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FAMILICIDE IN ITALY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CASES INVOLVING MALE PERPETRATORS (1992-2015)

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Abstract

This article adds to the literature on familicide by providing specific insights from the Italian experience. It presents results of an exploratory investigation into male-perpetrated familicides in Italy between 1992 and 2015. Familicide is defined as the killing of the spouse or intimate partner, and at least one child, at the hand of the other spouse/partner. Incidents of familicide were collated from newspaper reports. We identified 90 cases, resulting in 207 deaths. On average, perpetrators were middle aged ($M = 46.8$; age ranging from 25 to 76), and most ($n = 66$; 73%) committed, or attempted to commit, suicide. While significant contributory roles were played by health problems and financial worries, the origin of the primary emotional upset for the killers tended to be interpersonal conflicts involving their partners. For those cases with available information ($n = 56$; 62%), six types of familicide were also identified on the basis of the murderer's homicidal motivations. Most frequent were three circumstances. 15 cases concerned the "doubly-protective familicide" (which corresponds to the "suicide-by-proxy"), characterized by the preservation of the family in the face of a presumed catastrophic event. Triggers included the killer's financial distress, health troubles, or anxiety associated with other personal problems. 13 cases referred to "doubly-punitive familicide," whose distinctive feature, in addition to punishing the partner because of her estrangement, her infidelity, or other disputes, is to directly involve the child(ren) in the punitive homicidal act. The children are viewed as contributory factors to the killer's stress, or are considered to be in league with the mother. 12 cases exemplified "indirectly-punitive familicide" (also termed "murder-by-proxy"), in which the victimized child(ren) are killed as an extension of the partner. Overall, this typology provides a more nuanced conceptualization of familicide occurrences than those examined in previous research.

Introduction

This exploratory study is part of a larger investigation into domestic violence in Italy, and focuses on episodes of familicide over the last two decades (1992-2015). Although there is no currently accepted definition of familicide, some scholars use a broad definition of family, inclusive of any blood relationship (e.g., cousins, siblings, grand-relations), as well as other relationships codified by the existence of the primary relationship (e.g., in-laws, step-relations; among others, Cooper & Eaves, 1996; Malmquist, 1980, 2012). We refer to a more specific definition, in-line with other studies, in which familicide is defined as the murder of the intimate partner or ex-partner (herein termed *partner*), and at least one child (e.g., Liem, Levin, Holland, & Fox, 2013; Mailloux, 2014; Schlesinger, 2000; Websdale, 2010; Whiteley, Terell, & Ann, 2016; Wilson, Daly, & Daniele, 1995). Results from previous investigations (particularly, Liem & Koenraadt, 2008) emphasize a plurality of distinctive features shared by killers involved in this form of multiple homicides compared with profiles of offenders responsible for other types of domestic violence. This suggests resorting to a definition of familicide based on a narrow acceptance.

In general, familicides are rare. In the case of Canada, for example, Wilson et al. (1995) reported an annual average of four cases. For England and Wales, the tally was reportedly three (Wilson et al., 1995). More recently, an investigation conducted by Liem et al. (2013) on familicide prevalence in the United States (2000-2009) reported 23 cases annually. In spite of their rarity, familicides generally entail a high rate of victimization compared with other circumstances of family and intimate violence. This, combined with the strong collective trauma associated with annihilation of a family, probably explains the relatively high media interest in these events.

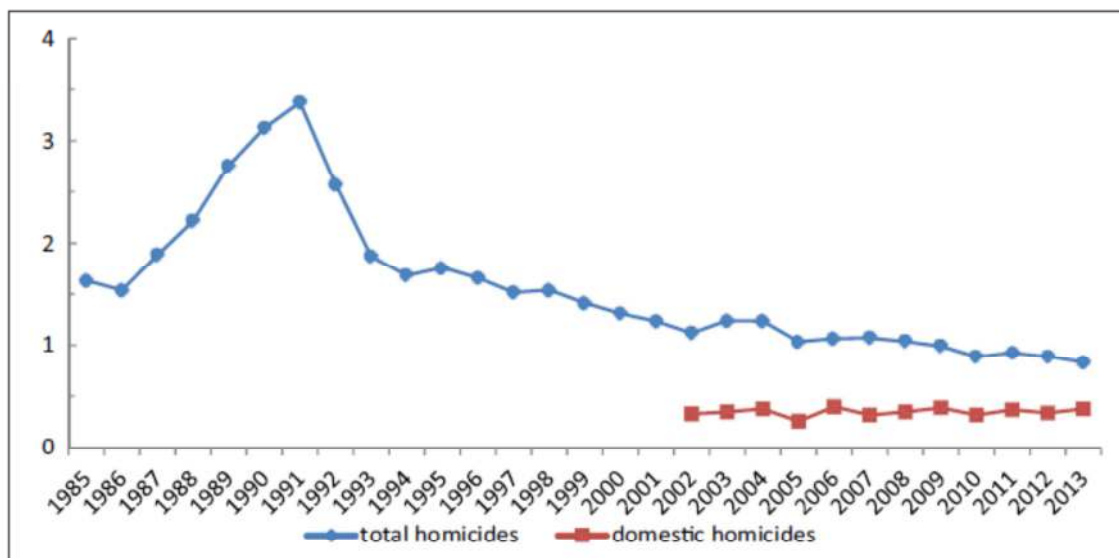


Figure 1. Homicide rate in Italy per 100,000 inhabitants.
 Source: Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT; 2015a).

As far as Italy is concerned, available information identify a long-term decrease of homicides at least since the beginning of 1990s. This is documented, for example, by recent reports by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT; <http://www.istat.it>), which were also based on data from the Italian Ministry of Interior (<http://www.interno.gov.it>). Figure 1 (source: ISTAT, 2015a; see also ISTAT, 2015b) shows a sharp fall between 1991, when the phenomenon reached its peak, and 1993 (from 3.38 to 1.87 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants), which was followed by a gradual decline (with slight fluctuations) to 0.83 in 2013 (see also additional reports specifically published by the Italian Ministry of Interior: for example, Barbagli & Colombo, 2011). Considering most recent years, such a trend places Italy below the average value calculated on the total of the 28 European Union countries (e.g., recent statistics from the Eurostat, 2014; <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained>).

Data provided by the ISTAT (2015a) with regard to victim–offender relationship for the 2002–2013 interval include domestic homicides whose victims were partner or ex-partner, other family members, and other relatives (see Figure 1), with the total of their homicide rate that was found to be relatively well conserved across the time period under study (for an overview of homicides in Italy, for example, Colombo, 2011; Preti & Macciò, 2012; for domestic homicides and homicide-suicides in Italy, for example, Ciappi, 2002; D’Argenio, Catania, & Marchetti, 2013; Merzagora Betsos & Pleuteri, 2005; Merzagora Betsos, Travaini, Battistini, & Pleuteri, 2011; Roma, Pazzelli, & Ferracuti, 2011; Roma et al., 2012; Russo, Delia, D’Arrigo, & Falduto, 2008, 2009; Verzeletti, Russo, & De Ferrari, 2013).

