



Mothers who kill their offspring: Testing evolutionary hypothesis in a 110-case Italian sample

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This research aimed to identify incidents of mothers in Italy killing their own children and to test an adaptive evolutionary hypothesis to explain their occurrence.

Methods: 110 cases of mothers killing 123 of their own offspring from 1976 to 2010 were analyzed. Each case was classified using 13 dichotomic variables. Descriptive statistics and hierarchical cluster analysis were performed both for cases and variables, and significant differences between clusters were analyzed.

Results: The Italian sample of neonaticides (killings of children within the first day of life) was found to satisfy all evolutionary predictions for an evolved behavioral, emotional and motivational pattern to increase fitness, showing a consistent profile for offending mothers. Relatively young, poor women with no partner kill their offspring non-violently, either directly or through abandonment, and they attempt to conceal the body. These women have no psychopathologies and never attempt suicide after killing their children. All neonaticide cases fall in a single cluster that is distinct from all other offspring killings by mothers. Infanticide (killing of children within the first year of life) and filicide (killing of children after the first year of life) do not significantly differ according to any of the variables measured. The common profile of mothers who have committed infanticide or filicide includes psychopathology, suicide or attempted suicide after killing their children, violent killing of their victims, and no attempt to conceal the victims' bodies. These results suggest that maternal infanticide and filicide represent an improper functioning of adaptation, and their profile are much more variable than those of neonaticide offenders.

Conclusion: Our study confirms that only neonaticide is an adaptive reproductive disinvestment, possibly evolved in the remote past, to increase the biological fitness of the mother by eliminating an unwanted newborn and saving resources for future offspring born in better conditions. Neonaticide is shown to be clearly distinct from infanticide and filicide and therefore should be approached, prevented, and judged differently.

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Introduction

The killing of a child by his or her biological mother has occurred in our species since its origin (e.g., Moses in The Bible), in every culture and every population (Miller, 1997; Milner, 1998; Sudha & Rajan, 1999; Sahni et al., 2008). The killing of offspring by their mother also occurs under similar conditions in non-human primates (Hausfater & Hrdy, 1984; Hrdy, 1979, 1992, 1999; Sugiyama, 1965), cats (Rudnai, 1973), rodents (Parmigiani, Palanza, Mainardi, & Brain, 1994), and several other species. According to evolutionary theory, the killing of offspring by its mother may, under certain conditions, represent an evolved behavioral pattern that increases the reproductive fitness of the mother (Trivers, 1985). Mothers may

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kill their offspring when, for some external reason, pups life expectancy is reduced; under this condition, mothers benefit from interrupting breeding or abandoning the offspring and dedicating her resources to survival and future pregnancies. This adaptive hypothesis for neonaticide has been verified in an array of comparative studies. In rats, horses, and even monkeys, mothers may kill unwanted offspring after birth, but they are also capable of reabsorbing the fetus before birth when external conditions jeopardize offspring life expectancy (Bruce, 1960; Roberts, Lu, Bergman, & Beehner, 2012).

Evolutionary psychiatry suggests that animal species, including ours, evolved behavioral, emotional and motivational patterns to maximize fitness, defined as the number of an individual's progeny that survive into the next generation (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Cartwright, 2000; McGuire & Troisi, 1998; Stevens & Price, 2000). In our species, maternal killing of offspring generates massive distress in the general public due to the seeming contradiction between maternity and violence towards offspring. Daly and Wilson (1988) have performed seminal research on maternal child killing, and they have delineated the context, modalities, and possible causes of such killings that suggest they may have an adaptive value for mothers. Daly and Wilson (1988) proposed that human mothers have evolved specific behavioral, emotional and motivational patterns that drive them to kill their offspring during the first year of life (infanticide). In cases of offspring killing, mothers are usually very young and hence still have significant reproductive potential, but they are experiencing great economic and/or social difficulties that could jeopardize breeding success. According to these authors, similarly to other animal species, evolutionary forces in a remote past shaped mothers' behavior, emotions, and motivations to interrupt breeding and resume investing in their own survival for future breeding chances under improved socio-economic conditions (Daly & Wilson, 1988). It was further hypothesized that this homicidal pattern could possibly be mediated through a stress response (Hatters Friedman, McCue Horwitz, & Resnick, 2005). Various studies on mothers who kill their offspring have generally confirmed such predictions (Harris, Hilton, Rice, & Eke, 2007; Lewis & Bunce, 2003; Overpeck, Brenner, & Trumble, 1998; Stone, Steinmeyer, Dreher, & Krischer, 2005). Most researchers observed, however, that the predictions of Daly and Wilson (1988) fit especially well with maternal killing of children in their first day of life (neonaticide) (Briggs & Cutright, 1994; D'Orban, 1979; Hatters Friedman et al., 2005; Spinelli, 2001).

