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TECHNICAL NOTE

PSYCHIATRY

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Weapon Usage in Attempted and Completed Parricides in Nineteenth-Century America: An Archival Exploration of the Physical Strength Hypothesis

ABSTRACT: The "physical strength hypothesis" (PSH) predicts that where there is the greatest discrepancy in size and strength between offenders and victims, the former will use superior weaponry (e.g., firearms) to overcome structural imbalances against the latter. Using archival data from the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, 1851–1899, this paper examines the weapons used in attempted and completed parricides in nineteenth-century America. Findings indicate that parricide offenders used firearms most frequently against their fathers while intimate contact methods were used against mothers. When gun usage was combined with level of intent in male offender patricides, where the greatest discrepancy in strength was expected, results indicate that spontaneous gun usage outnumbered premeditated gun usage, thus challenging the assumptions of the PSH. The data suggest that cultural factors such as methods of dispute resolution, weapon carrying, and alcohol consumption may be important factors in understanding parricides.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, parricide, matricide, patricide, weapon usage, physical strength hypothesis

In one of the seminal works on homicide, Marvin Wolfgang observed that "homicide is usually quick, brutal, and direct," the weapon used in such incidents "simple," "relatively commonplace," and an "accident of availability" (1,2). The banality of the weapons selected and used in typical homicides, Wolfgang noted, was intertwined with the contexts in which confrontations took place. For instance, Wolfgang observed that knife usage was common in female offender homicides (42%) since the dispute originated in the kitchen where women were engaged in domestic tasks at the time the conflict emerged and was resolved (3). Thus, domestic settings during the weekend evening hours, combined with alcohol consumption by victims, offenders, or both, constituted one of the deadliest spaces and times (4).

That is to say, homicides in general were not planned in advance but emerged and escalated during the interaction, the victims precipitating their own victimization. That is, homicide in general was not the fatal outcome of a calculated attack on a victim, but a concatenation of events that were rooted in sociality, and extended to its situational conclusion (2). Hence, a trivial argument that began in a social setting escalated to a physical fight, with one of the participants resolving the dispute with fatal consequences through chance and luck. Disputants who first pulled a gun and used it, or delivered the crushing blow became homicide offenders while disputants who succumbed to their wounds became victims. Although handguns were the primary weapons of attack in typical homicide cases, Wolfgang did not attribute the high homicide rate in the U.S. to the greater accessibility of firearms (1). He accounted for the high rate of violence to the cultural norms of using violence to resolve disputes. Wolfgang hypothesized that young and older men—and women who kill men—would find it necessary to employ a firearm to "maintain distance between themselves and their victims, and to offset their limited physical power when involved in an episode of violence" (1).

Implicit in the work of Wolfgang and made explicit in parricide research, the "physical strength hypothesis" (PSH) has been corroborated by 23 years of U.S. homicide data (5,6). Using FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR; 76–99), Heide and Petee (6) state that fathers were more likely to be killed with firearms (64%) than mothers (44%). If victimization is disaggregated according to the age of offenders, juveniles were much more likely to use firearms than adults, while adults were much more likely to use knives, blunt objects, personal weapons, and other means to kill their parents than juveniles. Overall, however, the use of firearms still accounted for more than half of the parricides. Although it has been primarily discussed in the context of twentieth-century parricides, the logic of the PSH predicts that where there is greatest difference in size and strength between offenders and victims, the former will employ superior weaponry (e.g., firearms) to overcome that structural discrepancy.

According to the PSH, juveniles use more firearms than adults because they are physically weaker than their parents. Hence, Heide (5) hypothesized that juveniles would be more likely to use a firearm to kill fathers because there would be greatest discrepancy in size and strength between fathers and adolescent sons. Furthermore, that adult parricide offenders were less likely to use firearms than juveniles was indicative of their proximity to victims at the time of killing and less structural imbalance. By drawing on the clinical literature on parricide, Heide and Petee (6) hypothesized that the selection of nonfirearm methods could be influenced by the mental state of the offender at the time of the crime since it has been demonstrated that adult offenders suffer from mental illness (7,8).