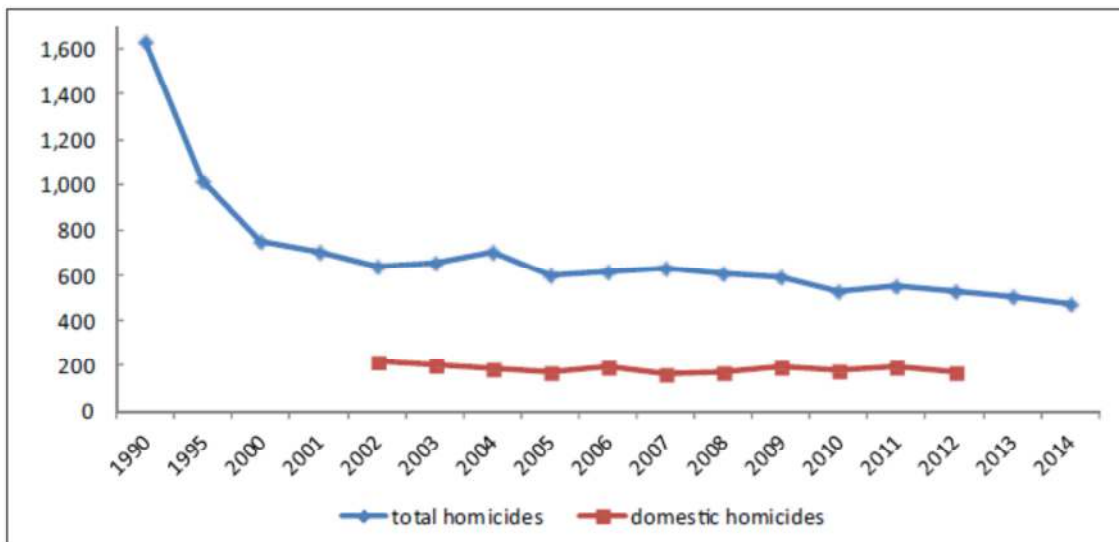


Figure 2. Number of homicides in Italy.

Source. Economic and Social Research Center (EURES; 2005, 2009, 2013, 2015).

More detailed information about domestic homicides have been provided, for example, by the Economic and Social Research Center (EURES; <http://www.eures.it>) since the beginning of 2000s, drawing from the National Agency Press (ANSA), and the Italian Ministry of the Interior. As with data from the ISTAT, the EURES reports reveal a stable trend for domestic homicides between 2002 and 2012 compared with a gradual decline of the total number of homicides in the same time period (as part of a dramatic fall since the beginning of 1990s) (see Figure 2).

EURES reports on homicides in Italy (EURES, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2013) give additional information about domestic homicides. Figure 3, relative to years between 2002 and 2012, illustrates that, in a majority of cases annually (ranging from 57% to 69%), the victim of a domestic homicide was female, with a much higher incidence of the same victimology when the murderer was male (ranging from 89% to 97%). These data emphasize the gender-specific dynamics that underlie the assassination of women in the domestic setting. The high prevalence of male offender is confirmed if one considers the total of domestic homicides (ranging from 81% to 91%).

Further details on the victim–offender relationship from the EURES reports (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2013) reveal that a significant majority of victims of domestic homicides (ranging from 55% to 70%) consist of partners (including former partner) and children of the killers (see Figure 4)—however, with no information about their possible and simultaneous involvement in multiple murders like familicides. In addition, a more in-depth analysis based on the gender of the killer of the same victimized (ex-)

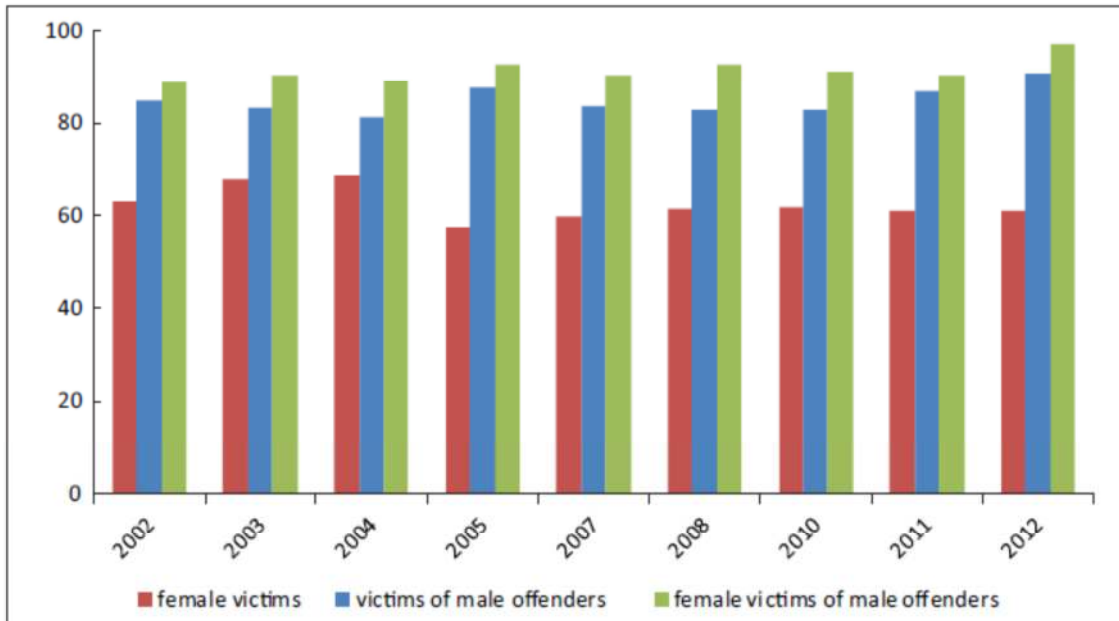


Figure 3. Percentage of victims of domestic homicides in Italy.

Source. Economic and Social Research Center (EURES; 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2013).

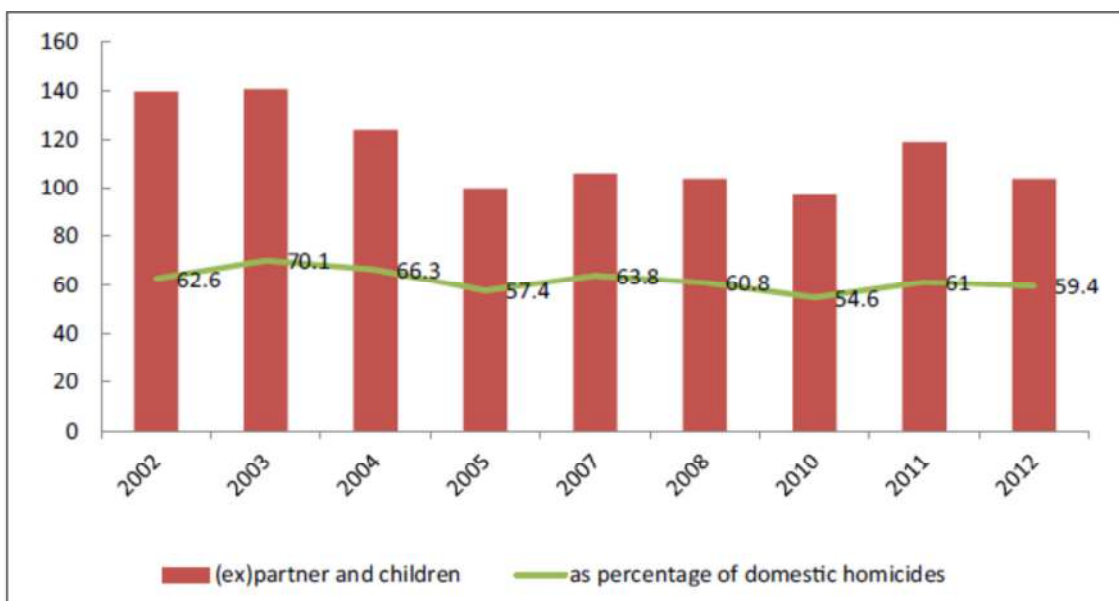


Figure 4. Victim-offender relationship in domestic homicides in Italy.

