

3-28-2025

## Examining Motivations and Risk Factors Associated with Revenge Filicide

Alicia Darneice Jones  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Alicia Jones

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Eric Hickey, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty

Dr. Jerrod Brown, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
May 2025

Abstract

Examining Motivations and Risk Factors Associated with Revenge Filicide

by

Alicia Jones

MA, Alder University, 2017

BA, Governor State University, 2015

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

May 2025

## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the motivations and risk factors of revenge filicide. Revenge filicide is when a parent murders their child or children out of retaliation to inflict emotional pain on the other parent. This descriptive study used 12 revenge filicide cases consisting of five female and seven male offenders to determine the motivation and risk factors for revenge filicide, and attachment theory was used as the theoretical foundation. The whole sample reported having strained or failed relationships with their current or former partner and were amid a bitter custody battle at the time of the offense. Victims ages ranged from 7 mos. to 14 years old and were typically murdered by drowning suffocation and firearms. The themes recognized from this study include a severe lack of emotional connection, motivation/desire to control, and a deep desire to inflict pain and suffering. These findings contribute to some of what is known about revenge-motivated filicides. Positive social change may occur by raising awareness of filicide offenders' motivations and risk factors, increasing the application of safety measures, improving detection, preserving children's lives, and promoting members of the community's overall safety.

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## Dedication

This research study is dedicated to my sweet, loving mother, the epitome of my walking angel, biggest cheerleader, and best friend, and to my younger brother, who texted and called me regularly to check on me and provide continuous encouragement and motivation, helped me laugh when I felt like crying, keeping me going through this tumultuous journey. On the days I felt lost, could not find my way, doubted myself, and wanted to give up, you both picked me up and carried me through the complex and uncertain times. I love you both endlessly and could never complete this research project without either of you.

## Acknowledgments

I must begin by thanking Dr. Hickey, my committee chair, for the word's affirmations, celebrating every milestone, the laughs, transparency, being available to answer every question, address every concern, and for the immeasurable revisions. Your patience and knowledge never went unnoticed, and it was such an honor to work with you. Without your guidance and support, I would not be where I am today. Please know that I will always stay in touch, "onward". To my second committee member, Dr. Brown, thank you for being available and providing a listening ear and insight when needed. I also must thank Dr. Mohammed, who poured into me and encouraged me to hand code my data, which I was so afraid to do, but constantly reminded me that I was capable of navigating through this process and to always trust and believe in myself throughout the entire data collection and analysis process phase. Thank you for providing unlimited resources for qualitative research support and being available every time I reached out.

To Dr. Johnson, my former professor, mentor, and friend, I want to thank you! You believed in me, pushed me, and made sure I felt your support throughout my entire doctoral journey. While I already mentioned my mother and brother in the dedication section, there is no way I could not acknowledge both of you again and tell you both THANK YOU! Mom, thank you for being a listening ear and for being everything I needed from the beginning of this journey to the very end. You provided space for me to rant and rave about the many difficulties I faced and was there to celebrate every accomplishment I made along the way. I am eternally grateful for your prayers, love, and support. To my brother, thank you for bringing balance to my life during the chaos and

for listening to me talk about homework assignments, papers, and my fascination with murder cases. I appreciate your love, kind words, and how you poured into me every time we talked.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Child abuse is when a parent, guardian, or caregiver physically, emotionally, or sexually punishes a child or is neglectful of their needs. Other examples of child abuse include violent living conditions, exposure to violence amongst parents or caregivers, siblings, or having experienced “parental alienation” (Rantanen et al., 2022, p. 1).

Violence and violence within the family is a severe public health matter nationwide (Freysteinsdóttir, 2023) and is defined as physical force or behavior that causes psychological harm, death, or injury (Rantanen et al., 2022). Severe cases of child abuse can lead to the death of the victim, and violence has been the most significant cause of death in youth in the United States, New Zealand, and Mexico and the lowest in Ireland, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, and Portugal. The occurrence of child murders is decreasing in some countries but is increasing in others. Statistics may be somewhat lower than the occurrence because it is not always possible to determine if a homicide or manslaughter has occurred (Freysteinsdóttir, 2023).

A previous study revealed that one-fourth of child deaths were a result of ambiguous external unidentified causes, and some deaths may have resulted from abuse and neglect. Many leading factors are associated with child maltreatment, and there are risk factors that are recognized in cases of child maltreatment that result in the death of the child. Some identified risk factors include aggression, mental health problems, substance abuse, and earlier convictions for offenses. Offenders of child homicides likely suffered from severe mental health conditions during their childhood, had difficulties at

school, and were aggressive towards their peers. Studies have focused on risk factors and the gender of the perpetrating parent and discovered that pregnancy denial is a leading factor in mothers committing infanticide, and learned that often mothers are young, have limited social support, and are unemployed (Freysteinsdóttir, 2023).

Stepfathers are more likely to abuse alcohol compared to biological fathers, have lower education levels, are unwaged, and have a criminal record. When exploring the gender of children in cases of child maltreatment, one study showed that boys are more likely to die from maltreatment compared to girls. However, Freysteinsdóttir (2023) reported results from another study conducted by Lyman et al. (2023), which revealed that girls were more likely to be murdered than boys. Other researchers determined there is no difference in gender amongst the numbers of children murdered, particularly between babies. Traumatic experiences in the months leading to the death of the child have been identified as risk factors as well, such as parental divorce, a severe illness, or the loss of family members. Additionally, victims who died from maltreatment had a history of injuries inflicted on them by their parents, causing the children to need medical attention before their deaths (Freysteinsdóttir, 2023).

Cavanagh et al. (2007) argued that 96% of children who died from maltreatment were previously abused by their offender prior to the incident. In some instances, the child was under examination by child protection services. In cases of maltreatment, research also shows that the father abused other children within the family beforehand. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the safety of the other children within the home when a case of child maltreatment has been identified (Freysteinsdóttir, 2023).

Universally, approximately 300 million youth ages 2-4 are victims of severe physical discipline and psychological abuse within their households. A child's family environment should promote safety and protection from harm. However, there is a significant amount of literature that indicates that babies and small children are the most vulnerable to violence, resulting in their deaths by their parents (Rantanen et al., 2022).

### **Background**

Child maltreatment fatalities (CMFs) are deaths that result from abuse or neglect and are often highlighted in the media. CMFs can be separated into different age groups: Neonatal, babies who are murdered within their first 24 hours of life; infants and toddlers 0-2 years old; preschool children 3-5 years old; middle age children 6-12 years old, and teenagers. Younger children are often victims of shaken baby syndrome, which results in brain damage. Other causes of death include being hit or kicked, pushed into an object, or aggressively thrown on the floor. Some children die from neglect, malnourishment, or from receiving large doses of medication from the parent with the intent of calming the child down. Severe physical causes of fatalities include "intra-abdominal hemorrhage," fractured spleen or peritonitis, burns or stab wounds, drowning, asphyxiation, and death by firearm (Freysteinsdóttir, 2023, p. 194).