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Although the PSH is intuitively appealing, and has been corroborated by extant works (5,6,9), there are several reasons to reexamine the hypothesis. First, if parricides follow the contours of general homicides (10), and if homicides are chance outcomes of lethal confrontations (11–13), then the use of a firearm in parricides loses its rational and calculated footing since such cool-headed decision making is paradigmatic of instrumental aggression, not expressive (14). Second, the PSH assumes a priori the function of a firearm (to kill) with its intent in physical confrontations. Although the display of a firearm escalates a confrontation, its intent is to deescalate the potential violence from materializing through a show of supererogatory force. Hence, the introduction of a firearm into a physical altercation is meant to dissuade the antagonist from resisting or escalating the encounter (15,16).

Equally significant, aggregate datasets such as the SHR are not able to provide the necessary details to discern how weapons are used (17). For instance, even if a parricide offender uses a rifle to kill his parent, without knowledge of the distance between the victim and the offender, it is impossible to know if the rifle was used in a way that is consistent with its functional design or used like a handgun at intimate distances. Furthermore, it is imprudent to claim that the use of edged instruments, personal weapons, and blunt objects is equivalent to diminished strength and expectations of resistance since the element of surprise easily overcomes a stronger antagonist, especially if the victim is in a defenseless state (e.g., sleeping) (18).

For these reasons, official records of firearms used does not categorically mean that guns are strategic and tactical weapons of choice for parricide offenders who are weaker than their targets; nor does the use of ordinary objects and edged instruments translate into an offender's lack of concern about potential resistance from a victim. It is just that using aggregate data to draw inferences about offenders' behavior and mental state from weapons usage alone, without knowing the origin, evolution, method, and sequence of attack is not sound reasoning (17,19). To remedy these gaps in the literature on parricides, this paper examines the weapons used by parricide offenders to kill their parents. By using newspaper archives as data, this paper also examines how those weapons were actually deployed in parricides that occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century in the U.S. Using this unique, narrative-rich data from previous centuries, this paper examines the "PSH."

There are several warrantable reasons to examine parricides in nineteenth-century America. First, most of the findings on parricide are based on research conducted in the latter half of the twentieth century (5–10,20,21). Consequently, there is a noticeable historical gap in the parricide literature (22). Second, the logic of PSH entails that historical contingencies may not be as salient since discrepancy in size and strength between victims and offenders may be constant across cultures and historical periods. Third, the epidemic use of handguns in contemporary homicides diminishes the fact that handguns only became pervasive in America after Samuel Colt's mass-produced revolvers became cheaply available in mid-nineteenth century (23,24). By using archival data from the latter half of nineteenth-century America, it is thus possible to contrast extant findings with those from an earlier historical period, when the very factors that are presupposed to be implicative in parricide—accessibility of handguns, erosion of parental authority, rise of children's rights—were emerging in the socio-cultural landscape.

Method

For this project archival records of two major newspapers were used as data, the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Accessibility and readership dictated the usage of these two databases. The archives of both papers are available electronically, hence, a narrow topic search was possible beginning from the mid-nineteenth century; furthermore both papers were housed in two respective cities that had been well established with a wide readership in the East and Midwest. The invention of the telegraph around that period catapulted the formation of the Associated Press, which permitted the instantaneous dissemination of information across the country.

The *New York Times* was searched from January 1, 1851 through December 31, 1899 while for *Chicago Tribune* the search began on December 1, 1852 through December 31, 1899. The terms *parricide*, *patricide*, and *matricide* were searched, which resulted in 397 articles for *New York Times* and 325 for *Chicago Tribune*. Articles that were directly related to the killing of a parent were selected and cross referenced against each database, resulting in a total of 231 incidents of parricide for *c*. 50-year period. After the cases were selected, a coding instrument containing 42 variables was used to further refine the data collection for analytical purposes. The data were then entered into data management software.