Source. Economic and Social Research Center (EURES; 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2013).

partners and children shows the massive impact made by male offenders (ranging from 78% to 88%; see Figure 5).

Our review of reports of Italian homicides published from several sources shows that only a portion offered any relevant information (and for a limited time period) in terms of the victim-offender relationship and additional

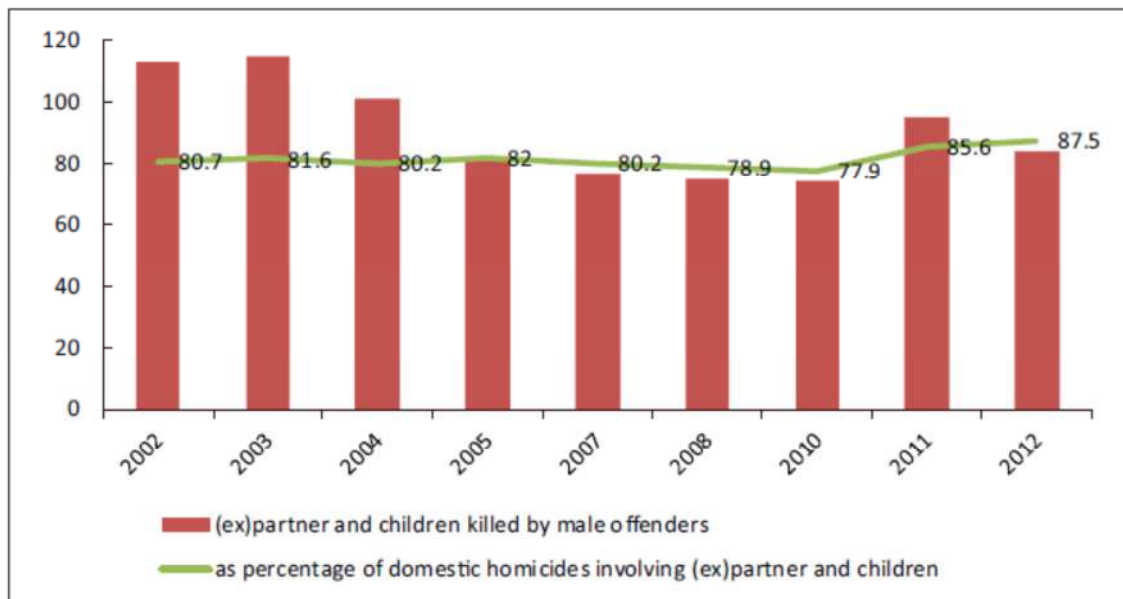


Figure 5. Victim–offender relationship in male-perpetrated domestic homicides in Italy.

Sources. Economic and Social Research Center (EURES; 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2013).

circumstances that approximated (to some extent) those seen in familicide. While such reports help to contextualize our topic within the broader realm of homicides and domestic homicides in Italy, any in-depth analysis of familicide (especially qualitative) for the time period under investigation in this article is precluded by the lack of epidemiological data for this type of offense. In addition, to our knowledge, there has been no specific study devoted to this topic, for Italian cases, published either in the national or wider literature.

Our research aims at providing some texture to the current informational void about this type of violence in Italy, and sheds light, from a multidisciplinary perspective, on the psychological and social factors that can “radicalize” and emotionally license a murderer to annihilate his family. We acknowledge that this study does not itself constitute an exhaustive epidemiological review of this form of domestic violence. Indeed, the methods we use to collate information cannot be treated as a substitute for systematic and reliable data harvesting from recognized institutional repositories. That said, our main objective was to conduct an explorative investigation into this criminal phenomenon from both a quantitative and qualitative standpoint and, in doing so, to complement the international literature on familicide with certain specific insights from the Italian experience.

As illustrated in “Method” section, we relied on newspaper reports to retrieve information at the level of the single familicide incidents. Because of

the especially violent nature of these homicides, with multiple victims, they tend to attract substantial media interest. We believed that our survey and collation of media reports would appear to be a reasonable approach to take in reviewing this topic. “Descriptive Statistics” section comprises descriptive statistics derived from our database on familicide, which covers the period between 1992 and 2015. “Types of murder” section elaborates on qualitative aspects of familicide, in particular killers’ motivations and attitudes toward their victims. This exercise made it possible to identify six types of familicide, each of which was subsequently illustrated by an appropriate empirical case.

These findings are discussed in detail in “Discussion” section. Here, several comparisons are made between, on one hand, descriptive statistics that rely on our dataset and, on the other, results from previous research conducted in other countries. In addition, comparisons were made using further epidemiological data obtained following an ad hoc inquiry made by the author to the EURES Center concerning more specific information about the victim–offender relationship in Italian homicides. A final discussion with regard to a qualitative analysis of the killer’s homicidal dispositions was then undertaken to clarify the contribution that our typology of familicide can make *versus* those most frequently described in previous investigations.

Method

In the past, newspaper reports have proven to be useful archives for data acquisition for several types of homicide (Aderibigbe, 1997; Danson & Soothill, 1996; Harding, Fox, & Mehta, 2002; Liem & Koenraadt, 2007; Liem et al., 2013; Malphurs & Cohen, 2002; Roma et al., 2011; Roma et al., 2012). As with other similar studies, the considerable media coverage paid to familicide events acted in our investigation as a useful, if derivative, surrogate for any official data repository. Information about incidents of familicide were collected between January 2013 and December 2015 from the online archive of the major Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera* (<http://www.archivio.corriere.it>).

Previous research on familicides in other countries has emphasized the distinct prevalence of male perpetrators, with Wilson et al. (1995, p. 279) stating that “familicide is virtually a male monopoly” (among others, Holland, Brown, Hall, & Logan, 2015; Johnson & Sachmann, 2014; Léveillé, Lefebvre, & Merleau, 2009; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Liem et al., 2013; Liem & Reichelmann, 2013; Websdale, 2010). A preliminary search of newspaper reports we used to investigate familicides in Italy shows that female killers correspond to a tiny minority of perpetrators between 1992 and 2015.

Indeed, we estimated that men committed more than 95% of familicides; it is therefore, almost exclusively, a male act. We decided to exploit this gender “identifier” in the search terms used to collect more detailed epidemiological data.

To search the online newspaper archive, our search queries relied on a selection of the Italian verbs most commonly used to describe interpersonal violence. These textual cues were used in conjunction with references to the partner, ex-partner, and child victims. In common with other sampling methodologies, the data that we retrieved will inevitably suffer from sampling errors. These will reflect the inadequate “coverage” of search-engine retrieved data, as well as the media-driven self-selection of public-interest stories, as dictated by editorial policies. In addition to the caveats that come with the use of derivative data, media reports are sometimes, necessarily, speculative, especially with regard to the motivations of the murderer. However, despite these shortcomings, currently the media record represents one of the most useful sources of research material to collect detailed information at the level of the single familicide incidents. Therefore, we exploited it as best we could.

In addition to the date and location of each familicide, media coverage was used to retrieve the following data: the killer’s name and age; whether he committed, or attempted, suicide; the killer’s occupation; the number of child victims (in addition to the killer’s partner); and the name and age of each victim; the homicide and (attempted) suicide method; and whether the murderer suffered from any mental disorder. Where sufficient information was available, the perpetrator’s motivations were categorized according to the main suspected sources of stress.

Finally, newspaper reports were scrutinized for references to other non-victimized family members, more distantly related individuals, and people with whom there were no blood ties, who may, or may not, have been targeted by the offender. All individuals who survived familicidal violence or were not victimized certainly constitute valuable potential interviewees, along with non-suicide killers, or the killers whose suicide attempt had failed. Collectively, these testimonies would be crucial for providing more accurate evidence for the psychological and social mechanisms behind each incident.

