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The Women's Perpetrated Murder Experience

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Abstract

This research focuses on the experience of the perpetration of a murder in a population composed of four women. For this study, we used the qualitative research method of Amedeo Giorgi. We focused the study analysis in the cognitive processes, associated with the decision to commit the murder, and in the context in which this phenomenon emerges. The results are consistent with the perspective of murder as a multifactorial phenomenon. We have further found that the resolution of the homicide not always precedes the practice thereof.

Keywords: Homicide experience; Killer women; Phenomenological approach; Qualitative research; Decision making

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Introduction

Most murders committed by women have as victims their mates or children [1]. On the other hand, the murder of an intimate partner is more often committed by men [2].

The main risk factors for this kind of murder are substance abuse and a domestic violence background; however, these are not the only risks. The young age of the couple and the big difference between the couple's ages are also important risk factors [2].

In the intimate partner homicides committed by men, the break up is also a risk factor, because it can work as a trigger for the action. On the other hand, intimate partner homicides committed by women after a break up are extremely rare [3,4].

Regarding domestic violence, substance abuse not only predicts aggressions but it also interferes on its severity [5]. This substance abuse exists also in the violent behaviour of women [4,6]. There is a strong link between intimate partner homicide and domestic violence, since the murder of a woman by its partner is often preceded by domestic violence events [7,8].

On the other hand, the aggressions committed by male partners against women are also a risk factor for the intimate partner homicide committed by women, since that kind of murder usually happens as a reaction to the beatings and violence [4,9].

As we've seen, the most common motives for the intimate partner homicides committed by women are defence reactions from an attack being suffered in that moment, or the revenge of a long history of beatings [10]. Neonaticide is a crime that is most often committed by women [11,12]. Some of the risk factors for this crime are unwanted pregnancies, the young age of the

parents and the lack of pre-born care. Nevertheless, these factors are only considered as a risk when they are cumulated with an inexistent attachment [13].

Referring to the decision-making processes associated with the homicide, there are some perspectives that are important to refer. The expected utility model assumes that people seek to maximize pleasure and minimize costs. So, they will take their decisions after evaluating their alternatives and choosing the one that allows them to reach their goal. So, in this model, a person will valorise the outcome and the probability of that outcome when they make their decision [14]. It is also important to remember that the human being has a limited processing ability, so it will be very important the way how that the information is processed by the subject for him to understand and contemplate the available alternatives [15]. As these authors say, the way in which the information is presented to the subject will influence the way he will process it and the way he will represent the available alternatives.

Murdoch et al. [16] designed a descriptive aggression model of aggressive behaviour by women. In this model, the process starts with an offence trigger that generates a negative affective response. Once that response is initiated there are two possible paths, mood regulation and failure to regulate mood. If there is a failure, it will start the offence supportive cognitive response, that will drive to the dominant goal formation, which may consist in a procurement of good or a redress of harm. This will lead to the

planning that can be explicit systematic or implicit unsystematic. This last one is not completely unplanned because there's still some cost/benefit reasoning associated with that decision. Nevertheless, this type of action is associated with an incapacity of processing the consequences of the action.

Regarding the decision-making processes, there is a need to refer, in the first place, the Reasoned Choice Perspective [15], which assumes that offenders seek to benefit themselves and to diminish their losses, and that's the main basis of their decision to commit a crime. Along with this perspective, we think it's useful to attend to other factors that influence the decision, as such as the way in which the information is processed by the subjects [15]. In the same way, it is important the way that the subjects evaluate the alternatives available, since that will have a crucial effect on the decision process.

It's also important to take into account other factors that interfere with the decision-making process, such as the limitations of the human processing capacity, the environment in which the decision is taken, the quantity and quality of the information available or the time that the subject had to take the decision [14]. In the same way, it's very important to take into consideration the cognitive biases that may interfere with the decision, such as the fact that people tend to feel more deeply the losses than the rewards, which will make the subjects more inclined to inactivity because of this loss aversion. Other important cognitive bias is that people tend to devalue the rewards according to their distance in time, which means that a reward received immediately has more value (even if it's smaller) than a reward received after a long time.