For this study, both completed and attempted parricides were included (20). While this conflation may appear to be conceptually, methodologically, and analytically unsound, there are compelling reasons to operationalize both as one act. Assaults that would be nonlethal today were fatal in nineteenth-century America, the difference between life and death being time. Hence, wounds that would be treated with relative ease today, such as a cut or a nonfatal gunshot wound often caused infection and loss of blood in the victims, which led to deaths that were categorized as homicides (23).

Out of the 231 incidents, information on two variables that were directly related to the PSH was recoded: weapon and intent. For this paper, the initial data on weapon usage were recoded into five categories: (i) gun, (ii) intimate contact, (iii) poison, (iv) other, and (v) unknown. Both handguns and long-guns were collapsed into one category since rifles were mostly used at close range rather than long range. Second, all nonfirearm methods of killing that occurred in proximity between victims and offenders were collapsed into one conceptual category. The rationale behind the collapse of the variables can be explained by the fact that whether one uses a knife, a blunt object, an axe, a hatchet, or hands and feet (personal weapons), the aforementioned methods all require the offender to come into intimate killing distance (18). Third, other category included acts such as starving a parent to death. Fourth, there were some cases that the weapon and cause of death could not be determined because of the sparse information that was included in the newspaper article.

The parricides were also coded contingent upon the level of intent embedded in the offense. Hence a parricide was coded as being (i) "premeditated" if the offender planned the crime in advance, (ii) "spontaneous" if the parricide evolved out of an ordinary dispute, (iii) "accidental" if the killing was an unfortunate accident, (iv) "hit" if the offender used a hitman to carry out the attack, and (v) "unknown" if intent could not be discerned from sparse information. The amount of detailed information collected is explained by the amount of coverage a particular case received. For instance, parricides that involved the wealthy and the bizarre generated tremendous news coverage (25). Other parricides that did not involve the well-to-do received only a sentence at best. Consider the following account reported on April 22, 1872 in the *New York Times*: "A Kentucky boy twelve years of age fatally stabbed his mother, who was attempting to punish him."

From this story we are able to learn that a 12-year-old boy from Kentucky committed a matricide using a knife. It most likely was not planned; and we know that the source of the conflict between the mother and child involved the boundaries of parental discipline. Fifteen paragraphs later on the same page, another matricide was reported: "A woman named Maher, residing in Greenbrush, near Troy, was struck down and had her neck broken last evening, in attempting to stop a fight between her two sons. Joseph, the alleged matricide, has fled." In this account, we can discern several noteworthy characteristics of the offense, such as the cause of death, location of the wound, and intent. Although not all of the 231 parricide incidents reported in detail the ages of victims and offenders, pre- and postoffense behaviors, parricides were newsworthy events. In particular, the weapons that were used in the parricide were mentioned or could be inferred. Age, however, could not be included and used in the analysis because it was only intermittently reported, and when reported, it was preceded by dubious epistemological adverbials such as "about," "around," and "almost," thus of questionable accuracy.

Of course, using newspapers as data has several limitations. First, the data reflect only those cases that, for one reason or another, made it to the pages of newspapers as news items (21). Second, although an attempt was made to capture as much information as possible, the project was limited by what the newspapers reported. Third, the coverage of the incidents does not reflect an objective and value-free medium of transmission of information. Instead, the articles often showed biases in the coverage, portraying victims and offenders in a negative or positive light (26).

Yet, despite such structural limitations, content analysis of archival newspaper accounts can also be justified on several grounds. First, parricides, as infrequent events, would be poorly represented in any county-level data, both in police and coroner's reports, thus threatening generalizability and severely limiting the sample (27). Second, official criminal justice data for homicides (e.g., Uniform Crime Reports, SHR) are not available for nineteenth-century America (28). Third, while it could be argued that such detailed coverage of homicide events illuminate stylistic patterns that emphasize what has been described as *forensic journalism*, the analysis need not be limited to such structural features of media products (26). The details that are provided in the articles can be included as part of the content analysis since the very descriptions and acts covered can be analyzed as units of behavioral analysis (29,30).