Descriptive Statistics

For the period between January 1992 and December 2015, our study identified 90 cases of familicide committed by men (an average of 3.8 cases annually), which caused 207 deaths among partners, ex-partners, and children (an average of 8.6 deaths annually, with 2.3 deaths per case), in addition to 11 deaths comprising other relatives and non-relatives. Figure 6 shows how,

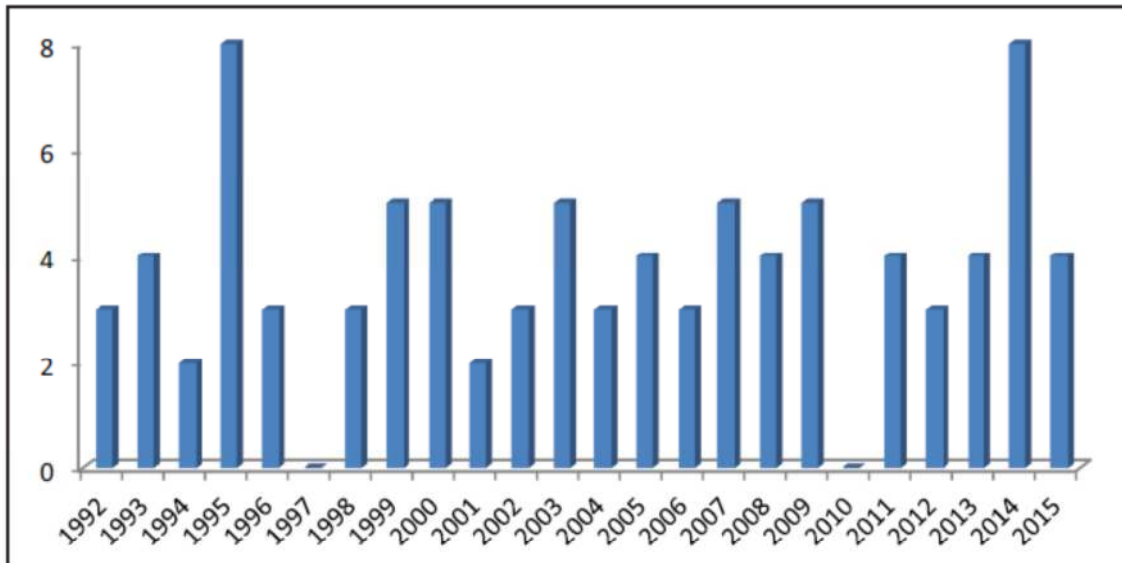


Figure 6. Annual incidence of male-perpetrated familicides in Italy (1992-2015) ($n = 90$).

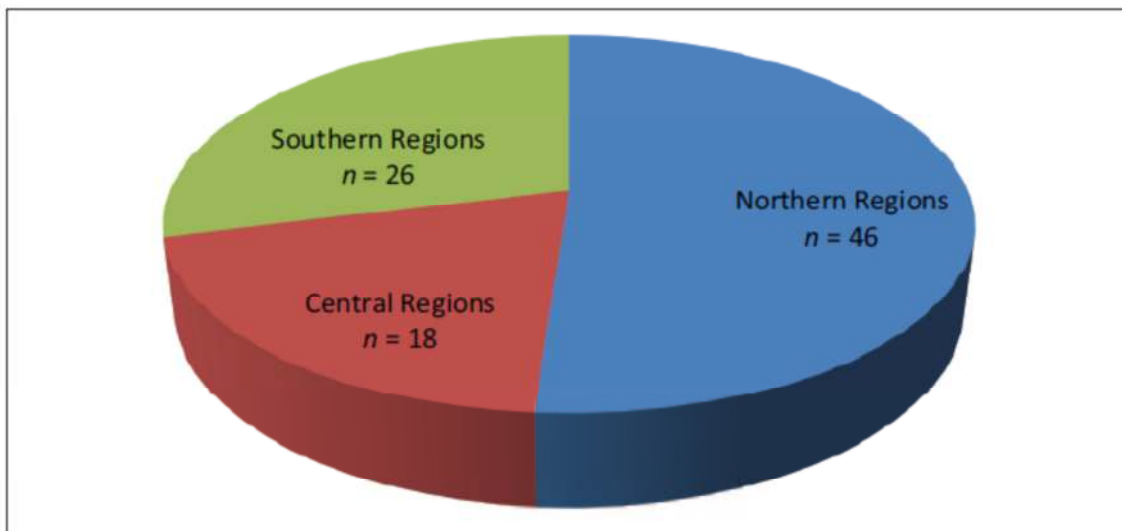


Figure 7. Geographical distribution of male-perpetrated familicides in Italy (1992-2015) ($n = 90$).

apart from four exceptional years (1995 and 2014, with eight cases, and 1997 and 2010, with no case), the annual occurrence of familicides was relatively constant across the period under investigation.

With respect to the geographical distribution of familicides, data revealed that approximately half of the cases ($n = 46$) occurred in the Italian northern regions, with just over a quarter in the south ($n = 26$; 29%) and the remainder in the central regions ($n = 18$; 20%) (see Figure 7).

A study of the distribution of fatalities incurred by familicides (the partner and one or more children) identified that two deaths were the most common

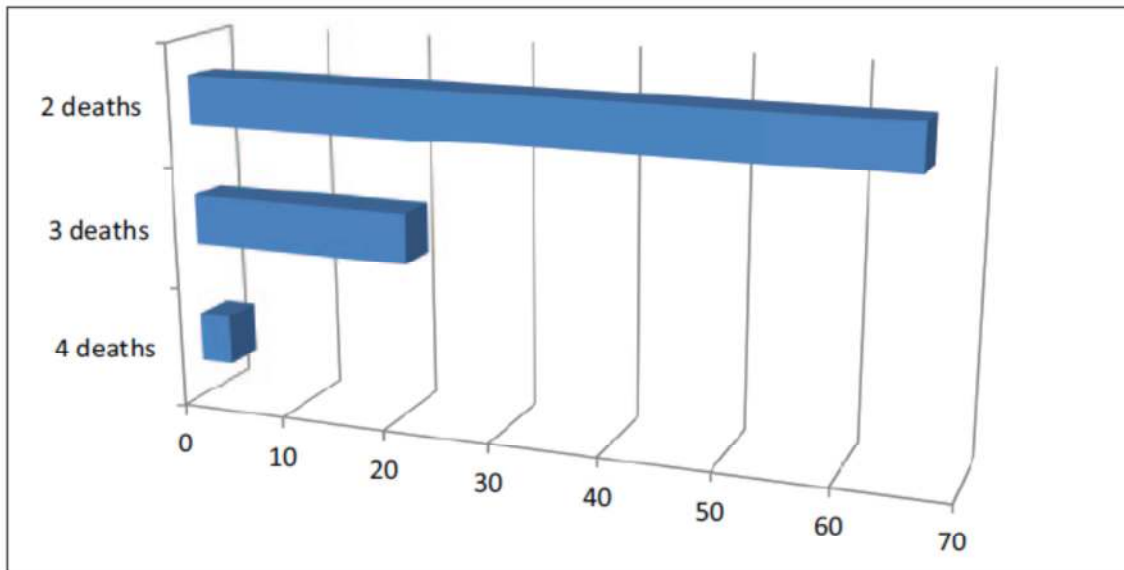


Figure 8. Male-perpetrated familicides for number of deaths in Italy (1992-2015) ($n = 90$).

Table 1. Victims killed by male perpetrators of familicides in Italy (1992-2015).