Child welfare professionals provide direct services to children and have the most significant accountability to safeguard and intervene if they notice a child is at risk of being harmed. An insignificant amount of research indicates that child welfare workers (CWWs) do not receive enough training on the leading factors for CMFs. A previous study determined that CWWs have insignificant awareness levels of the risk factors for

CMFs. Official data from 2015 revealed that 1,670 children passed away from maltreatment. However, examinations reaffirm that CMFs were underrepresented, and researchers believe the number of children who died from maltreatment is significantly higher. Fatalities because of abuse and neglect include a broad variation of factors, such as aggressively killing by assault or inactively killing a child by neglect or lack of supervision. Out of 1,670 CMFs in 2015, 80.2% of children died from neglect, and 43.9% died from physical abuse. Many children who are victims of mistreatment are significantly young (Douglas & Gushwa, 2020).

Like Freysteinsdóttir (2023), Douglas and Gushwa (2020) stated that most youth who die from child maltreatment are under 1 year old. Roughly 75% are younger than 4 years old. A substantial body of literature revealed that infants are at significant risk of fatal child maltreatment. The literature has also shown that youth with incapacities or medical conditions are at a higher significant risk for CMFs. Regarding child characteristics, there are noticeable racial and ethnic differences among victims of CMF. Research states that Black and African Americans and American Indians are the most common victims of CMF in comparison to their existence in the community overall. Family members have been most recognized for the death of children resulting from abuse or neglect (Douglas & Gushwa, 2020). Mothers commit the most significant percentage of homicides, most likely because they are the primary caregivers for the child compared to their male counterparts (Douglas & Gushwa, 2020; Freysteinsdóttir, 2023).

Fathers are the following family members found to be the most responsible for the death of a child, and the next most likely is the mother's romantic partner. Perpetrators of

CMFs are usually under 30 years old, described their child as being difficult, and were known to have unrealistic expectations of their child based on their age and developmental capabilities. Children with non-relatives residing in their household are also at a higher risk for CMF, and prior research suggests that children are at elevated risk of CMF where domestic violence is present, living arrangements are unstable, and households experiencing financial challenges (Douglas & Gushwa, 2020).

Previous research on the connection of CWWs and CMFs has primarily concentrated on how mortalities have affected the daily operations of CWWs. Not much has been discussed on how to equip CWWs better to recognize and respond more appropriately to critical circumstances. 30% to 50% of youth whose deaths result from abuse or neglect are recognized by child protective services prior to their homicide, and CWWs are exclusively able to assess the risk of fatal child maltreatment when working directly with families. Literature reveals that youth between 8% and 21% are not as likely to die if a consecutive report has been made to child protective services based on the youth's age and the nature of the mistreatment the youth is enduring. Examinations using the National Abuse and Neglect Data Sets revealed that essential child services such as a supportive family, foster care, case management, and court-appointed advocates are significantly helpful in reducing the risk for CMFs, as these support systems decrease the chance for bodily mistreatment victims more than victims of neglect (Douglas & Gushwa, 2020).

Regardless of the significant role CWWs have in supporting and preventing CMFs, there is minimal literature that gives attention to the lack of training, preparation,

and education that CWWs receive, allowing them the competency to identify and address the factors leading to CMFs (Douglas & Gushwa, 2020). Investigators contend that more than half of child deaths are caused by the child's primary caregiver, and rates of filicide range from 2.4 to 7.0 per 100,000 residents. While there is no distinct definition of child homicide that indicates the exact age or relationship of the parent or (stepparent), the word filicide is commonly used when referring to the murder of a child who is 1 year of age or older, committed by the parent (Barone & Carone, 2021).

Filicide has also been used as an extensive substitute for infanticide, when a child younger than 1 year is murdered by their parent, and neonaticide, when a child is murdered within the first 24 hours of life. Due to the broadness of the term filicide, the cause of death has occasionally been miscategorized. Additionally, even though previous studies have tried to determine the influence of psychosocial factors in cases of filicide, this behavior continues to be significantly underexplored. It is a severe public health concern (Barone & Carone, 2021). Jackson et al. (2022) and Léveillée and Vignola-Lévesque (2020) explained fatal family violence or intrafamilial homicide (IFH) as when a perpetrator murders another individual who is a member of their biological family.

IFH has been challenging to investigate because of the characteristics that classify various kinds of intrafamilial homicide like “filicide, parricide, uxoricide, and familicide” (Léveillée & Vignola-Lévesque, 2020, p. 468). Violent acts against children by their parents have been a significant national health concern and are a concern for physicians and investigators, precisely when children are involved. A parent murdering their child has been challenging for most individuals to comprehend and produces many emotions

within the family and community (Jackson et al., 2022). Salihu et al. (2021) stated three categories of child murders: neonaticide, infanticide, and filicide. A child murdered within the first 24 hours of life is called neonaticide, and a child murdered within their first year of life is known as infanticide. Filicide is the murder of a child by their biological parent or caregiver Lattanzi et al. (2020) or stepparent, adoptive parents, or parental figures (Myers et al., 2021).

Many investigators and physicians insist that male perpetrators of intrafamilial violence usually try to regain control and release unbearable or painful grief and suffering caused by significant losses or arguments on child custody disputes. The suffering is so painful and intolerable that the perpetrator sees no other alternative other than murder (Myers et al., 2021). Milia and Noonan (2022) stated that female perpetrators of intrafamilial violence usually lack emotions for their children, do not want their children, or have a mental disorder that adversely impacts their moods, thinking, and behavior. Investigators also assert that perpetrators of intrafamilial homicide have suffered significant losses or were faced with child custody disputes, causing feelings of hopelessness and anger. Researchers contend that homicidal ideations progress over time and, eventually, become the only solution in cases of intrafamilial homicide. However, the desire to commit the homicidal act is kept secretive for an extended period until a particular situational occurrence triggers the homicidal act (Léveillé & Vignola-Lévesque, 2020).

Jackson et al. (2022) reported that in 2019, 13% of homicides resulted from intrafamilial violence, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCRP,

2019). Investigators confirm that emotional and psychological distress are risk factors associated with intrafamilial violence. Therefore, future investigations must shed light on additional risk factors associated with this type of crime while concentrating on effective intervention strategies that address the needs of family members to decrease intrafamilial violence nationwide (Léveillé & Vignola-Lévesque, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

There is much to explore regarding child homicide. Filicide is understudied, is a severe public health concern, and is one of the most common causes of child deaths. Children younger than 12 months old are at the highest risk of being a victim of homicide, which is four times greater than the overall population (Greenwood et al., 2023). Revenge filicide is severely misunderstood and underreported, and daily, children are at significant risk of being murdered by their parents out of retaliation to the other parent (Myers et al., 2021). The literature states why filicidal acts go unreported or unnoticed. Like Frederique et al. (2023), Greenwood et al. (2023) discovered that child homicides are miscalculated due to a lack of detection.