Newspaper articles, as historical and documentary facts, thus provide a glimpse into the social life and normative patterns of social interaction during the reported period; they also represent a historical record of how people lived their lives, and the contexts that led to the emergence of conflict within an intrafamilial setting and how such conflicts were ultimately resolved (24). Newspaper accounts provide a nuanced view of an often neglected period of study in criminology and criminal justice research.

Results

The data from the nineteenth century suggest that firearms (43%) were used more frequently than intimate contact methods (36%) to kill fathers; intimate contact methods (43%) were used slightly more than firearms (34%) when killing mothers. Thus, by simply noting the weapons used in parricides, current findings appear to corroborate the PSH because firearms were used to a greater extent in incidents where greatest discrepancy in size and strength was expected (patricides). For intimate contact methods, edged instruments such as axes, hatchets, and knives were the most prevalent tools used in both patricides and matricides. In patricides, however, the use of personal weapons followed blunt objects while for matricides the weapons used were reversed. In addition to such close-quarter killings, parents were also thrown from buildings, died from brain trauma after a fall, and some offspring starved their parents to death, a method of killing that is highly consistent with elder abuse, and parricide as abuse extended to its logical conclusion (31). For nine matricides and 25 patricides the type of weapon used could not be discerned because of lack of information (Table 1).

TABLE 1—*Weapons used in nineteenth-century parricides.*

N = 235	*n* (%)
Firearm	98 (42)
Intimate contact	89 (38)
Poison	11 (5)
Other	4 (1)
Unknown	34 (15)

One notable weapon, although infrequently used, that merits further scrutiny is poison. Data on nineteenth-century parricides indicate that poison was used in parricides that involved long-term financial gains. Thus, sons and daughters who wanted to kill their parent to acquire inheritance, land, property, and insurance money went to painstaking lengths to plan and carry out the attack, isolating their aging parents from other family members and support networks, transferring titles and deeds before killing. Although a time-consuming way to kill compared with other direct methods (gun and knife), poison allows offenders a certain amount of psychological distance; however, that impersonal distance must be traversed with cunning and deceit since poison was mixed and delivered with food and drink, as part of ordinary prosocial behavior. Such ruses were discovered by coroners during autopsies.

For 76 incidents, the level of intent and weapon usage could be gleaned from the newspaper articles. Such a distinction is important since how weapons are deployed and originate in the conflict add an additional level of detail to our understanding of weapon usage in parricides, details that are not available using aggregate datasets (Table 2).

According to the data, 25 (33%) patricide incidents involved firearms that were used in a premeditated fashion. For 11 incidents (14%) the level of intent could not be discerned; two cases involved accidental deaths of parents during gunplay. In 38 incidents (50%), however, firearms were used without previous planning and premeditation. Generally one disputant just happened to be carrying a gun when an argument erupted and escalated into a physical altercation. The introduction of a firearm into the fray culminated with the death of a parent. Such patterns of weapon-carrying and usage are consistent with contours of homicide between nonrelated men in nineteenth-century America (4,23,24,32).

Discussion

Simply noting the weapons used to kill parents using nineteenth-century archival data supports the PSH. However, if details of the

TABLE 2—*Intentionality and firearm usage in nineteenth-century patricides.*

N = 76	*n* (%)
Premeditated firearm use	25 (33)
Spontaneous firearm use	38 (50)
Accidental firearm use	2 (3)
Unknown intent firearm use	11 (14)

parricide are scrutinized further, noting the level of intent and how the weapons were deployed and used, it is prudent to reexamine the PSH. For instance, the findings suggest that gun usage was not premeditated but arose out of the situation itself. This pattern of weapon use is not consistent with the assumptions of the PSH without becoming psychoanalytic since those who are weaker than their opponents "would have the greatest need to use firearms" (5, 6). That is, need would dictate a conscious—or unconscious—selection of a weapon of maximum utility. The PSH, then, essentially presupposes a rational decision-making model of calculation of risk and success on the part of an offender. But as demonstrated here, parricides in nineteenth-century America did not necessarily involve rational processes. In fact, the opposite may have been true.