	N	%
Gender ($n = 207$)		
Male	54	26%
Female	153	74%
Age ($n = 197$)		
<18	74	38%
18-25	23	12%
26-40	52	26%
41-65	45	23%
>65	3	1%
<i>M</i> (adult victims)	38.1 (± 12.8)	
<i>M</i> (child victims <18)	8.3 (± 4.9)	
Homicide method ($n = 207$)		
Firearms	94	45%
Pointed instrument	74	36%
Strangulation/Suffocation	25	12%
Other	14	7%

outcome ($n = 66$; 73%), followed by three ($n = 21$; 23%), and then four deaths ($n = 3$; 4%) (see Figure 8).

Data collected for the victims were the following (see also Table 1). The age of the victimized partner ranged from 24 to 68 ($M = 43.6$). Of a total of 119 victimized children, most were killed ($n = 117$; 93%). Among those killed, the majority were female ($n = 63$; 54%). The age of the killed children

Table 2. Male perpetrators of familicides in Italy (1992-2015).

	N	%
Age (n = 88)		
18-25	1	1%
26-40	29	33%
41-65	53	60%
>65	5	6%
<i>M</i>	46.8 (± 11.5)	
Marital status (n = 90)		
Married	72	80%
Divorced/separated	14	16%
Never married	4	4%
Socioeconomic status (n = 82)		
Professionals	8	10%
Non-manual employee	19	23%
Small proprietors/artisans	8	10%
Manual worker	28	34%
Unemployed	6	7%
Retiree	13	16%
Suicide behavior (n = 66)		
Suicide	55	83%
Suicide attempt	9	14%
Not available	2	3%

ranged from a couple of months to 43 years ($M = 14.3$). For approximately half of cases ($n = 94$), the victims were assaulted by firearms; in just over a third of the cases, the assault weapon was a pointed instrument ($n = 74$; 36%). Strangulation/suffocation was also used ($n = 25$; 12%). The majority of the victims were killed in their own home.

As for familicidal killers (see also Table 2), the majority in our sample ($n = 52$; 59%) were in their 30s or 40s. On average, murderers were middle-aged individuals ($M = 46.8$; age ranging from 25 to 76), 66 of them (73%) committed, or attempted, suicide, while a firearm was most frequently used to commit suicide.

In our sample, the available information showed that in 72 cases (80%), perpetrator of the familicide was married to their victimized partner, whereas 14 (16%) were separated or divorced, and four (4%) were unmarried. From our newspaper reports, we deduced that 25 perpetrators (28%) suffer from mental disorders, mainly from depressive disorders. We also managed to determine the socio-economic status of 82 out of 90

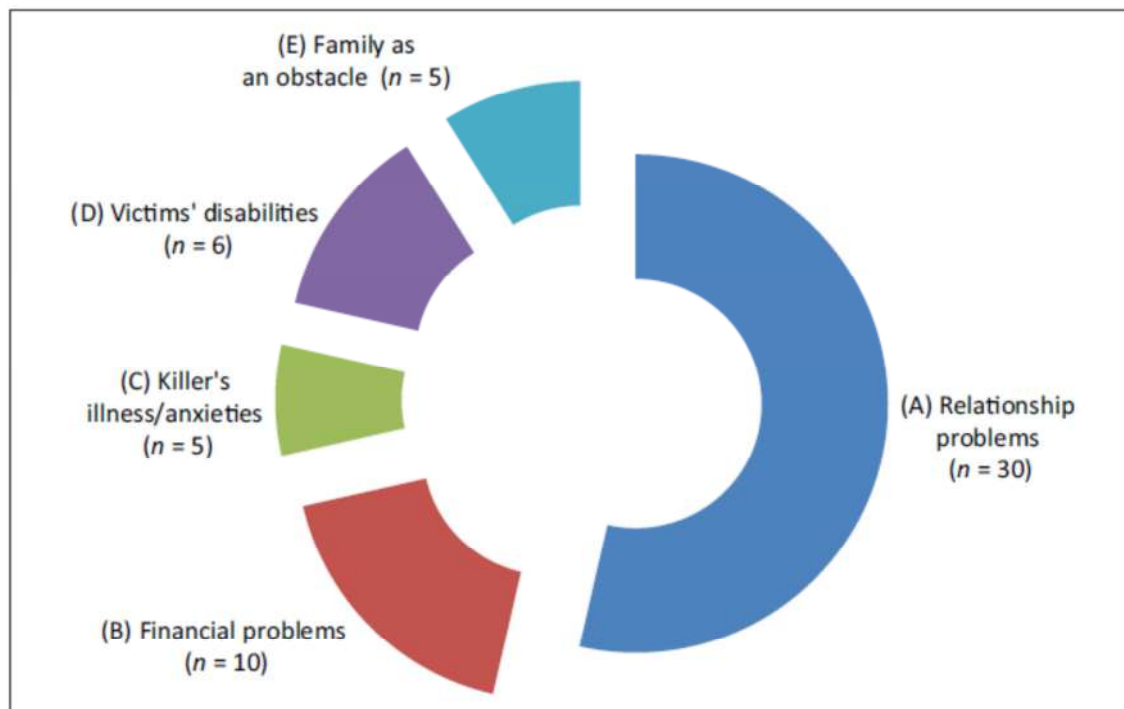


Figure 9. Stress drivers for male perpetrators of familicides in Italy (1992-2015) ($n = 56$).

offenders. Of these, eight (10%) were professionals, 19 (23%) were non-manual employees, eight (10%) were small proprietors/artisans, 28 (34%) were manual workers, six (7%) were unemployed, and 13 (16%) were retirees.

In a total of 56 cases (62%), the newspaper reports explicitly mentioned or allowed us to assume at least one possible stress driver for the familicide (see Figure 9). For 30 cases (53%), relationship problems, and other disputes with intimate partners (in some cases, with the direct involvement of their children) were the principal contributory factors in the multiple homicide (Category A of stress drivers). These problems mostly consisted of divorce or separation, or the threat of these, jealousy, or other conflicts, including those related to financial issues and child custody. In 10 cases (18%), the perpetrator's financial problems were cited as the determining factor (Category B); large debts, losing money, unemployment, or a combination of any of these was sufficient. Other motives included the offenders' deteriorating physical health, and other personal or existential troubles (Category C), which accounted for five cases (9%), together with six cases (11%) concerning illness or disability of the partner or children (Category D), and five cases (9%) related to the view of the family as a threat, an obstacle, or a burden to the killer's lifestyle or ambitions (Category E).

Types of Murder

Much debate exists in criminological literature about the psychological mechanisms and motivations responsible for familicide offenses. Focusing on male perpetrators, we came across a number of recurrent factors that could have acted as triggers for the multiple homicide. To fully understand how such highly destructive behaviors can arise, one should focus on the murderers' sense-making processes and their definition of the situation accounting for the need to direct such an extraordinary violence toward their partner and children simultaneously (Schlesinger, 2000). At this stage of our investigation, the available information in the database are insufficient for an exhaustive analysis of the entire sample. However, evidence provided by the newspaper reports allowed us to make some tentative observations. We propose a typology derived from six categorizations of offenders' main forms of homicidal dispositions and attitudes toward their partner and the child(ren). These are empirically based types concerning the 56 cases mentioned above, for which the newspapers explicitly reported or gave sufficient clues to deduce at least one possible factor that precipitated the familicides (see Figure 9). For all types, we specify the main cognitive mechanisms that, in the mind of the killer, could justify acts of violence toward his partner and child(ren). In addition, an exemplar of each type is provided for illustrative purposes.