Other reasons filicidal acts go unnoticed are because mothers frequently discard the remains of the baby's body, hide their pregnancies, or due to "incorrect classification such as sudden infant death syndrome" (Greenwood et al., 2023, p. 122). While previous investigations have identified some risk factors and motivations for filicide, future research is needed to develop a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon, to bring more awareness to the risk factors and motivations of revenge filicide, and to enhance detection and preemptive action (Myers et al., 2021). Future research studies are

also needed to advance appropriate classification systems of filicide (Greenwood et al., 2023).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the motivations and risk factors associated with revenge filicide. Various motivations for revenge filicide are rejection, martial separation, custody/visitation dispute, and infidelity (Myers et al., 2021). Other motivations for revenge filicide include a new "love interest, jealousy, attention seeking, retribution, extreme anger, and a loss of control are motivations for revenge" (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, pg. 34). Risk factors of revenge filicide include lack of employment, psychiatric disorders, a history of intimate partner violence, and financial challenges (Myers et al., 2021). Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) argued that pathological insufficiencies, mental illness, and loss of identity are possible risk factors as well.

Previous researchers have identified some motivations and risk factors for revenge filicide. However, risk factors such as parental incarceration and accessibility to weapons have not been explored, and neither has betrayal or deception been examined when exploring revenge filicide. Therefore, in this study, I developed a more nuanced understanding of the motives and risk factors that contribute to revenge filicide, which can potentially decrease the elevated rates of child homicides.

### **Research Questions**

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the motivations of revenge filicide?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Which risk factors related to revenge filicide are the most prevalent?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

In this study, I used attachment theory to answer the research questions. John Bowlby coined the term *attachment theory* during the 1930s and 1940s (van der Horst et al., 2020). Bowlby stated that an infant's relationship with their mother is the most significant relationship in a child's life. It sets the blueprint for every love and social relationship the child will have as they transition into adulthood (Chen, 2023). Attachment theory is used to examine an infant's attachment and relationship with their parent during their developmental stages, which can ultimately positively or negatively impact their behavior as an adult. If an infant does not receive responsiveness from their caregiver in a timely and accurate manner or the proper care and attention, this can lead to defiant and even criminal acts as an adult (Eriksson et al., 2020; van der Horst et al., 2020). Attachment theory defines four different attachment styles: secure attachment, anxious-ambivalent, anxious-avoidant, and disorganized attachment. I used this framework to develop a deeper understanding of the parent-child relationship of offenders who murder their children and what risk factors and motivations can lead to revenge filicide.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a qualitative analysis to explore revenge filicide's motivations and risk factors. Case participants for this study included African American, White, Asian, and Hispanic male and female offenders convicted of murdering their children. Other demographic variables were not a part of this study's inclusion or exclusion criteria. I identified 12 case participants from secondary sources with U.S. residency, whose ages

ranged from 18-65 years old and examined data on revenge-motivated filicides from 1995-2024. Due to being unable to conduct in-person interviews, I used the Internet, Google Scholar, public records, peer-reviewed journals, and court records to identify scholarly sources for my study. The academic databases used were Academic Search Complete, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Criminal Justice Database, Sage Journal, and Nexis Uni to support in identifying scholarly sources for my research.

I looked for cases where children were murdered by their parents or caregivers and narrowed in on the motivations, risk factors, and the series of events leading to the child's death to determine if the cause and manner was an act of revenge against the other parent. The thematic analysis helped me recognize, analyze, and identify common themes and patterns within the data and record case participants' similarities and differences (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I used John Bowlby's attachment theory to support an understanding of how a lack of attachment between a parent and their child can influence a parent's decision to murder their offspring.

### **Definitions**

*Filicide*: The act of a parent murdering their child (Greenwood et al., 2023).

*Infanticide*: The deliberate killing of an offspring less than 1 year old by a parent (Salihu et al., 2021).

*Intrafamilial homicide*: When an individual murders another member of their biological family (Jackson et al., 2022; Léveillé & Vignola-Lévesque, 2020).

*Motivations*: explains the internal forces that drive legal or criminal behavior (Leveillee & Doyon, 2019).

*Risk factors:* attributes that increase the risk of unwanted behavior (Frederique et al., 2023).

*Neonaticide:* When a parent murders their child within the first 24 hours of life (Frederique et al., 2023; Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

*Revenge filicide:* The murder of a child by a parent, caregiver, parental figure, or stepparent out of retaliation to inflict emotional agony onto the other parent (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023; Moodley et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2021).

*Schadenfreude:* When an individual feels pleasure from someone else's misfortune (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations in this study. One limitation was not having access to the correctional population. I preferred to conduct face-to-face interviews with incarcerated case participants, but that was impossible. Because offenders are a complex population to access, I relied on secondary data for this study. Without having direct access to the correctional population, the authenticity of this research study could potentially decrease as I was not able to conduct interviews with offenders convicted of revenge filicide. There was also minimum research on this topic. With this research gap, obtaining literature on this subject matter and being able to answer the research questions within my study thoroughly was challenging. Lastly, there appeared to be minimal investigations that included a theoretical framework to inform the research study and address the questions chosen by the researcher.

### **Significance**

This study was significant because revenge filicide had not been thoroughly investigated. A better understanding of the risk factors and psychosocial characteristics of perpetrators of filicide may increase the overall awareness of why parents kill their children, the social and cultural influences that lead to homicide, and improve knowledge in deterrence and apprehensions. Myers et al. (2021) and Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) contend that their investigations were the first to explore revenge filicide. Therefore, my examination on revenge filicide addressed gaps in the literature by exploring the motivations of deception and betrayal in filicidal parents and parental incarceration and betrayal as risk factors of revenge filicide. Identifying unexamined motivations and risk factors may reduce the likelihood of murder of babies and young children in our society.

### **Summary**

There has been considerable concern and interest in understanding filicide, specifically revenge filicide. Researchers state that a parent's lack of emotion towards a child, mental disorders that negatively impact someone's mood, and lack of parent-child attachment have been significant risk factors in filicidal cases (Milia & Noonan, 2022). Motivations for filicidal acts include marital separation, rejection, or custody/visitation dispute (Myers et al., 2021). Even though some motivations and risk factors have been identified, the act of a parent murdering their child is incomprehensible and remains concerning. Therefore, further exploration of the motivations and risk factors is needed to understand this behavior's etiology better. Chapter 2 includes a review of the theoretical framework, the literature on violence, filicide, revenge filicide, and the literature search

strategy that I used for this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

There is a gap in the literature on the motivations and risk factors of revenge filicide in the United States. Therefore, I conducted this qualitative study to explore what motivating factors contributed to a parent or caregiver murdering their child and the risk factors for revenge filicide. Chapter 2 includes my review of the literature on filicide, revenge filicide, the motivations, risk factors, such as revenge fantasies, anger, and aggression, the etiology of violence, and the theoretical framework of attachment theory.