Emotions are another important factor that interferes with the decision-making process. In this context is important to distinguish between emotions that are more focused in a specific cause, like anger or fear. This type of emotions are usually shorter, but if they're strong enough, they could interfere with behaviour regulation even after a while and in a non-linked situation [17]. Emotions are different from moods, which are less focused on a particular event and tend to last more [17]. Leith and Baumestair [18] refer that the moods (the negative ones) are related to less self-control and to a bigger propensity for taking risk decisions.

In this context, we also need to distinguish between immediate effect and anticipated effect. The second one is predicted by the subject and it will integrate the decision-making process, being valued in the decision, and interfering in it. For example, a subject may decide not to engage in some criminal behaviour because he fears the fear of being caught that he will feel after the crime. The immediate effect appears in the moment of the decision, is not predicted and it will interfere on the quality of the decision [17].

Method

Qualitative research

As Willig [19] says, the qualitative research will focus on the meaning. This means that the qualitative research pays attention to the way people make meaning of their experiences. The goal of this kind of research is to understand what do people feel when they experience some events or conditions. It's more useful to apply a subjective perspective on the interpretation of

human actions than an objective one [20]. This author refers that a homicide could only be understood when the environment of the homicide is also understood.

Taking this into consideration, we feel that is really important to make efforts to study the homicide phenomenon using qualitative research methods.

The use of qualitative research methods is very important on the matter of homicide because it is useful for the comprehension of the criminal practice, since it allows you to understand the cognitive processes that drive to the action, as well as the cognitive distortions and beliefs inherent to that action.

Phenomenological research

An investigation will be phenomenological whenever it involves a deep description of the lived experience and the researcher has adopted a phenomenological attitude towards the study object. This attitude needs the absence of external previous scripts in the analysis of the phenomenon, and also the giving of credibility to the narrative [21]. For this author, it's mandatory that the researcher makes use of the phenomenological reduction, in which the conscience appears first than the natural world [22]. This operation needs a suspension of all the previous scientific, cultural or social knowledge [22]. The eidetic analysis is also a fundamental part of the phenomenological research, this process is meant to achieve psychological meanings of the experience [22].

The results validity and generalization in qualitative investigations by the Giorgi approach is assured by several mechanisms.

One of them is the Phenomenological-Psychological Reduction, in which the investigator must refrain his prejudice and pre-judgemental thoughts and interpret the phenomena described by the participants, accepting them as the way they were experienced by them [23].

Another form validation of the used approach was the eidetic-psychological analysis and the identification synthesis. The eidetic-psychological analysis is the most effective method in qualitative knowledge acquisition, because through it the investigator can obtain the essential aspects present in certain theme [23]. It consists in the differentiation between what exists in the language and expression of the participant and those that are the essential components of the experience. This way, despite the empirical variation that may occur between participants, or potentially among all the people that lived the experience, it is possible to understand their eidotic-Greek term that means essential form [23]. That way, by accessing to the essential of the experience, the investigator can differentiate between the components that are only the subjective experience of the participant and those that can be generalized in identical circumstances [23]. The application of these methods was subjected to peer validation, done among several ISPA-IU students (in Lisbon, Portugal). Like Giorgi and Sousa [23] clarify, through these methods it is possible to obtain invariable structures that typify knowledge. These structures are subject to the same replication need of any other conclusion, but are sustained and validated [23].

Procedure

An investigation using the Phenomenological Approach is structured in four steps [22]. Those are the following:

Step 1

The first step is an interview and following transcription of it. In this step, the investigator should only read all the transcription to apprehend its general sense, keeping himself within the scientific perspective of the phenomenological-psychological reduction [22].

Step 2

Keeping the phenomenological reduction, the investigator must determine and divide the significance units. For that, the investigator must follow a psychological perspective, having in mind the theme study [22].

