



111 Beyond Medea: A Sacrificing Father

Ignazio Grattagliano, PhD, Department of Criminology, University of Bari, Piazza Cagnola, 3/B, Casamassima, 70010, ITALY; Domenico Suma, MD, Department of Mental Health Brindisi, Via dei Cappuccini 20, Ceglie Messapica, Brindisi, ITALY; Valentina Stallone, PhD, University of Bari Department of Psychiatry, Piazza Giulio Cesare, Bari, 70100, ITALY; Andrea Lisi, PsyD, Sezione di Criminologia, Università di Bari, Piazza G. Cesare, Bari, 70100, ITALY; and Antonello Bellomo, MD, University of Foggia Department of Psychiatry, Via Latilla 16, Bari, 70100, ITALY*

After attending this presentation, attendees will more fully comprehend the psychodynamics involved in a case of filicide perpetrated by a father on his two-year-old son – “reverse” Medea Complex as it were.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the risks that seriously dysfunctional couples pose to the well-being of their children.

Either a father or mother may commit filicide. According to the data in the literature, mothers most often carry out neonaticides and infanticides. Fathers, on the other hand, more often kill their children when the children are older. In one study of 3,459 cases of filicide, based on data obtained from the FBI, 95% of mothers who committed these crimes did so during the first week of the newborn’s life, whereas fathers who kill their children do so when they are between the ages of 13 and 14-years-old, and even more so when they are between the ages of 16- and 18-years-old (Kunz e Bahr, 1996).

Filicide is a crime that may be perpetrated by either parent, or both for that matter, on their child who is between the ages of 0 and 18 years. Although it is not often described in the literature, there are data that show that there appears to be a “Male version of the Medea Complex” in which the fathers take the lives of their own children as a retaliatory measure against the mother. Frequently, the father uses a sharp weapon, a firearm, or strangulation with his bare hands. Some of the elements that might fuel such behavior may include a sense of revenge or omnipotence; a highly attached and/or ill-defined relationship with his child; the inability to respect him or her as a person; or simply thinking about him or her as a “weapon” against his partner. At times, such acts are followed by suicide, indicating the following: the importance placed on the ties to the victim; their symbiotic relationship; the inability to see the child as an individual, but rather as an extension of his own persona, projecting his own experiences and emotions. In the eyes of the perpetrator, murdering one’s own child can represent an act of love toward one’s offspring in an attempt to eliminate all current and future suffering caused by difficulties between the parents.

This case concerns a child who died at the hands of his 26-year-old father who, in turn, unsuccessfully attempted suicide. The autopsy ascribed the child’s death to asphyxiation and hemorrhage. The child had been hanged from a door by a cord that was tied around his neck. Cuts to the musculature of the left side of the neck and left jugular vein, from top to bottom, were identified. Because cardiovascular activity was still present in the child, his father placed him on a bed and cut the victim’s left wrist from left to right. Following this, in an attempt to end his own life, the perpetrator proceeded to cut his own wrists, tried to set himself on fire, and swallowed caustic substances. Court ordered forensic psychiatric evaluations were subsequently requested. No significant evidence emerged which indicated the presence of psychopathology or mental illness at the time of the crime. Blood and urine analysis showed no traces of narcotics or prescription drugs such as barbiturates or benzodiazepine. The perpetrator was found to be completely culpable. Investigations revealed that the crime might have been an act of revenge against his partner, a 21-year-old woman, as a way to punish her for the problems regarding their relationship. Their son was the product of an unexpected pregnancy that occurred after the couple had been together for only one month. As a result, the young couple did not have the chance to get to know each other very well before beginning a life together. Due to his immaturity, he was unable to accept his partner and his son. In addition, there were strong feelings of jealousy. All of these factors led the couple into a state of crisis.

This story concerns a relationship rife with distortions, misunderstandings, and resentment; a dominant woman with a highly individualistic nature, along with the perpetrator’s sexual dysfunction (premature ejaculation and sporadic erectile dysfunction), which was often pointed out by the woman to friends, relatives, and to her ex-boyfriend. Adding to his misery, she had encouraged him to go out with other women. She was not attracted to him and wanted to leave the relationship. An ill-defined relationship with the child, who the father saw more as “son” than “person,” and a relationship with a partner who was resentful of him led the perpetrator to feeling “frustrated” about seeing his “family plans” fall to pieces. He was humiliated, misunderstood by his partner, and felt inadequate in his role as companion. When the man perceived his wife’s intentions to psychologically divorce him, he threatened to kill himself. He planned his suicide (a suicide note was found, which included his motives, confirmed this), he declared his intentions, and made the attempt to do so, after having killed his own child.

Filicide, Medea Complex, Murder Suicide