 47 of 147) who killed themselves, $\chi^2(1, N = 232) = 0.47, p > .10$.

Discussion

Parents sometimes kill their children and then subsequently kill themselves, but fortunately this tragic event occurs with relative rarity. Using a database that included more than 11,000 homicides committed in Chicago during the years 1870-1930, we tested the hypotheses that (a) filicidal genetic parents are more likely to commit suicide than are filicidal stepparents; (b) filicides that include multiple victims are more likely to end in the offender's suicide than are filicides that include a single victim; (c) parents are more likely to commit suicide following the filicide of an older child than following the filicide of a younger child; (d) older parents, relative to younger parents, are more likely to commit suicide following filicide; and (e) fathers, relative to mothers, are more likely to commit suicide following filicide. We presented empirical support for most of the hypotheses, relying primarily on data for genetic parent filicides and filicide-suicides.

Shackelford et al. (2005) investigated the contexts and circumstances of filicide-suicide in Chicago for homicides committed during the years 1965-1994. With very few exceptions, the current research generated qualitatively similar findings for Chicago filicides committed nearly a century earlier (see also Adler, 2003, for a brief, qualitative discussion of several cases of maternal filicides in turn-of-the-century Chicago). Although separated in time by two World Wars, the advent of television, and substantial legal, social, and economic reforms, Chicago filicide-suicides occur today in some of the same contexts and circumstances as they did in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Previous research has indicated that filicidal genetic parents are more likely to commit suicide than are filicidal stepparents (Cooper & Eaves, 1996; Daly & Wilson, 1988, 1994; Somander & Rammer, 1991). We found some support for this hypothesis. A greater percentage of filicidal genetic parents committed suicide than did filicidal stepparents (32.9% and 10.0%, respectively), but this difference was only marginally statistically significant.

We replicated the finding that filicidal parents are more likely to commit suicide following a multiple-victim filicide than following a single-victim filicide. We further documented that this is the case for filicidal genetic parents in particular. There is no clear explanation for why multiple-victim filicides are more likely to be followed by suicide than are single-victim filicides. We speculate that psychiatric illness, notably depression, is more prevalent among perpetrators of multiple-victim filicides than among perpetrators of single-victim filicides. One correlate of psychiatric illness—particularly depression—is increased risk of suicide (see Daly & Wilson, 1988). Future research will need to assess this speculation empirically.

According to Trivers's (1972) parental investment theory, parents value an offspring more as that offspring ages and, therefore, approaches reproductive maturity. Filicide of an older child may therefore be partly attributable to parental psychopathology (e.g., depression) and, accordingly, be more likely to be followed by the offending parent's suicide. Analyses in the current study of filicidal genetic parents corroborate this hypothesis. Analyses for stepparents produce a similar pattern of results, but these results were not statistically significant. We do not know whether parents who killed older children in fact suffered from psychiatric problems to a greater extent than did parents who killed younger children. We speculate that this is the case, as has been found in previous research (see, e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988). Future analyses of filicides and filicide–suicide would benefit from securing access to the psychiatric history of the offenders to help to clarify this speculation and related speculations about offenders' mental health.

Some previous research has indicated that older parents, relative to younger parents, are more likely to commit suicide following filicide (Daly & Wilson, 1988). We replicated this finding using data on filicides committed by genetic parents. We could not conduct the parallel analysis for stepparents because no younger filicidal stepparent subsequently killed himself or herself. Daly and Wilson (1988) argued that psychiatrically normal older parents may value their children more than do psychiatrically normal younger parents because older parents have less residual reproductive value than do younger parents. Filicide by an older parent might therefore be more likely to coincide with the parent's psychiatric problems than might filicide by a younger parent. These psychiatric problems may include key correlates of suicide, such as depression. Future research will need to address empirically these speculations on the greater likelihood of suicide by filicidal older parents than by filicidal younger parents.

Across several different databases that include homicides committed in different years and in different countries, filicidal fathers have been documented

to more often commit suicide than filicidal mothers (e.g., Cooper & Eaves, 1996; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Shackelford et al., 2005; Somander & Rammer, 1991). We did not replicate this finding in the current research, thereby generating the only known failure to document this sex difference in filicide–suicide. Future research is needed to investigate whether the current results represent an anomaly or whether, in fact, the sex difference might not be robust.

In summary, we secured access to a database of more than 11,000 homicides committed in Chicago during the years 1870–1930 to test several hypotheses about the contexts and circumstances of filicide–suicide. So few filicidal stepparents committed suicide that a comparison of filicide with filicide–suicide committed by genetic parents and by stepparents either is not possible or produces results that must be interpreted with caution. The current study indicates that filicide–suicide may not be an event that is wholly unpredictable, but that it instead may be more likely to occur in certain contexts (e.g., multiple-victim killings) and in certain circumstances (e.g., following filicide of an older child). The current results shed light on when and why filicide–suicide occurs and suggests additional directions for determining how to reduce the occurrence of this tragic crime.

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Todd K. Shackelford is professor of psychology at Florida Atlantic University, where he is chair of the evolutionary psychology graduate program and director of the Evolutionary Psychology Lab (www.ToddKShackelford.com). He received his PhD from the University of Texas at Austin in 1997. He has published more than 160 articles and chapters and several books, and much of his empirical and theoretical work focuses on conflict between men and women in intimate relationships. He is editor-in-chief of *Evolutionary Psychology* (www.epjournal.net) and associate editor of the *Journal of Personality, Personality and Individual Differences*, and *Human Ethology Bulletin*.

Viviana A. Weekes-Shackelford is completing her PhD in evolutionary developmental psychology at Florida Atlantic University. She received her BA and MA in psychology from Florida Atlantic University in 1998 and 2004, respectively. Her major research interests are in the broad field of evolutionary developmental psychology, with special interests in parent-child relationships, especially conflict.

Shanna L. Beasley received her MA in psychology from Florida Atlantic University in 2006. Her major research interests are in the broad field of evolutionary psychology.