Filicide, the umbrella term for the murder of a child, is a form of homicide defined as the intentional killing of one or more children by a biological parent, guardian, stepparent, adoptive parent, caregiver, or any other recognized parental figure (Frederique et al., 2023; Myers et al., 2021). Investigators report that most times, perpetrators of filicide go unnoticed, as they can often hide their filicidal acts. Filicidal acts can also go unnoticed due to incorrect coroner reports and a lack of children found when a murder occurs (Frederique et al., 2023). Studies have shown that the United States has the most significant number of deaths in developed nations, and approximately 3% of all homicide arrests in the United States included accusations of parents murdering their children (Frederique et al., 2023; Myers et al., 2021). These statistics equate to about 500 filicidal arrests yearly (Frederique et al., 2023).

The rates of infant homicide in the United States are at 8 per 100,000, which is severely higher than in other industrialized countries, and researchers contend that a mother commits filicidal acts approximately once every 3 days in the United States

(Frederique et al., 2023). On average, perpetrators of filicide are 32 years old, and 75% of offenders are between 18-40 years old. 33% of victims are younger than 1 year old, and 66% of victims are six years of age or younger. The two most common methods used by offenders of filicide are the parent's feet, hands, or firearms, and it has been noted that fathers are just as likely to kill their infants as mothers. Biological children are more likely to be killed by their parents than stepchildren, and about 18% of victims are fully developed children (Myers et al., 2021).

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used the Walden Library and Google Scholar to explore revenge filicide. The databases that I examined included psychological and criminal justice databases. I used peer review journals for the theoretical foundation and explored case study analyses to identify motivations and risk factors for revenge filicide. The databases that I used included Thoreau, PsycINFO or PsycArticles, Academic Search Complete or ProQuest Central, and Research Gate. The following phrases, terms, and keywords were used in Boolean search criterion to populate precise and significant search results: *revenge filicide, child mortality, child murder, anger, revenge, and filicide, parent murders child, spouse revenge, Medea complex, filicide, maternal filicide, family violence, attachment theory, risk factors, motivations and revenge filicide, and attachment models*. Databases populated peer-reviewed articles and journals published within the last 5 years, and there was limited research on revenge filicide.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The significance of the theoretical framework in research is to explain the theory

and concepts related to the topic. The framework that I used for this study was attachment theory. An attachment between a mother and her child begins in the womb. It is informed by psychological gestation and co-occurs with the many physical changes that come along with pregnancy. The connection between the mother and the child is enhanced during pregnancy, creating the foundation for a fetus' healthy physical and mental development. The quality of attachment that a mother has to her unborn baby is foretelling how she will interact with her infant during the postnatal period. Research has revealed that even if a mother rejects her pregnancy and attachment is disruptive, some infants still do well regardless of the rejection of the pregnancy (Barnes, 2022).

In contrast, there are some instances where even if the infant lives through a denied pregnancy, there can still possibly be severe negative results for the mother and newborn. Due to pregnancy denial, the mother fails to provide prenatal care to the baby, which causes the baby to be at risk of endangerment by the mother. A lack of care for the unborn baby can lead to premature births, causing the need for the baby to be moved to neonatal intensive care. Essentially, it is a healthy attachment relationship that safeguards the newborn from the danger of the mother. In severe cases, some neonates are murdered by their mothers within hours of their life (Barnes, 2022). When the mother is explaining what has happened throughout and shortly after the birth of the neonate, it is common for her to reference their newborn as an "object" or "it," which is an indication of the lack of emotional attachment or connection the mother had to her baby that is generally established in the utero (Barnes, 2022, p. 52).

The occurrence of pervasive pregnancy denial happens in 1 out of 475 women up

to 20 weeks of pregnancy, and 1 out of 2455 lack of recognition remains through delivery. However, pregnancy denial is not always pathological. Some mothers deny their pregnancy because it is unbearable to accept. Sometimes, a mother is motivated to deny her pregnancy because she fears being rejected or judged or the repercussions that may follow. Researchers imply that for a mother to refuse her pregnancy, she must have some recognition of the pregnancy. Pregnancy denial is an "emotion-focused strategy" that develops a belief that the current situation is unchangeable (Barnes, 2022, p. 52). The denial of pregnancy consists of a level of awareness, some psychopathology, and becoming aware of the unexpected pregnancy (Barnes, 2022).

Barone and Carone (2021) and Giacchetti et al. (2020) focused their research on attachment states of mind when trying to understand the psychology of filicide and revenge filicide, as Barone and Carone (2021) and Giacchetti et al. (2020) believe that attachment styles are a significant component in the quality of life a child is provided. Researchers have recognized that when a mother gives birth to a child, she has challenges with re-establishing herself as a woman and must make a psychological adjustment that will allow her to nurture and provide for her child. During this time, the mother's portrayals of her caregivers are revisited, triggering undesired childhood memories that are sometimes frightening for the mother (Barone & Carone, 2021).

Investigators Barone and Carone (2021) highlighted the work of John Bowlby (1969), who developed the theoretical framework of attachment theory. Attachment theory has been significantly helpful in understanding how traumatic events and a lack of healthy attachment styles can negatively impact the relationship between a mother and

her child. Attachment is the emotional bond between a newborn and their caregiver. This conceptual framework provides a specific viewpoint to explore the development of a child's "internal models of self the others and the interactions between each other" (Eriksson et al., 2020 & Lattanzi et al., 2020, p. 2). Attachment, in this sense, is related to the shared interactions between a newborn and the mother, who must be in tune with the baby so that she can provide the proper love and attention that the baby needs (Lattanzi et al., 2020).

Bowlby (1969) concentrated on the different attachment styles, including secure attachment, ambivalent (or anxious-preoccupied) attachment, dismissing-avoidant attachment, and disorganized attachment, and the impact each style has on a caregiver during their childhood (Eriksson et al., 2020). Barone and Carone (2021) specifically focused on attachment styles and child abuse and neglect as being risk factors for filicide, noting that lack of attachment or separation from attachment figures during childhood can have a long-lasting impact on the mother and can have a detrimental effect on the relationship that a mother has with her child.

Attachment is created through the "repeated signal and response pattern of the infant-caregiver relationship" (Eriksson et al., 2020, pg. 64). A stronger attachment is developed between a mother and her child when she responds quickly to her baby's needs. Newborns who receive responses from their parents in a timely and accurate manner often demonstrate severe emotional stress when they are detached from their guardians. Studies assume that the reactions to the accessibility of the attachment figure, primarily the mother, significantly impact the baby and the parent-child relationship. The

mother-infant connection and uniquely its interruption caused by ongoing separation and withdrawal of grief is known to have a significant developmental impact (Eriksson et al., 2020).