A common feature of three types of familicide is the acrimony that underlies the homicidal act, at least toward the partner. Here, the latter is always the target of some punitive behavior, as the killer attempts to obtain (perverted) justice (in the sense of Joiner, 2013) for events real, or imagined. These events may include imminent or actual separation as demanded by the partner herself, a presumed infidelity, or disputes related to financial worries or child custody (Category A of stress drivers). The three types can be further differentiated according to the attitudes of the murderer toward the victimized child(ren).

For the first and second type of familicide, both the intimate partner and the child(ren) are targeted by a homicidal act imposed as some form of restorative justice. The two types are distinguished on the basis of the direct *versus* indirect involvement of child(ren) in the punitive act. The circumstance of *doubly-punitive familicide* (Type I) is reserved for an offender who kills a child because he or she is thought to have conspired with, or to have been an ally of, the partner in fueling the killer's sense of helplessness. The child may also have tried to defend or protect his or her mother when assaulted. This type putatively describes 13 (23%) of the 56 cases in our dataset, with seven cases followed by the perpetrator's suicide. For instance, in October 2000, in

the province of Savona (in the northern region of Liguria), a 63-year-old retired farmer killed his wife (66) and one of his two sons (28) with a rifle, then wounded his daughter (30), and the other son (26). The incident came at the end of several years of land ownership disputes and other conflicts involving his wife and children. Before the court, he said,

I did not get along with my wife because she was aggressive. . . . My children scorned me in all manners, and showed me disrespect. I believe that no one can endure this kind of life for 25 years.

An *indirectly-punitive familicide* (Type II) occurs when the child is assassinated because s(he) is perceived as an extension of the victimized partner, and is therefore only symbolically treated as estranged, and the cause of frustration. This type refers to 12 incidents (21%), with nine cases followed by the annihilator's suicide. This is exemplified by the case of a 40-year-old unemployed man, who, following the separation from his wife (40), had threatened to kill her and their daughter (8). In January 2012, after a loud argument with his ex-wife, he stabbed both to death, then assassinated his mother-in-law (77) and his disabled brother-in-law (55), and set fire to their residence in the city of Trapani (in the southern region of Sicily). He then committed suicide by jumping off a balcony.

The third type of familicide is always followed by the killer's suicide. This is named *symbiotic-punitive familicide* (Type III). In this act, anger and revenge are exclusively directed toward the partner. The murderer's homicidal instinct toward his children is to some extent an act to protect them, and to ameliorate any pain they might feel because of the events that have befallen the family. Combined with the suicidal act, the killer then retained his (symbiotic) relationship with the child(ren). Five cases (9%) could plausibly be of this type. As an illustration of this scenario, in June 1992, in the city of Verona (in the northern region of Veneto), a 37-year-old municipal employee stabbed his wife (31) to death, probably because of jealousy after suspecting a love affair with another man, as he had earlier told his mother. He then drove his car with his 4-year-old daughter for about 60 Km to a neighboring lake, then jumped off a landing stage, drowning the two of them.

A total of 15 cases (27%), all of them followed by the killer's suicide, might be characterized as evidence of an additional type named *doubly-protective familicide* (Type IV). Here, both the intimate partner and the child(ren) are killed to satisfy a pseudo-altruistic need on the part of the killer to prevent their suffering from some imagined and terrible future. This act is a response to the perception of a catastrophic event or events that are considered insurmountable. Of these irremediable circumstances, the most frequent are the

offender's financial and work-related problems (Category B of stress drivers), as well as his health problems and/or some other anxiety (Category C). In some respects, the annihilation of the family is part of an *extended suicide*: on the one hand, the homicidal act is logically preceded by the killer's suicide, which aims to escape or put a stop to his sense of helplessness caused by certain failures and other personal troubles; on the other hand, the suicidal act subsumes the family members, as an extension of self, into the murderer's personal "failing," and their destiny becomes intimately assimilated with his, in the form of a collective catastrophe. At any rate, with the suicide, the killer probably pursues also in this case an ultimate attempt to preserve the family unit.

As an example, in February 2006, in the province of Verona (in the northern region of Veneto), a 49-year-old chicken hauler committed suicide by cutting his throat after assaulting his wife with a hammer, and his three children. He killed his 44-year-old partner and his daughter (10), then seriously wounded his two sons (14- and 16-year-old). Hugely distressed by the financial troubles of his chicken farm, he left a note in which he said, "I ruined my family because of my carelessness."

Another type is called *protective-euthanasiac familicide* (Type V), which in our sample might be applied to six cases (11%), with four committing suicide. The distinctive feature of certain comparable cases of homicide-suicide has been termed by Joiner (2013; see also Malmquist, 2012), as a "perversion of mercy," insofar as the act of killing is seen to be a merciful release for a disabled (including psychologically), or physically unwell partner, or child (at least one; Category D of stress drivers). The collateral assassination of healthy family members then (either the partner or children) presumably aims to protect them and to remove not only the misery of those disabilities but also the drama and stress of their having had survived the killing of a loved one. In common with the previous type of familicide, the perpetrator's suicide "ritually seals" the family unit, in the mind of the killer. This type can be illustrated by the case of a 57-year-old stallholder, who, in September 1995 in the province of Alessandria (in the northern region of Piemonte), massacred his wife (57) with a hammer, and their son (18), while sleeping. He then took his own life by slashing his wrists, having left a letter expressing his anguish over his partner's cancer.

For all types examined so far, the familicidal annihilator has remained in absolute control of the family, which is conceived of as a non-autonomous entity that is, and should be, unquestionably subject to his power. Crucially, it is the killer who decides and evaluates the extent of each threat to the family and how it should be dealt with, including its destruction as an inevitable response to the perception of certain catastrophic circumstances. A different

Table 3. Types of male-perpetrated familicides in Italy (1992-2015).

I.	Doubly-punitive	Direct involvement of the child(ren) in the punitive homicidal act against the partner
II.	Indirectly-punitive (murder-by-proxy)	Victimized child(ren) killed as an extension of the partner punished by the homicidal act
III.	Symbiotic-punitive	Punitive act against the partner with the homicide-suicide involving the child(ren) aimed to protect and retain the relationship with them
IV.	Doubly-protective (suicide-by-proxy)	Extended suicide aimed to preserve the family in the face of presumed catastrophic events
V.	Protective-euthasiac	Merciful release for a disabled (including psychologically), or physically unwell partner, or child(ren)
VI.	Instrumental	Annihilation of the family (viewed as an obstacle) to gain unfettered access to whatever is desired.

cognitive mechanism and definition of the situation underlie the last type identified in our sample, which we call *instrumental familicide* (Type VI). This type approximates five cases (9%) and is characterized by murderer who does not kill himself. Indeed, the absence of suicide is to some extent associated with a premeditated homicidal act, aimed at getting rid of one's family, because certain behaviors of the family members or their existence as such are viewed as threats or obstacles to the offender's current lifestyle, or to future ambitions (Category E of stress drivers). The annihilation of the family by this "entitled" killer is an instrument to gain unfettered access to whatever is desired, however delusional a killer's plan might be. To illustrate this scenario, in June 2014 in Milan (in the norther region of Lombardy), a 31-year-old office worker stabbed his wife (38) to death, his daughter (5) and his son (20 months), because, he confessed, they became a burden that hampered his love affair with another woman. Table 3 summarizes the main features of each type of familicide.

Discussion

Our research identified 90 familicides involving male perpetrators between 1992 and 2015, responsible for 207 deaths. The majority of killers in our sample ($n = 52$; 59%) were in their 30s or 40s. As with previous studies (e.g., Léveillé et al., 2009; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Liem et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 1995), on average, murderers were middle-aged individuals ($M = 46.8$).

