



Filicide–suicide ideation among Taiwanese parents with school-aged children: Prevalence and associated factors

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the prevalence of filicide–suicide ideation among Taiwanese parents with school-aged children. Multiple risk factors associated with filicide–suicide ideation were assessed, and the potential effect of traditional family values was evaluated. A random sample of 1,564 parents was recruited from 21 elementary schools in a rural area of Taiwan. Potential risk factors, including demographics, family finance, psychological maladjustment, family interaction, and cultural beliefs, were further examined using a hierarchical logistic regression. Overall, 14.6% of the respondents reported having filicide–suicide ideation during the past year. The hierarchical logistic regression analysis showed that demographic factors including age, gender, and ethnicity had no significant effect. Family finances, depression, and conflict with the respondent's spouse were positively associated with filicide–suicide ideation. Finally, the parents' beliefs in traditional family values had a positive effect on filicide–suicide ideation. In other words, filicide–suicide thoughts were more common among those who upheld a strong parental responsibility for care giving and family solidarity. This study revealed a substantial prevalence of filicide–suicide ideation among local parents and identified a number of risk factors associated with those thoughts, namely family financial status, parental depression, and conflict with one's spouse. More importantly, the results highlighted the effect of traditional family values in the process. The potential intention of filicide–suicide as mercy killing and its cultural relevance were discussed.

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Introduction

Parents are the primary caregivers of their children, protecting them against a potentially dangerous outside world. Ironically, it is common for children to be maltreated or injured by their parents. Research has shown that children are more likely to suffer violence at home than in any other care environment (e.g., [Ellonen & Pösö, 2011](#)). Physical and emotional abuses are just a few examples of the harm that parents may inflict upon their children ([Ma, Chen, Xiao, Wang, & Zhang, 2011](#); [Straus & Field, 2003](#)). To an extreme extent, children may sometimes lose their lives to these dearest adults. According to one recent data analysis from the US National Violent Death Reporting System, murdered young children are most often killed by parents and caregivers, and these homicides occur mostly at home ([Bennett et al., 2006](#)). Relatively infrequently, the parents first kill their children and then commit suicide. Given the emotion-loaded nature of filicide–suicide incidents, it is rather surprising that so few studies have been conducted to assess the magnitude of the issue.

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The existing literature provides only limited knowledge of the characteristics and associated factors of filicide–suicide. More importantly, despite the wide media coverage of such tragic events within the area, its prevalence in Asian regions remains largely unknown. One major challenge is the extreme difficulty obtaining detailed information about those who committed filicide–suicide, which prevents any further investigation on their motives and the contributing factors of such acts. Thus, as in suicide research, it is helpful to examine the individuals who hold filicide–suicide thoughts because suicidal ideation has long been identified as associated with a high risk of suicide attempts (Kessler, Berglund, Borges, Nock, & Wang, 2005). The first objective of the present study is to address this significant knowledge gap by providing a large-scale assessment of filicide–suicide ideation among parents of school-aged children in Taiwan, which is an East Asian context with little previous research on this problem.

During the past decade, the issue of filicide–suicide has been increasingly recognized in Taiwan. Several major cases have received much public attention and led to substantial reform on welfare policy and social service delivery. For example, in April 2010, one local single mother killed herself and her teenage daughter by burning charcoal in a closed room of their apartment because of her frustration with not being able to have her daughter legally registered as the biological father's offspring (Central News Agency, 2010, April 20). The police and social workers were heavily condemned for failing to intervene in time, which consequently elicited a heated debate within the helping professions community. Such incidents reveal the seriousness of the problem and the necessity of prevention measures. However, so far, the risk factors and mechanism of filicide remain under-examined, let alone the more complicated case of filicide–suicide.

