



### 137 **Matricide: Criminological Understanding Beyond Psychosis — An Italian Case Series Study**

*Felice F. Carabellese, MD\**, and *Chiara Candelli, PhD*, Section of Forensic Psychiatry, University of Bari, Piazza Giulio Cesare, 11, Bari, 70124, ITALY; *Gabriele Rocca, MD*, Section of Forensic Psychiatry, University of Genova, Via De Toni, 12, Genova, 16132, ITALY; and *Roberto Catanesi, MD*, Section of Forensic Psychiatry, University of Bari, Piazza Giulio Cesare, Bari, 70124, ITALY

After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to recognize some of the features of matricide and understand principles of forensic psychiatric assessment of matricidal criminals.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by assessing the role of the mother-son bond in the etiology of matricide.

Matricide, or killing of one's own mother, is one of the rarest of reported murders, with a rate of about 2% of all homicides worldwide. Historically, this type of crime has been known since ancient times and also has a mythological reference (the Orestes complex). According to the literature, a son who kills his mother is usually a single, unambitious young man with an intense relationship with his mother, a lack of interest in other women, a feeling of social inferiority, and an absent or passive father. Matricide seems to be more common among or specific to individuals with severe psychiatric disorders, especially schizophrenia. Among schizophrenic offenders the paranoid subtype is the most common. Other diagnoses include mood disorders, substance abuse, and personality disorders. Many offenders suffered from psychosis at the time of the crime, and their acts were influenced by persecutory delusions and/or auditory hallucinations.

A history of a problematic relationship between the mother and son is typically present. Offenders often report feeling that their mothers were either ambivalent toward them, or excessively domineering; these relationships have been described as "mutually dependent but hostile." Matricides are classically committed in the victim's home, usually using a weapon, although asphyxia is also common. In some cases "overkill" is reported, involving extreme violence.

To better understand the characteristics of matricidal criminals and the psychopathological mechanisms related to this behavior, a study of ten matricides committed in Italy will be presented. The forensic psychiatric examination reports of the ten offenders (age range 21-53 years, mean age 37) were retrospectively analyzed to study several variables regarding the homicide features as well as offender characteristics and motives. The diagnoses were collected exactly as they appeared in the reports and evaluated on the DSM-IV-TR criteria. The assessment of the degree of criminal responsibility, according to the examining forensic psychiatrist, was extracted (full responsibility/diminished responsibility/no responsibility) and analyzed.

From a medico-legal point of view, there were two deaths by shooting, one deliberately provoked fall, three smotherings, two bashings, and two stabbings in which the injuries were due to more than one weapon or action.

Clinically, the most common diagnosis was schizophrenia (5/10); two offenders were found to have other psychoses and three perpetrators suffered from an Axis II disorder. Of the offenders, seven out of ten (7/10) were found not guilty due to insanity, one was judged to have a diminished responsibility, and two to be fully responsible.

It is interesting to note that although most of the cases were diagnosed with schizophrenia or other psychoses, not all the perpetrators who committed matricide had psychotic symptoms at the time of the offence (i.e., delusional thinking or hallucinations). On the other hand, in all cases a "pathologic" mother-son bond was found. In particular, in accordance with the literature, the victims were ambivalent mothers, with an intruding, domineering but symbiotic relationship with their sons that was mutually dependent but intrinsically hostile. Against this background many different motives, both "psychotic" and non-psychotic, can trigger the crime. Each of these must be accurately described and analyzed to reconstruct the dynamics of the matricide and understand its genesis.

It is not always persecution delusions, therefore, that cause these crimes. Mental disease is not the only causal factor and is not enough, taken alone, to explain the crime. Indeed, the observation that different psychopathological pictures induced a "perverse," dysfunctional bond over the years, leading to the same tragic epilogue, seems to confirm that something more needs to be searched for, presumably in the history of the mother and son, and especially the way their relationship developed and crystallized over the years, also due to the absence or passivity of the other parent.

A psychiatric-forensic study of the entire existential history of both people, as well as of the socio-economic context, is therefore needed to understand the roots of this tragic crime. The peculiar dynamics of the mother-son relationship, as well as their unique personalities and life experiences, are the key to cases of matricide.

#### **Matricide, Psychosis, Mother-Son Bond**