Another majority consist of 66 offenders (73%), who committed, or attempted, suicide. Likewise, in a sample of 207 familicides (96% male) in the United States examined by Liem et al. (2013), these findings were recapitulated. In that study, 67% of perpetrators committed, or attempted, suicide and, as with our study, a firearm was most frequently used to annihilate the family. Such results also approximate those concerning 13 cases of suicide that followed 16 male-perpetrated familicides in Quebec between 1986 and 2000 (Léveillé et al., 2009). However, a lower prevalence emerged from a study of 61 Canadian familicide incidents between 1974 and 1990 (93% male) and 49 cases from England and Wales between 1977 and 1990 (98% male), with “only” half of male perpetrators committing suicide in both samples (Wilson et al., 1995).

In their research comparing familicide annihilators *versus* close partner, or child homicide, Liem and Koenraadt (2008) pointed out that familicidal killers expressed distinct demographic and psychopathological characteristics. The authors found that those who had committed familicides were more likely to be married than those who had killed an intimate partner. They were also less likely to have committed a previous violent offense but more likely to suffer from a personality disorder. In addition, they were generally more highly educated than child homicide perpetrators. As a result, male annihilators represent a distinct category of murderer that could be amenable to profiling.

Our sample showed that the killers were married to their victimized partner in 72 cases (80%), 14 (16%) were separated/divorced, and four (4%) were unmarried. These data also agreed with those reported by Liem et al. (2013) for the 207 familicide cohort discussed earlier: 71% of the perpetrators of familicide were married, 19% were divorced or separated, and 7% unmarried. However, in more than two thirds of incidents studied by Léveillé et al. (2009), the killers were separated or were dealing with a separation from their partner.

One discrepancy between our results and previous investigations has to do with the killers’ psychological profile. Indeed, we identified 25 perpetrators (28%) who suffered from mental disorders, mainly from depressive disorders, compared with a high prevalence estimated, among others, by Léveillé et al. (2009), Liem et al. (2013), and Sachmann and Harris Johnson (2014). As for the murderer’s stress drivers, the most common perceived “provocation” from our sample was a breakdown or tension in the relationship with the partner (53%, which corresponds to 30 out of 56 cases with available information about the main homicidal motivations). Jealousy and the overreaction to imminent or effective separation demanded by their partners were common killer attributes. Generally, such results were in line with previous research: for example, the incidence of relationship problems involving the intimate partner amounts to 9 out of 16 cases examined by Léveillé et al.

(2009), and 74% from the sample studied by Liem et al. (2013), with an additional 11% concerning child custody problems. Moreover, our dataset showed a significant prevalence of health problems and financial worries, which impacted on the final decisions to annihilate a family.

A further, separated analysis of domestic homicides made it possible to test the accuracy of our sample of familicide occurrences. As mentioned in the “Introduction” section, a request was addressed by the author to the EURES Center for more specific epidemiological data that could then be compared with our dataset. This request resulted in the extraction of a series of aggregate data from the EURES archive based on victim–offender relationships consistent with our definition of familicide. These data covered the period between 2000 and 2015 (source: EURES Ricerche Economiche e Sociali – Archivio degli omicidi volontari in Italia, October 2016).

The EURES Center retrieved 71 cases of familicides, 68 of them (96%) committed by male killers, which agrees with the 62 male-perpetrated offenses identified in our database for the same time period. The percentage of male perpetrators, relative to female, were found to be comparable with our estimate for the entire study period, as mentioned in “Method” section. As with data on domestic homicides examined in the “Introduction” section, this confirms the potent gender-linked mechanisms that underlie familicide. Due to the small incidence of female-perpetrated offenses, a number of comparisons were possible between, on the one hand, the EURES data comprising 71 cases and, on the other, results for male-perpetrated familicides from our sample for the same period (2000-2015) and for the entire interval covered by our research (1992-2015).

Following the strict exclusion of collateral victims (i.e., victims other than family members), those reported to have been killed in the EURES dataset totaled 156, with an average of 2.2 deaths per case. Our sample shows 141 deaths (2000-2015) and 207 deaths (1992-2015) and an average of 2.3 deaths for both time periods. The average age of the victimized partners from our sample periods of 1992-2015 and 2000-2015 were 43.6 and 45.8, respectively, which approximates the result of 45.1 retrieved from the EURES archive. As for the children killed, our dataset documents an average age of 14.3 (1992-2015) and 14.7 (2000-2015), both of which are comparable with the mean of 14.8 found using the EURES Center data. Firearms were the most frequently used assault weapons according to both the EURES (50%) and our investigation, over both study periods (2000-2015: 47%; 1992-2015: 45%).

Furthermore, the average age of the perpetrators was found to be 48.6 in the EURES dataset, which closely approximates the 48.7 years found in our sample for the same period (46.8 was the relevant figure of the entire interval of 1992-2015). Available information from the EURES Center documented

that the killers committed, or attempted to commit, suicide in 65% of cases, which is comparable with our findings (74% between 2000 and 2015; 73% between 1992 and 2015). One discrepancy concerns the prevalence of mental disorders, which was 38% in the EURES dataset *versus* 29% (2000-2015) and 28% (1992-2015) in our sample.

However, collectively, this series of data comparisons made between our dataset and information retrieved from the EURES Center showed that a significant portion of our results (at least for 2000-2015) were consistent with those provided by a recognized repository. Unfortunately, given the aggregate nature of the additional data made available by the EURES Center, other comparisons were made impracticable, in particular, those concerning the murders' motivations and attitudes toward their victims and the dynamics of homicide occurrences. This issue is discussed with respect to other previous investigations as follows.

The perpetrators' attitudes toward the family members who were ultimately victimized were at the center of the qualitative analysis of our sample, focusing on a number of cases ($n = 56$; 62%) with the available information. Six types of familicide were specified. 13 cases (23%) were conceptualized as *doubly-punitive familicide* (Type I). In addition to punishing the partner because of her estrangement, her infidelity, or other disputes, the children were directly involved in the punitive homicidal act. They were perceived as additionally responsible for the perpetrator's frustration or were considered to be on the side of the victimized partner. 12 cases (21%) referred to *indirectly-punitive familicide* (Type II), in which the children are killed as an extension of the partner, who was targeted mainly for jealousy, separation, or her decision to leave. 15 cases (27%) were categorized as *doubly-protective familicide* (Type IV), whose distinctive feature consists of the preservation of the family in the face of a presumed catastrophic event. The offender's financial and health troubles, or other personal problems, were among the most recurrent precipitating events. Less frequent were the remaining three types (each of them with about 10% of cases): *symbiotic-punitive* (Type III), *protective-euthanasiac* (Type V), and *instrumental* familicide (Type VI). This typology conceptualized a more nuanced differentiation within the familicide occurrences than those generally employed in previous research. At the same time, our typology incorporates all major types of familicide identified in other contributions.

We believe the Type II (*indirectly-punitive familicide*) precisely corresponds to the *murder-by-proxy*, which has been discussed in previous investigations (Frazier, 1975; Liem, 2010, 2012; Liem et al., 2013), and describes familicidal killers driven by anger following their partner's threat of withdrawal, or estrangement (see also the notion of "spousal revenge" in Liem & Reichelmann, 2013; Whiteley

et al., 2016). Such conditions are tantamount to those annihilators whom Websdale (2010) called *livid coercive*, in that their destructiveness stems from a profound sense of anger and shame. As stated by Liem et al. (2013, p. 352),

in their minds, they have been betrayed by their intimate partner and by everything that she loves—namely, the children. The killer seeks revenge by killing his partner and all of “her” children. From this perspective, familicides resemble intimate partner homicides, as the primary object of aggression constitutes the spouse rather than the children. (see also, Dietz, 1986; Dobash & Dobash, 2015; Eriksson & Mazerolle, 2013; Fox & Levin, 2011; Gregory, 2013; Harper & Voigt, 2007; Holland et al., 2015; Johnson, 2006; Koziol-McLain et al., 2006; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Manning, 2014; Oliffe et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 1995).