An extensive review of academic databases on maternal filicide concluded that little is known about its predictors, and more systemic research is needed to identify factors associated with filicide with an aim to prevent these events (Friedman, Horwitz, & Resnick, 2005). Therefore, the second objective of this study is to identify the risk factors associated with filicide–suicide ideation among Taiwanese parents. More importantly, the existing findings from western populations may not be applicable to local contexts because filicide–suicide is potentially a culturally relevant phenomenon. For example, a large number of filicide–suicide cases in Taiwan were committed by both parents, which is rarely observed in many other countries (Child Welfare League Foundation, 2006). The traditional family values in Taiwan need to be analyzed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issue, which constitutes the third objective of the present study.

Prevalence of filicide–suicide

As the term suggests, filicide–suicide is the co-occurrence of two acts. Filicide refers to the deliberate act of a parent killing his or her own son or daughter. According to the data from the U.S. Department of Justice, there were 575 homicides of children under the age of 5 nationwide in 2005, among which 295 were committed by parents (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). The same data also confirmed that parents have been the primary perpetrators of child homicide in recent years. One UK report based on police records identified 99 homicides of children under the age of 16 in England and Wales during 2002 and 2003, and 55 of the victims were the sons or daughters of the principal suspects (Cotton, 2004). Compared to other types of homicides, filicide is relatively uncommon, and it is very difficult to come up with a reliable estimate of its prevalence (McKee, 2006).

With regard to filicide–suicide, the prevalence is even smaller. From the 22,988 homicide records in the Chicago Homicide Database 1965–1994, a US study singled out 459 cases of filicide, among which 396 were committed by a genetic parent. In this pool, 24 genetic parents committed suicide after their filicide (Shackelford, Weekes-Shackelford, & Beasley, 2005). One register-based study of all filicides in Austria and Finland found a total of 86 filicide victims in Austria and 66 in Finland in 1995–2005, which equals 5.2 and 5.9 per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively (Putkonen et al., 2009). Suicide or attempted suicide followed filicide in 32% of the cases in Austria and 54% of the cases in Finland. One study reviewed all of the consecutive coroners' files on domestic homicide in Quebec, Canada, and identified 77 child victims of 60 male parent perpetrators from 1991 to 2001. Concerning these cases, 60% of the filicide acts were followed by the suicide of the perpetrators (Bourget & Gagné, 2005). Regardless of the low prevalence, evidence suggests the presence of filicide–suicide in many countries around the world.

The prevalence of filicide–suicide extends well beyond western societies. In fact, it has been argued that such acts are more common in certain Asian cultures. One Japanese study analyzed records from newspaper databases and official statistics from 1994 to 2005 and found 933 of filicide cases involving 1,084 victims under the age of 15 (Yasumi & Kageyama, 2009). Fatal abuse was most prevalent (33.1%), followed by filicide–suicide cases (32.5%, 303 cases). Another study reviewed 14 media-reported filicide–suicide incidents in Hong Kong during 1998–2010, in which 12 mothers and 3 fathers were involved as the perpetrators (Hon, 2011). Although no official statistics of filicide–suicide exist in Taiwan, the Child Welfare League Foundation (2006) retrieved 34 filicide–suicide cases that have been reported by the local media during 2006 alone. In these cases, 33 children died and another 13 were injured. One Taiwan study analyzed data from the Child Bureau and identified 58 families involved in such events during the 2004–2007 period, which cost the lives of 85 children (Liu & Pong, 2008).

To raise public awareness of the issue, the Taiwan Fund for Children and Families collected 39 media-reported cases from Jan to Oct 2008, among which 57 children were involved, and 21 of them were killed (Central News Agency, 2008, November 17). These casualty numbers are disturbingly high because the homicide rate in Taiwan is relatively mild when compared to many other countries. Particularly, a recent innovation of charcoal burning as a suicide method has paralleled the increase of filicide–suicide incidences in Taiwan (Pan & Lee, 2008). Charcoal burning has become the major method of suicide because of the easy accessibility of charcoal and the perceived painlessness of the resultant death (Child Welfare League Foundation,

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