Consider the following way that typical nineteenth-century male offender patricides occurred: On the day of the patricide, Benjamin (son; age, 19) struck his stepmother during an argument—stepmother who habitually mistreated her two stepdaughters and was blamed as the source of the family's domestic unhappiness. Benjamin sided with his biological sisters; Max (father), naturally, sided with his 20-year-old bride. On the day of the crime the two argued violently. Max then called his son a "foul name" and picked up a smoothing iron. "This so angered the youth that he suddenly drew a revolver of large caliber from his pocket and fired one shot point blank at his father. The bullet struck Leventhal (Max) on the right side of the neck, and the blood immediately spurted out of the wound on the right side of the neck." In another case, Thomas and Lodie Smith (son) were drinking and playing cards. Lodie became so enraged that his father had won another hand that he drew a revolver and shot him three times.

In the typical parricide scenarios provided above, it is difficult to argue that a gun was consciously and rationally used as a way of overcoming discrepancy in size and strength. The parricides unfolded during the course of ordinary social intercourse, in the heat of the moment, thus resembling a typical homicide between strangers in public spaces (33,34). Both parricides begin with a verbal argument of some sort: in the first, the victim insults the son and brandishes a weapon (iron), which only aggravates the encounter; in the second, both parties are drinking and socializing with one another. Simply put, the parricide offenders are not defending themselves or others from a tyrannical despot (35), but are reacting to what they perceive to be an injustice and a slight; moreover, both parricide victims precipitate and participate in their demise (1). Firearms, rather than being used as equalizers against physically stronger antagonists, were used as a way of intensifying and "one-upping" their opponents in the fight; the first disputant to pull a gun and shoot "won" the altercation. Hence, the way weapons were used in nineteenth-century parricides in America is consistent with findings from homicides in the twentieth century in that the "winners" of altercations became defendants in murder indictments while "losers" became homicide victims (11).

Thus, in addition to classifying the weapons used, it has been argued here that it is just as important to discern how those weapons are used in the totality of the parricide context. As argued here, combining weapon usage and level of intent, spontaneous gun usage outnumbered premeditated gun usage, the discrepancy in size and strength an almost negligible variable since the death of a parent was the result of rapidly escalating situational forces at play. What is evident is that sons and fathers alike reacted to assaults on their sense of self, worth, and honor, the source of the dispute often trivial, the firearm used an "accident of availability." Death was simply an outcome decided by chance. Thus, in addition to the weapon used, cultural patterns of dispute resolution, weapon carrying, leisure activities, and alcohol consumption are all significant factors in understanding and analyzing parricides, not just abuse. The narratives from newspaper accounts indicate that sons and fathers routinely fraternized with one another over alcohol, arguments and fights inevitable when drunk, and that gun carrying was commonplace, even during the most benign social occasions, the family dinner table. Although historical evidence suggests that using guns as a way of resolving disputes—duel—was common amongst upper-class males in earlier centuries (32), this behavior later spread to lower-class males in the mid-nineteenth century after Samuel Colt's introduction of a cheap revolver into the mass market (23). And although speculative, it may be this cultural pattern of dispute resolution and gun carrying—normative behavior in public places in mid- to late nineteenth century (4)—that may have infected domestic relations between male family members within the home.

Although this paper suggests that the PSH is as much a function of accidental availability and a culture tolerant of gun carrying and usage, it has not addressed the severity of wounds inflicted on victims (e.g., number and location of gunshot wounds). Moreover, although edged instruments have been noted as primary weapons in intimate contact killings, this paper has not directly addressed the body disposition of victims during the attack (e.g., sleeping, sitting, and standing), as well as the type of attack movements employed by the offenders (e.g., slashing, hacking, and thrusting). An examination of wounds inflicted with edged instruments and firearms, their location and severity, may perhaps illuminate the mental states of offenders during parricides that others have noted but have been unable to pursue because of the limitations inherent in aggregate data. Such future inquiries may add an invaluable knowledge to our understanding of parricides while refining the PSH.

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