This signal/response theory of attachment recognized that babies show a range of behaviors when they are detached from their primary guardian, which demonstrates the significance of the signal and response relationship attachment between the guardian and baby. Some babies show extreme signals of stress and distress by sobbing, clutching, or looking for their caregiver, and some babies do not demonstrate any stress or distress signals. Babies who have a secure attachment to their parents feel calm and protected in the presence of their mothers and often display distress when detached from their caregivers (Eriksson et al., 2020).

Infants with a secure attachment style use caregivers as a safe ground and feel reassured following the parting from their mothers (Eriksson et al., 2020; Sutton, 2019). When the mother returns, the baby responds with healthy attachment behaviors, displaying cheerfulness and proximity-seeking when reconnecting with their mothers and resuming environmental interactions (Eriksson et al., 2020). In contrast, anxious-avoidant babies will not search for proximity with their mothers and will disregard them upon their return. Anxious, avoidant babies do not rely on the dependability of their mother's ability to care for them and are severely distressed even before departing from their mother (Eriksson et al., 2020; Sutton, 2019). When the mother returns, the baby clutches her eagerly, but emotionally supporting the baby may be challenging, and environmental interaction will not resume.

Additionally, while examining insecure attachment style, more passively, anxious-avoidant babies display some distress or reaction to their mother's existence when parting or reconnecting with their mother. However, they will not demonstrate proximity-seeking behaviors but continue environmental interaction uninterrupted. The insecure attachment style demonstrates that the mother prioritizes and is attentive to the needs of the baby but disregards the emotional support that is needed for the baby. Lastly, disorganized attachment is noticeable when a baby denies interaction when the mother returns and is demonstrated by both "proximity seeking" and avoidance behaviors and is established when the mother's actions are alarming or frightening regarding the baby (Eriksson et al., 2020 p. 64).

Barone and Carone (2021) recognized that when a child endures physical or sexual abuse or dangerous emotional threats by their caregiver, or if a parent is absent during childhood, the child develops a distorted view of a healthy attachment style and does not have a positive outlook on the attachment between a parent and a child. Child abuse and neglect also cause challenges with emotional regulation during adulthood. Chen (2023) emphasized the significance of healthy attachment during childhood by stating that securely attached individuals usually have more of a positive outlook on life challenges and a better ability to implement emotional regulation techniques. However, insecurely attached individuals do not share the same ability to manage difficult situations optimistically and have challenges with implementing emotional regulation techniques (Barone & Carone, 2021).

Prior investigations highlight the role played by attachment models as a

significant factor in foreseeing the caregiver's ability to be sensitive to the needs of their baby, the mother's emotional availability, and her behavioral adjustments (including violent behaviors) towards the baby (Lattanzi et al., 2020). Explorations by Barone and Carone (2021) and Lattanzi et al. (2020) revealed that attachment models determine the variations in parenting styles toward the baby, and Lattanzi et al. (2020) assert that there is "a match between the parent's mental representation of attachment and the infant-mother attachment patterns" (p. 2). Bowlby (1969) explains attachment as a natural necessity for infants. Naturally, children learn healthy attachment styles from their caregivers, and the parenting styles of their caregivers influence the evolution of emotional regulation (Barone & Carone, 2021).

Attachment security is needed to establish positive relationships, resolve conflicts, and develop emotional regulation skills. In contrast, attachment insecurity established as part of maltreatment in childhood can lead to challenges in relationships and a lack of emotional regulation ability. An insecure attachment style can also cause unbalanced and ineffective emotional regulation in early childhood. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory asserts that to escape attachment insecurity and to develop a secure attachment style, caregivers must be able to give their child love, attention, availability, and satisfaction during early childhood, as this is a significant time in the child's life for the formation of attachment, and adults experiencing severe levels of stress may fail to manage their negative emotions and undesired behaviors (Özdemir & Evinc, 2021).

## **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts**

### **Classifying Filicide**

Frederique et al. (2023), Moodley et al. (2019) and Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) asserted that there are six variations of filicide: altruistic filicide, filicide associated with suicide, filicide to alleviate or prevent suffering, acutely psychotic filicide, unwanted child filicide, accidental filicide, and revenge filicide. In altruistic filicide cases, a parent believes they are killing their child out of love, not adverse feelings, but for the child's best interest. An example of altruistic filicide is a mother killing their child because the child has a terminal illness. Filicide associated with suicide describes a mother deciding to take her own life, and because she does not want to leave her child behind, she also decides to take her child's life. In these instances, the parent or caregiver trusts that their offspring needs them and does not want to leave them behind. Therefore, they kill their child before taking their own life (Frederique et al., 2023).

In some filicidal cases, a mother may murder her child to alleviate pain or suffering, whether it is actual or imaginary. An example of this type of filicide would be a mother murdering her child to save and defend them from their sexually violent father. In these circumstances, the mother has usually experienced a traumatic event during childhood. She kills her child to prevent them from experiencing the same traumatic event or events she endured during her childhood. In cases of acutely psychotic filicide, the parent murders their child in a reaction (response) to psychosis with no comprehensive reasoning or rationale. Mothers in this category usually experience "hallucinations, epilepsy, delirium, or ictal phenomenon" (Moodley et al., 2019, pg. 2).

An example of acutely psychotic filicide would be a parent reporting they heard voices telling them to drown their children because the Devil possessed them.

Next, there is unwanted child filicide. Newborns are usually the most common victims of this kind of filicide, and it is defined as a mother killing her offspring because she views her child as a burden and someone prohibiting her from living the life she desires. In these circumstances, the mother often never desires to have a child, regrets becoming a parent, and ultimately decides she no longer wants the child. Accidental filicide is a form of child maltreatment resulting in physical abuse or neglect, and according to the Resnicks classification system, lacks murderous intentions. Investigators contend that these murders are usually a result of the "battered child syndrome" (Frederique et al., 2023, pg. 38). In the case of accidental filicide, the parent regularly has violent outbursts in response to not being able to manage their child's emotions, and as a result, kills the child due to not being able to tolerate their child's emotions. An ideal example of this form of filicide is a mother being frustrated with her whining baby and killing the child out of frustration (Frederique et al., 2023).

Lastly, there is revenge filicide. Spousal revenge, also referred to as the "Medea complex," is explained as a parent murdering their child to cause emotional agony to the other parent (Frederique et al., 2023; Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023; Myers et al., 2021, pg. 207). The primary purpose of spousal revenge is to intentionally cause the other parent to suffer (Moodley et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2021). The most common cases of spousal revenge filicide are custody disputes, divorce/separation, rejection, infidelity/jealousy, and arguments/conflict (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023; Myers et al.,

2021). A commonly used example of spousal revenge is a father killing his children because he learned his wife was having an affair. Another example could be a mother killing her children because her husband received full custody of their children (Myers et al., 2021).

### **Risk Factors of Filicide**

Research contends that parents are the most common perpetrators of child murders. Initially, it appeared women were primarily responsible and reprimanded for these crimes, but researchers have recognized that fathers are responsible for a significant percentage of filicide. Some explorations revealed that mothers are the most common perpetrators of filicide compared to their male counterparts. Other explorations revealed that fathers are as equally responsible as their female counterparts or even more accountable than their female counterparts (Declercq et al., 2018).