Step 3

In this step, the investigator must transform the significance units, that contain the common-sense language used by the participant, in expressions of psychological meaning. In this step, the investigator will have to turn to eidetic analysis and specify factors until then only implied [22]. This analysis must be validated in a peer review, which in this investigation has been done in dissertation seminar context, by several colleagues.

Step 4

Keeping the referred phenomenological-psychological reduction and applying the eidetic analysis, the investigator should use the significance units as foundation to describe the general psychological structure of the experience lived by the participant.

Participants

Four female criminal inmates recruited within two female prisons in Portugal: two of them were convicted for the murder of their intimate partner; one of them was convicted for the murder of a neighbour; and one of them was convicted for neonaticide. All of the participants are Portuguese natives, their ages variation is between 30 and 60 approximately (the exact values are not revealed to protect the identity of these participants since there are very few convicted in this circumstances). Neither of the participants was diagnosed with any psychological or psychiatric disorder.

Settings

The present study was made in order to obtain the degree of Master in Clinical Psychology on the ISPA-IU, and it was conducted in two female prisons located in Portugal; two of the participants were interviewed in the prison of Odemira and the other two were interviewed in the prison of Tires.

Results

In this study were found six essential meanings of the experience that were invariant in the four participants and the two structures. Those are: the unsystematic planning of the murder; the regret after the murder; the perception of the murder as dissonant of the self; the murder as an outstanding moment of the participant's life; the weak structure of the decision-making processes and the absence of actions to cover the murder.

Homicide without any systematic planning

In all cases, the homicide occurs without the existence of any previous planning. The murder is a consequence of a trigger event that can be a threat or not. In the 3 cases with adult victims, all 3 were under the effect of alcohol or drugs, and that fact had a deep impact on the triggering and consummation of the homicide.

All the participants describe the action as a spontaneous event and associate it with some kind of uncontrolled behaviour. The homicide emerges in a context of great emotional tension and this tension is seen as an essential part of its occurrence. There is no full weighing of the benefits and costs of the action since there is not a true apprehension of its potential consequences. The modus operandi of the murder is not planned in a way that makes it easier to hide the evidence of its occurrence.

In two of the cases that we studied, the murder is a response to a threat in which there is a belief that if they didn't take action, they would be the ones who would be murdered. In these cases, the homicide acquires a defensive purpose.

Regret after the murder

The regret for the homicide appears in 3 of the 4 participants in a very explicit and clear way. Only in one of the cases this regret appears but more associated with the way the death happened than with the death itself. In other words, this participant regrets the killing not because of the victim's death, that she perceives as a good thing, but because she was the one who committed the murder.

This regret is associated with a lot of motives. One of them is the negative valorisation of the murder as an unmoral act. The other one is the culpability inherent to the act of killing and to the death as a result. Other reason is the understanding of alternatives that could have been chosen instead of the murder, this regret could be even deeper when there is a special protection duty of the victim.

In the cases in which the death is not immediately declared, the participants tell that they had a deep desire that the victim survived, and even prayed for that to happen. So, in these cases, there is a regret that even precedes the homicide, associated only with the chance of it.

This regret is also shown by the fact that none of the participants tried to hide the evidence of the murders.

Murder as a defining moment on the subject's life

In every case, the murder is referred as a defining moment that has a really deep impact on the participant's life. The murder is valued in its moral dimension and also because of its consequences. The participants associate the consequences of the murder in their perspective (like being in jail) but also on the victim perspective (causing the death of a person). Some of the participants also refer that the murder had caused problems to their families, because they also suffered with their behaviour.

Murder inconsonant with the perception of self

In all cases of our study, the subjects refer to the murder as an act which not reflects their usual behaviour neither their beliefs. They classify that act as something isolated in their life story that has no correspondence whatsoever with their personality and structure. The participants don't feel that the murder defines them as persons, considering themselves as good persons who made a mistake. The murder is perceived as an action integrated in a context (moment of action, emotional interference and relationship with the victim). The participants tend to believe that with a different context that crime would not have occurred.