Mothers may also kill their own children later than at birth, as during their first year of life (infanticide) (Hatters Friedman et al., 2005; Scrimshaw, 1984) and after their first year of life (filicide) (Bourget, Grace, & Whitehurst, 2007; Hatters Friedman et al., 2005). In a relevant number of mothers killing older offspring, psychopathology seems to be implicated (Bourget & Gagné, 2002; Resnick, 1970; Rodenburg, 1971; Spinelli, 2004; Stanton, Simpson, & Wouldes, 2000), while in others, jealousy toward the partner induces the mother to kill her offspring (the *Medea Complex*) (Liem & Koenraadt, 2008). Other cases might be triggered if the child possesses severe disabilities (altruistic filicide).

Aims

The still-unanswered question is whether neonaticide, infanticide, and filicide can be objectively distinguished by profiles that might help to prevent them. Further, it is not clear which of these forms of offspring killing represent evolved, adaptive behavioral patterns that increase a mother's reproductive fitness in the long term. Our study aimed to identify incidents of Italian mothers killing their own children and to test an adaptive evolutionary hypothesis to explain their occurrence.

Methods

Data may be collected on mothers who kill their offspring with epidemiological or psychiatric methods. The epidemiological method generally makes use of national archives and services such as VICLAS (Violent Crime Linkage System) in Canada or VICAP (Violent Criminal Apprehension Program) in the United States. The epidemiological method allows for the collection of large quantities of data that cover a long time span but generally have relatively limited analytical depth (Beyer, Mack, & Shelton, 2008; Bourget & Gagné, 2002; Harris et al., 2007; Overpeck et al., 1998). The psychiatric method consists of sampling individuals in forensic psychiatric hospitals. This method has a more restricted sample size that is partly biased, since it is composed solely of mothers who killed their offspring and who have been diagnosed as psychopathological. However, the psychiatric data collection method has the advantage of offering great analytical depth for every case (Krischer, Stone, Sevecke, & Steinmeyer, 2007; Stone et al., 2005). In Italy, archives and services that store case information on mothers who kill their offspring, such as VICLAS or VICAP do not yet exist. Police departments and penitentiary archives keep data regarding sentencing and prisoner detention time, but not regarding the type of crime committed by offenders with their profiles. Furthermore, in Italy, even mothers who kill their offspring and are diagnosed with severe psychopathology do not necessarily remain in forensic psychiatric hospitals for long periods; the court sends most of them to therapeutic closed communities after tenure in the forensic psychiatric hospital. In such closed communities, privacy rules prevent anyone from accessing patient files.

We could not perform a complete epidemiological survey of maternal offspring killings due to the lack of adequate archives, but we aimed not to limit our research to psychiatric hospital surveys. Hence, we opted for a typical criminalist method by starting from the most complete sources of information available, which are the archives of national and regional newspapers. The newspapers were not the source of our data, but rather the starting point for data collection. Once each case was found, all necessary variables for the study were sought and verified in lawyers' archives and eventually in the archives of the Forensic Psychiatric Hospital of Mantova, the only psychiatric hospital in Italy that admits female patients.

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