Poteyeva and Leigey (2018) reiterate that mothers and fathers commit filicide. Nevertheless, it is more common for mothers to commit neonaticide, when an infant is murdered within 24 hours of life, and infanticide, when an infant is murdered between the first 24 hours of life and 1 year old. An American study that analyzed arrest data over 32 years concluded that mothers contained 51.2% of perpetrators who murdered infants and 44.4% of perpetrators who murdered children ranging from 1-17 years old. Women seldom commit violent crimes such as murder. However, when women commit murder, they receive a significant amount of news coverage and public interest, their image created of them is more powerful, and they leave a more long-lasting impression (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018). Scholars identified paternal filicide as a construct and

recognized that it is less understood and explored. Experimental data on paternal filicide indicates that contrary to maternal filicide, the victims in paternal filicide cases are usually older children. In cases of paternal filicide, the perpetrator is more inclined to commit or attempt suicide than their maternal counterparts after committing filicide (Declercq et al., 2018).

While most of the human population disapproves of filicide, it has been a severe public health matter for thousands of years (Myers et al., 2021). Due to filicide's concern and threat to the community, examinations of filicidal women's psychopathological and personality traits were explored and investigated to identify risk factors for filicide and to develop a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon. While the studies recognized that both men and women equally commit filicide, the literature has primarily focused on the risk factors of filicidal mothers, and less research has focused on paternal filicide. Giacchetti et al. (2020) and Moodley et al. (2019) have identified many risk factors for filicide, such as mental illness, unhealthy attachment styles, economic challenges, dysfunctional attachment styles, unhealthy relationships with the other parent, and a lack of prenatal care.

Özdemir and Evinç (2021) insist that other risk factors of filicide include insufficient parenting skills, lack of effective coping, and inappropriate parental modeling of social support. A lack of interpersonal relationships, observations of unhealthy relationships with the opposite sex in childhood, losses or separations, and harmful living conditions are all well-known risk factors that form the ground for filicidal acts. While research has primarily focused on filicidal mothers and the risk factors of filicide,

investigators shared insight into the risk factors of filicidal fathers. In contrast to filicidal mothers, filicidal fathers are usually unemployed, have violent tendencies and substance and alcohol use, but do not have a unique criminal history. When a father commits filicide, they are usually under the influence of a substance and use impulsively violent methods to kill their children (Özdemir & Evinç, 2021).

Barone and Carone (2021) and Frederique et al. (2023) have supported Giacchetti et al. (2020) findings on the risk factor of filicidal fathers by identifying similar risk factors in their investigations as well. Meon and Bezuidenhout's (2023) stance on mental illness being a risk factor for filicidal acts identifies that psychosis, severe psychotic depression, affective disorder, mood disorders, and personality disorders have been the most significant in filicidal cases. Often, new mothers experience depressed moods and have intrusive thoughts of harming their newborn child. Research revealed that 20% of women who murdered their children showed a mood disorder when their baby was murdered. Previous investigations revealed that out of 55 filicidal mothers, 52.7% were psychotic, with personality disorders being the most prevalent diagnosis among those women (Frederique et al., 2023).

Personality disorders can cause the mother to feel vulnerable right after their baby is born during the prenatal period, leading to the mother feeling severely depressed, which is discovered once the baby is murdered. There is also a higher chance of developing affective disorder during the prenatal period, which appears to be related to certain personality traits. During the prenatal period, the mother may have difficulty managing stressful situations as her emotional stability is compromised, causing her to

experience negative emotions. Significantly, mothers who have been victims of abuse during their childhood can become violent and aggressive during adulthood compared to their male counterparts. Researchers also raised awareness that mothers who have been victims of violence are more likely to commit filicide than mothers who have not been victimized through violence (Frederique et al., 2023).

Age has also been a concentration factor when identifying risk factors for filicide. In neonaticide cases, which is when a child is killed in the first 24 hours of life, research demonstrated that women who are younger and not married are more likely to murder their children compared to women who are older and are married (Frederique et al., 2023; Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023). It is important to note that in neonaticide cases, mothers frequently have a psychiatric illness and are less likely to experience "psychotic symptoms, suicidal ideation, or suicidal behaviors" but usually share similar stress levels as other filicidal mothers (Frederique et al., 2023, p. 40). Furthermore, neonaticidal mothers regularly share a household with their parents instead of residing with their child's father or a romantic partner (Frederique et al., 2023).

In neonaticidal cases, mothers have usually had stern fathers and were abused by their fathers. Their biological mothers are usually non-existent or have had the bare minimum involvement in their childhood or upbringing due to substance abuse issues or illness. Neonatic mothers typically experience emotional neglect, role confusion, and intrusion of boundaries during their childhood. Frederique et al. (2023) contend that many neonaticidal mothers were also responsible for taking on adult roles at an early age due to a lack of presence of their mothers, which has been known to lead to role

confusion. These mothers usually lack social or emotional support systems, are known to hide their pregnancies because they fear being rejected by their husbands, family, or friends, and are not supported with establishing a career, self-determination, or pursuing an education. They are also afraid of the many alterations a baby will bring to their day-to-day lives, and rather than accepting their pregnancies, throughout the pregnancy, neonaticidal mothers hope that their pregnancies will end naturally (Frederique et al., 2023; Özdemir & Evinç, 2021).

Neonaticidal mothers do not have support when they become pregnant and rarely deliver their babies in a health center, as they want to keep the delivery of their baby a secret so that they carry out the crime of killing their offspring. Outside of a filicidal mother's encounters with child maltreatment and negligence, not much is known about other characteristics of their family dynamic. The minimal research that is accessible indicates that the filicidal mother's childhood was filled with hardship, brutality, and parental substance abuse (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018).

Eriksson et al. (2016) conducted a study on filicide, and findings showed that 40% of women were exposed to domestic violence, and 80% of filicidal mothers reported that their family income is in the "lower third of socioeconomic status" (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018, p. 3). More than 1/3 of the participants' mothers were alcoholics, and 29% of their fathers were alcoholics. Challenges during childhood might cause difficulties for women to depend on other individuals in adulthood. As previously mentioned, social isolation and lack of support are strongly connected to filicidal behavior (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018).

Other explorations implied that experiences with violence during childhood can cause mothers to have violent outbursts. Literature proclaims that traumatic events during childhood and denial of pregnancy imply that trauma could play a significant role in the mother's overall pregnancy experience. While both mothers and fathers have been recognized for murdering their offspring, psychopathy has played a more significant role in maternal filicide than paternal filicide (Frederique et al., 2023).