Fragility of the cognitive processes associated with the action

In all the cases of our study, the subjects have a great difficulty of defining or describing the thinking that drove to the murder. For most of the participants, the memory of the event seems to be flawless and accessible, but they could not narrate with precision what they thought before and during the action. However, they can point out some of the factors that contributed to the crime, such as the emotional disturbance and the fear and the rage against the victim. This incapacity of narrating consistently the process that drove to the killing may be associated with the non-existence of previous planning.

Inexistence of actions to hide the murder

There was no attempt to elude the authorities or to escape to the legal and social consequences of their crime (**Figure 1**).

Structures of experience

Besides having found several essential meanings of the experience that are common to both structures, we also found some differences that made us believe that was necessary to differentiate two structures of this experience. The structure A integrates the experiences lived by the participants 1, 3 and 4. The Structure B only integrates the experience lived by the participant 2.

Structure A: This structure of the murder experience is defined by several common factors that define it. First, there is a previous relationship with the victim, and this relationship is considered bad by the participants. There was previous physical, verbal and psychological violence. Regarding the victim, there was alcohol abuse in all three cases, and all the victims were under the influence of alcohol (P3 and P4) or alcohol and drugs (P1). This abuse is directly associated with the murder, because it has interfered with the victim's actions that lead to the murder. So, we verified an undeniable interference of substance abuse on the homicide triggering.

The murder actions in this structure are defined by its reactivity, because all of them occur in response to an action taken by the victim, and there is no previous planning of the murderer by the women. Because of this, there is a very precarious decision process on these murders. The homicidal action starts with very few thinking and a very poor cost-benefit analysis, since we were told by these women that they did not thought about the consequences of their actions, and they only wanted to stop the

victim. In all of these cases, the women felt that their life and their well-being were at stake, so they needed to take action. They did not think about the death as a final result, they only thought that they needed to prevent the victim from injuring them. In the case of P1 and P4 this menacing threat works in an immediate way; their lives were in danger in that moment when they took action. In the case of P3 the threat is seen in a mediate way, the woman knew that her husband would kill her eventually, maybe not in that day but someday he would.

As a result of the murder, these women felt regret. In the cases of P1 and P4 this is verbalized clearly and they also tell that they wished and prayed for the survival of the men they attacked, before they knew that they were dead. In the case of the participant 3, this regret is felt not because of the death of the man, but because of being her the killer. She explained that in the past she desired the death of her husband, not as a result of her own actions but due to other circumstances.

In all these participants, the murder is seen and felt as a behaviour that does not combine with their perception of self. They define themselves as good persons, incapable of doing any kind of harm. The murder is placed as an isolated action that would not take place in any other circumstances.

Structure B: This structure integrates the experience of P2 where the relation with the victim is significantly different that the one of the previous structure. In this case, the murder happens after a non-desired and unplanned pregnancy. Even though the possibility of having children had not been previously discussed with her partner, P2 refers that she had the wish of becoming a mother someday. She describes her pregnancy as a positive experience however she hid the pregnancy from her partner and family. This participant refers that after knowing how the process of giving a child to adoption worked she relaxed and enjoyed her pregnancy. Nevertheless, she tells that she was not sure if she would give the child for adoption or keep her.

P2 tells that she never planned to murder her daughter and she took all the needed cautions during her pregnancy. She even bought some baby clothes, yet she didn't buy the baby transport needed to bring the child home from the hospital.

P2 states that she has no memory of the birth neither of the murder. However, she knows what she did, and the actions that she took. Related to this murder there is a deep incomprehension of the motives that drove her to this extreme action. She hypothesizes about the chance of the murder has been committed because of the extreme fear that she was felling or because of any "futile motive".

In this structure the processes associated to the decision making are also very precarious. At some point, P2 refers that if she turned to the left she would reach her cell phone, but because she turned to the right she ended up killing her daughter. In the same way, the incomprehension of the reasons that lead her to the killing shows a total absence of planning.

After the murder, P2 felt a deep regret and she states that she is sure that her life would be happier if she had her daughter with her. After this murder the participant experienced several depression symptoms.