By the same token, Type IV (*doubly -protective familicide*) approximates the so-called *suicide-by-proxy*, as analyzed in a variety of contributions (Ewing, 1997; Fox & Levin, 2011; Malmquist, 2012; Polk, 1994; Scheinin, Rogers, & Sathyavagiswaran, 2011). Here, the homicidal act is generally committed by individuals who feel duty bound to save their family from devastating events (see also the notion of “despondent husbands” in Liem & Reichelmann, 2013; Whiteley et al., 2016). Websdale (2010, pp. 177-203) referred to these killers as *civil reputable*:

A common and persistent theme is that perpetrators and their families were responsible and respectable citizens. . . . Facing threats like bankruptcy, illness, or a controlling spouse, the perpetrators appeared to be overwhelmed to the point they felt that killing was their only way out. . . . Many of the civil reputable hearts appear to commit familicide for what they define as altruistic reasons. . . . Perpetrators express concerns about the misery their families endure due to things like financial destitution, social disgrace, and illness. . . . The civil reputable hearts appeared to view their family members as an extensions of themselves as opposed to autonomous individuals. (see also, Cooper & Eaves, 1996; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Liem et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 1995)

Finally, we provide some hypothesis concerning an additional elaboration of our typology. While codifying incidents corresponding to the Types I, II, and III, for some cases (particularly when an imminent or actual separation is the main source of stress), we could not categorically exclude that the homicidal act was relatively free from acrimony not only toward the children but also toward the partner. Unfortunately, the available details at this stage of our investigation are unable to confirm the hypothesis that, under certain circumstances, the mind-set of the perpetrator is ultimately to preserve the family unit and his relationship with both the partner *and* the child(ren). Here, the

murder probably believes these relationships have been put in jeopardy by the actions of the partner, and in particular her demand for a separation/divorce. At the same time, the use of relatively non-bloody means of killing, combined with a certain symbolism, might be taken as evidence of an effort to retain the integrity of the family on the basis of (perverted) *romantic* attitudes, in the case of the partner, and (perverted) *paternal* feelings, in the case of the children.

If confirmed by further details in our dataset, or by other research, this hypothesis would argue for an additional type of familicide, which might be called *doubly-symbiotic familicide*. In at least one case, currently categorized as murder-by-proxy, doubts emerge as to the extent to which the offender was driven by anger and revenge. In August 2008, in the province of Parma (in the northern region of Emilia Romagna), a 43-year-old personnel manager, distressed by his 45-year-old wife's threats to leave, gunned down her and his daughter (19). He then took his own life after lying near the body of the partner. The latter gesture can plausibly be considered to be an expression of the killer's ultimate search for a (symbiotic) tie with the victim (see also results from Johnson & Sachmann, 2014; Sachmann & Harris Johnson, 2014). This state of mind probably underlies several cases of male-perpetrated homicide-suicides, involving a female partner alone. One example concerns an author's relative who gunned down his wife, presumably from jealousy, leaving several notes in which he demanded to be buried near the partner and said: "Because of too much love, one is driven to do that."

Another, possible addition to our typology has to do with the Type V (*protective-euthanasiac familicide*). We observe that certain elements of at least one case included in this type exemplify hypothetical circumstances in which the same "perversion of mercy" applies to the partner *and* at least one child, both of whom suffer from physical or psychological disabilities. In December 2005 in Rome (in the central region of Lazio), a 64-year-old retired taxi driver assaulted his wife (59) with an axe, and his son (28), who suffered from schizophrenia and other mental disorders, respectively. He died, probably from poisoning, having left a message in which he said,

I was abandoned. No one helped us, with a schizophrenic wife and a mad son. I also searched for a job for him, but I was unable to find one. I did all I could to make things better, but I was unable to. Now our story ends here.

If confirmed by further details from this case, or by other investigations, the hypothetical conditions associated with a twofold (perverted) mercy would

justify the inclusion of a further type, which might be termed *doubly-euthanasiac familicide*.

Limitations

One of the main limitations concerns our use of reports retrieved from the online archive of the selected newspaper. As with other similar data harvesting exercises, this methodology will have introduced distinct sampling errors. This will equate to the quality of the searching and search algorithms used, the completeness of the media record, the veracity of reporting, and editorial bias in selecting newsworthy items. In addition, information is often sketchy, particularly with regard to the motivations of the murderer. However, we have subjected our data to as much scrutiny as is practicable to populate our familicide categories with actual cases. Future investigations should lessen these biases by incorporating a richer dataset, including hospital reports, criminal records, and interviews with the killers. Finally, interviews with family members and others affected by the crime, whether related or not, or harmed or not, should be gathered. Collectively, these data should permit a more precise analysis of the underlying psychological and social mechanisms that drive these incidents, and how the mental state of the perpetrators interprets these events in such a way as to conclude that familicide is inevitable.

The results of our investigation specifically refer to case studies of male-perpetrated familial homicides in Italy between 1992 and 2015. Therefore, one should be cautious about generalizing when it comes to other time frames or countries, particularly with respect to different cultural contexts. By the same token, the focus on male annihilators does not justify applying those results and descriptions of murder profiles to women involved in violence against family members. The latter cases require quite specific research to clarify possible analogies, and differences, between male and female perpetrators (Scott & Fleming, 2014).

Conclusion

This article consists of an analysis of the data concerning cases of familicides in Italy between January 1992 and December 2015. Data were gathered through data mining exercise using media archives; a main search criterion was a male murderer. A total of 90 familial homicides involving an intimate partner, and at least one child, occurred on average 3.8 times annually, which caused 207 deaths. On average, perpetrators were middle aged ($M = 46.8$; age ranging from 25 to 76), 66 of them (73%) then committing, or attempting,

suicide. Our finding that the majority of the offenders were husbands/fathers in their 30s or 40s, who committed the offense with a firearm, closely agrees with other (international) studies. As with intimate partner homicide alone, the majority of victims were female.

Apart from a significant incidence of health problems and money worries, the most common perceived “provocation” was a breakdown or tension in the relationship with the partner. Jealousy and the overreaction to imminent or effective separation demanded by their partners were common killers’ attributes. For those cases with available information ($n = 56$; 62%), six types of familicide were specified according to the annihilator’s attitudes toward the family members who were ultimately victimized.

Most frequent were three circumstances. 15 cases concerned the *doubly-protective familicide* (which corresponds to the *suicide-by-proxy*), characterized by the preservation of the family in the face of a presumed catastrophic event. Triggers included the killer’s financial distress, health troubles, or anxiety associated with other personal problems. 13 cases were categorized as *doubly-punitive familicide*, whose distinctive feature, in addition to punishing the partner because of her estrangement, her infidelity, or other disputes, is to directly involve the child(ren) in the punitive homicidal act. The children are viewed as contributory factors to the killer’s stress or are considered to be in league with the mother. 12 cases exemplified *indirectly-punitive familicide* (also termed *murder-by-proxy*), in which the victimized child(ren) are killed as an extension of the partner. The remainder were divided, on a roughly even basis, by the categories of *symbiotic-punitive*, *protective-euthanasiac*, and *instrumental* familicide. Further details and investigations could be able to provide a more nuanced typology in the future.

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