### **Gender Differences and Filicide**

There is an increasing body of literature that compares filicidal mothers to filicidal fathers, and numerous amounts of differences have been discovered. For example, victims of filicidal mothers are usually younger than victims of filicidal fathers. Research has indicated that mothers are more likely to commit infanticide than their male counterparts. Next, filicidal mothers are less likely to use weapons to murder their children; instead, they carry out their deaths by drowning or suffocation (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018). However, in cases of paternal filicide, it is expected that fathers use daggers, firearms, and sharp objects to commit filicidal acts (Özdemir & Evinç, 2021; Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018). Additionally, the perception of mothers who murder their children and the legal treatment they receive is significantly different than their male counterparts.

Filicidal mothers are handled with more leniency and are not as likely to be prosecuted. Mothers are not as likely to be found guilty of murder and are more likely to receive a reduced sentence. Filicidal mothers are not as likely to be sentenced to prison. Instead, filicidal mothers are more likely to obtain "psychiatric disposal" and filicidal

fathers are viewed as "bad" and "normal," whereas filicidal mothers are viewed as "mad" and "abnormal" (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018, p. 3). There is scarce research on the impact that adverse life events have on filicidal mothers and fathers, and conclusions have been conflicting. When it relates to adverse life events, a recent study concluded that a considerably higher ratio of males disclosed child maltreatment and were exposed to domestic violence (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018).

Similarly sparse are explorations on adult victimization. Data from previous studies concluded that 17% of filicidal mothers were abused as adults compared to about 3% of filicidal fathers. Also, the ratio of females who reported domestic violence was three times higher than males, 60% compared to 18%. Not much academic research has examined gender variations and socioeconomic status, but when they have, results were inconsistent. Approximately two studies revealed that a parallel number of men and women disclosed being unemployed, concluding that 60% of both men and women were unemployed when offending. In contrast, another study found that while a higher ratio of filicidal mothers were unemployed, filicidal fathers reported having monetary challenges. In the same study, filicidal mothers were slightly more educated than filicidal fathers (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018).

When examining mental health, Frederique et al. (2023) asserted that mental illness is higher in filicidal mothers than in filicidal fathers. However, Poteyeva and Leigey (2018) contend that this notion has some exclusions. There are also inconsistencies regarding the proportions of the sex difference in mental health issues. Some explorations reported that twice as many filicidal mothers have mental health

conditions in comparison to filicidal fathers. At the same time, other investigators noted that the sex variation in incidence is less noticeable. Results regarding specific diagnoses are inconsistent, particularly regarding the occurrence of depression among filicidal parents (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018).

Some analyses concluded that depression was significantly higher in filicidal mothers than fathers, while some studies did not recognize significant variation in depression across genders. Declercq et al. (2018) found that mood disorders and mental exhaustion are both common in cases of paternal filicide, and Declercq et al. (2018) and Tsellou et al. (2023) noted that fathers are more likely to commit revenge filicide because custody battles and conjugal separation. Suicide is an underexplored factor of mental illness in the filicidal writings. Filicide-suicide is another form of filicide, and estimations of filicide-suicide extend across explorations from 16% to 65% of filicidal acts. While it has been found that males are more likely to commit filicide-suicide than women, not much is identified regarding sex variations in suicide efforts between filicide parents prior to the offense. In a previous study, 151 filicidal parents had around an identical number of previous suicide efforts, with percentages of 13.4% for fathers and 14.5% for mothers (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018).

Poteyeva and Leigey (2018) explored gender variations from a case study they conducted on male and female filicide offenders, where they examined offense and victim characteristics, and notable differences were discovered. Results revealed that notable differences were recognized regarding the relationship the offender had with the victim, the victim's age, and the location where the victim was murdered. Of all filicidal

mothers, 95% murdered their biological child, in comparison to approximately 2/3 (68%) of filicidal fathers. In nearly all cases involving maternal filicide, the child was 12 years old or younger (98%), whereas with paternal filicide cases, the child was over the age of 13. In cases of maternal filicide, about 90% of the crimes were committed in the home where the child lived with their mother or stepmother (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018).

In comparison, approximately 2/3 of the crimes were committed in the home where the child lived with their father or stepfather. These results propose that more children were living with their mothers when the crime was committed, likely because the child was under the age of 18 and was not living individually. Lastly, in 29% of maternal filicide cases, the mother was helped by an accomplice, in contrast to only 4% of paternal filicide cases (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018).

### **Motivations of Filicide**

Child homicide by a parent is an inscrutable offense and has not received much exploration in developing settings (Dekel et al., 2020). Child homicide is the most severe act of violence towards a child. About 95,000 child homicides are reported yearly internationally, and age, gender, country, or residence play a role in the risk of the child being murdered. The probability of child homicide is the most significant during infancy, remains elevated throughout the first year of life, and slowly declines during the adolescent years. Infants are at increased risk of murder because they are physically fragile, solely depend on their parents to care for them, spend most of their time with their parents, and are limited in their ability to defend or escape from their aggressive parents (Tsellou et al., 2023).

On the other hand, children ranging from ages 5-12 are somewhat of a lower risk of child homicide in comparison to 0–4-year-olds or children between ages 13-17. While it is a shared perception that a child's family members and household are a safe environment for the child, research reveals that most children are murdered at the hands of their parents (Tsellou et al., 2023). To support developing a better understanding of the occurrence, Resnick, a skilled psychoanalyst, created the first classification system arranged based on the evident reason for murder and was the first to differentiate the age variations between children murdered (Dekel et al., 2020).

As mentioned, filicide is organized into categories: Spouse Revenge Filicide, Acutely Psychotic Filicide, Filicide associated with suicide, Unwanted Child Filicide, Accidental Filicide, and Altruistic Filicide. More than half of the filicidal acts examined by Resnick (1969) were classified as Altruistic Filicide. However, while exploring motives, authors shared similar but different explanations for filicidal acts. Milia and Noonan (2022) suggested that mothers who lack emotional attachment to their children are motivated to commit filicide. Barone and Carone (2021) recognized that mothers who did not want their children to be in solid romantic relationships, experienced traumatic events in their childhood, or had mental illness were all motivating factors of filicide.

Similarly, Myers et al. (2021) stated that some overlapping motives for parents killing their offspring include revenge, a parent not desiring their child, or intentional murder of the child during child abuse. Other motives highlighted by Milia and Noonan (2022) and Myers et al. (2021) include unselfish motives, and Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) asserted revenge, sexual satisfaction, spiritual or cultural traditions or beliefs,

psychopathy, inebriation, financial advantage, avoiding child support payments, and for attention and sympathy are all reasons to commit filicide. "Neurobiological, hormonal, and evolutionary" factors have additionally been considered when exploring motivations of filicide (Myers et al., 2021, p. 206).

### **Revenge and Aggressive Behavior**

Frustrating events often trigger aggressive behaviors, and aggressive revenge is motivated by adverse effects like anger in reaction to a transgression. One of the most significant influences of aggressive conduct is anger, and anger is strongly correlated to criminal offending. Dispositional anger is the act of one experiencing anger and reacting to it. It primes aggressive conduct to react to alleged incitement, mainly when the anger is influential or has not dissipated. The continuation of anger is provoked by angry rumination, which are obsessive thoughts about the provocation. Anger rumination intensifies one's anger and the expression of one's anger. The extent to which the correlation between dispositional anger and the inclination to ponder anger provocation changes across explorations (Threadgill & Gable, 2020).