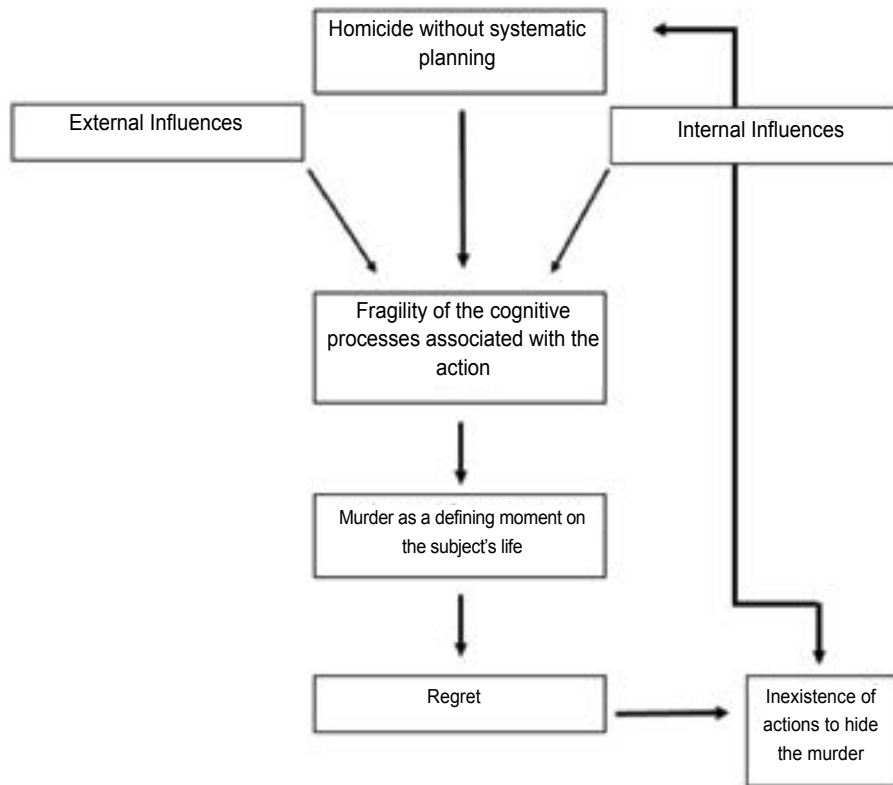


Figure 1 Model of homicide action.

In this structure, there is also a strong representation of the murder as inconsonant with the perception of the self. However, in this case this representation is much deeper than in Structure A. This participant experiences a true split between what she considers to be her and the murderer. She even tells that she's afraid of the person that committed the murder, and she fears that this person may appear again someday.

Discussion

If we split the murder in 3 moments, we have: the first one that integrates the preparation and triggers of the murder; the second moment that has the thought processes and the decision making inherent to the murder; and, at last, the third moment that focuses on the processes that result of the murder action.

Regarding the first moment, we have as an essential meaning of the experience, the inexistence of any systematic planning, as described by Murdoch et al. [16] typically associated with impulsive actions, in which the plan of the action is made during the execution of it. Or, in a very unstructured way, in the previous moments. As we've seen, the goal of the action may not precede the execution of it. In this way, what usually will happen in an aggression like this is a weighting between the costs of taking action and the costs of not taking action. This is especially noted on our study by the participants 1 and 4 that perceived that if they didn't kill the victim, the victim would have killed them.

In the case of the participant 2, we verified the existence of risk factors for neonaticide: the child was born at home, the woman was all alone [24], the unwished pregnancy [25] and the hiding of the pregnancy [26]. In this participant is noted also an affective negation of the pregnancy, in which the woman has cognitive perception of her pregnancy but she doesn't take emotional preparation for the birth [27]; this condition is also known as a risk factor for neonaticide.

The next moment contains the mental processes and the decision-making associated with the murder. In our study, we found the fragility of the cognitive processes associated with the action. We found that these results show the inexistence of a structured process as suggested by Johnson and Payne [15], where the agent evaluates all the available alternatives and the results that she may obtain with each one of them. In our participants, we found a very poor process concerning the decision making and execution of the murder. In the cases that the participants believed that their lives or their well-being were at stake, they focused their decision-making on the cost-benefit analysis of taking action or not taking action. This process integrates the expected utility model [14] but it's not as deep as it is defined in that model.

This difference can be understood having in mind several factors. The first one is mentioned by one of the authors of Rational Choice Perspective itself, clarifying that until the date of its creation, there was less information regarding emotional interference in the decision-making process, and that the emotions could

interfere with those decisions in different ways and in different moments [28]. The author also refers the existence of biases in these decision-making processes that condition the decision and may lead to errors in the action definition. However, Van Gelder et al. [17] highlight the role of emotional arousal in decisional interference and consequently in the creation of biases. This emotional interference is notorious in our study participants and from it results a clear interference in the decision process. That is why, and although their process integrates the expected utility model [14], they are limited by biases and not as profound as it is stated.

It's important to refer that this deliberation suffers a severe interference of variables like cognitive biases or emotional disruptions [29], or the existence of a very strict period of time to decide [15]. In all cases of our study there is a very strong emotional interference induced by the event that triggered the murder, which can have a very deep impact on the decision of killing. Because of this, our results seem to support the idea that the context of the murder (the external and the internal one) has a very strong interference on the weighting of the various elements and the decision-making [29]. This interference will probably be bigger when there is no previous planning of the murder, because several times the murder is not even wanted, wanting only to injure the victim [29].

It's true that even on the murders where there is not a previous systematic planning exists a cost-benefit analysis [16]. However, we must pay attention to two factors associated with this. The first one refers to the timing of that analysis because, as we've seen, it may not precede the action but be made during the action-something that is coherent with the idea that in some cases the murder is not intended [29]. So, having this in mind, we can question if the murder (in these situations) does not emerge from a process in course before it is really intended by the killer. Because, as we've seen, when there is a very extreme emotional response, there is a failure on the consequence apprehension [29] as we found on our results too. Well, if the agent cannot fully absorb the consequences (costs) and benefits from his actions, can we talk about a truly cost-benefits analysis? There is no doubt that there are rational components on the decision-making of this kind of murder, but as we've seen they are very bounded by the context in which the murder occurs, something also stated by Brookman [29].

At last, the third moment it's after the murder. In this moment, the focus is on the perpetrator and on the impact that the murder has on the one who commits it. The impact of the murder for its perpetrator would be greater when the murder is against his beliefs and values. So, if the murder is something that the perpetrator condemns and considers wrong, it will generate more guilt and regret [30]. As we found on our study, the unsystematic planning of the murder will be related to the fragility of decision making process that leads to the murder, which relates with the perception of the murder as inconsonant with the perception of self that, as Pollock [30] states, will lead to more deep regret and guilt, as we found in our participants.

The regret will also be related with the counterfactual thinking that the agent does after the murder [31]. This notion will help

us notice that alternative paths probably will only be perceived after the action and not before it, which reduces its choosing dimension.

Limitations

Because this is a research based on the phenomenological research model, and since we applied the methodology of Amadeo Giorgi that focuses on the comprehension of the essence of the experience, we don't think that the small dimension of the sample is relevant because, by using the eidetic analysis, we can access the essence of the experience that has a universal dimension [23].

One of the limitations that we think has some relevance is the fact that all the participants of this study were incarcerated. And, because of that, no matter the effort of the investigator to express its independence from the judicial system and to explain the non-obligation of the participating and confidentiality of the study, there can always be some suspicion that what they said could be used against them in some way. For that reason, the participants could avoid expressing some facts or search for more desirable ways of showing their actions. Even though we never felt that something like that happened, we are conscious that it was a possibility.

The other factor that could constitute a limitation to the study is the fact that these matters are extremely painful for the participants, and for that reason, sometimes they can avoid going deep on some feelings, facts, and memories because they make them suffer.

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