Nonetheless, while some individuals may score higher in dispositional anger, there is a drastic variation in the inclination to ponder on the angering experiences. The correlation between aggressive behavior and anger rumination has been thoroughly explored. Both experimental and non-experimental explorations revealed that anger rumination is correlated with considerable aggression and interrupts physiological and emotional recovery to base levels. Aggressive behavior used to harm another individual can be challenging to operationalize in a way that has reasonable real-life extensions.

Researchers have outlined how angry rumination influences aggressive behavior through several routes. Dispositional anger and anger rumination are separate predictors of aggression. One significant component frequently overlooked in anger rumination thinking is revenge planning. Revenge rumination is a topic associated with anger rumination, but thinking of revenge concentrates on retaliation aggression against an agitator (Contreras & Novaco, 2023).

Scholars state that revenge can be rewarding for individuals as revenge can bring on feelings of enjoyment or pleasure (Threadgill & Gable, 2020; Yoshimura & Boon, 2023). The act of revenge is a typical response to perceived wrongdoings. Revenge seems significant and inspiring, even to the degree of inspiring and rationalizing radical dishonorable behavior. For instance, approximately 20% to 40% of murders in America are inspired by revenge, which suggests that revenge is an extensive social problem that affects millions of individuals' lives. Though individuals commonly regret their vindictive behaviors, during the current moment, the revengeful actions bring pleasure, causing optimistic emotions because the avenger presumes, they are resolving the infuriating situation. Although revenge-seeking behaviors commonly respond to an infuriating situation, retaliation can manifest as the avenger desires a sense of satisfaction, usually when the avenger can seek vengeance against their offender. However, the brain dynamics linked with the enjoyable aspect of revenge-seeking have been significantly understudied. Therefore, researchers explored the neural foundations of emotional responses to gain the possibility to engage in revenge-seeking behaviors along with other offenses (Threadgill & Gable, 2020).

Goldner et al. (2019) and Threadgill and Gable (2020) define revenge as the desire to act aggressively toward one's offender to get even by seeing them suffer. Revenge is overtly different from negative retribution as revenge aims to retaliate against the offender to demonstrate evil actions and relieve or ease the negative and undesired emotion by making the offender suffer. Punishment is perceived as an act of justice, while revenge is triggered by rage or revenge against another person or circumstance. When individuals seek justice, they usually trust that revenge will be a rewarding experience that will produce purgation in an infuriating situation. Researchers assert this seems logical as prior studies found that accomplishing objectives causes a feeling of happiness. In cases of revenge, the avenger anticipates feeling better and having an increased mood once they take vengeance on their offender. The avenger's mood increases after engaging in aggressive behaviors because the avenger feels they have evened the score. Avengers seem to engage in such behaviors because they desire to improve their moods after an infuriating situation (Threadgill & Gable, 2020).

Anger is an unlikeable emotional state usually linked with the "approach motivational system," which describes approach motivation as motivation with incentivized actions (Threadgill & Gable, 2020, p. 2). This motivation is helpful because it supports moving towards noticeable results or states. High approach motivation may sometimes lead to abnormal, impulsive, or aggressive behaviors, causing one to feel good (Kaack et al., 2020). Several studies have linked anger with approach motivation. For instance, anger correlates with approach-motivated inclinations. Neural regions correlated with approach motivation are initiated during circumstantial anger. Previous work

implied that revengeful behaviors are connected to approach- motivation. Additional studies revealed that participants evaluate aggressive responses as more enjoyable than unreasonable aggression once triggered. Academics discovered that increased sensation-seeking facilitated the correlation between "dopamine receptor gene polymorphisms" linked to reward-seeking behaviors and prior past aggressive behaviors (Threadgill & Gable, 2020, p. 5033).

Retaliation is correlated with action in the ventral striatum, a significant section of the reward system in the human brain. Approach-motivated anger is associated with hostile behaviors and positive emotions like enjoyment following aggression. It appears that merely having the chance to avenge one's offender is likely connected to feelings of pleasure and gratification. However, no previous studies have explored how anger impacts the speedy neural responses to having the chance to engage in revenge-seeking behaviors. To better develop a holistic understanding of revengeful behaviors, it is essential to explore how anger affects the experience of winning the chance for revenge (Threadgill & Gable, 2020).

### **Attachment Style, Unforgiveness, and Revenge Motivation**

Romantic attachment, responses to a partner's wrongdoing, and relationship satisfaction are dualistic processes. Dualistic relationships function in a lively and mutual manner where each companion impacts the other companion's attitudes, feelings, and behavior. Relationship satisfaction is defined as a person's internal evaluation of the optimistic feelings experienced by both partners in the relationship. Attachment theory has been a beneficial framework for comprehending relationship satisfaction because it

provides rationalizations on the contrasts in the way both partners experience romantic relationships. Numerous research studies found a significant correlation between attachment and relationship satisfaction, and there have been attempts to recognize the mechanisms underlying this association (Guzmán-González et al., 2020).

Many individual and interpersonal factors are suggested to facilitate the relationship of attachment with relationship satisfaction, such as trust, forgiveness, and perception of the support of their partner. Another facilitating component could be unforgiveness, the combination of pessimistic motives and perceptions of the repercussions of emotional pain. Attachment has been associated with how individuals respond to interpersonal hurts, and being unforgiving has been linked to reduced relationship satisfaction. Still, previous studies have concentrated on forgiveness. Therefore Guzmán-González et al. (2020) explored romantic attachment, forgiveness, and relationship satisfaction.

Bowlby's (1979) attachment theory contends that human beings desire tight-knit emotional connections that are comforting and provide protection when one is suffering or feels threatened. Attachment theory initially concentrated on early relationships, but this theoretical foundation has expanded to adult romantic connections (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Scholars propose that intellectual constructs form the behavior of grownups in close relationships, "internal working models" (IWM), that are developed in early childhood relationships with custodial parents (Guzmán-González et al., 2020, p. 2823).

Guzmán-González et al. (2020) echoed Eriksson et al.'s (2020) definition of attachment, stating that adult attachment is broken into two parts: attachment anxiety and

avoidance. Anxiously attached individuals are fearful of abandonment and rejection by their caregivers. They constantly need approval because of their perceived negative image of self because they do not believe they deserve love, care, and protection.

Avoidant individuals are uncomfortable with dependency and closeness. They conceal their emotions from their partner, are excessively self-reliant, and are reluctant to vulnerability, based on a pessimistic representation of other individuals believing they are not available to them in their time of need (Guzmán-González et al., 2020).

Securely attached individuals are less anxious and less avoidant as they believe they deserve love and comfort from others. Conversely, insecure individuals display significant levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance because they have a negative perception of themselves and others. The research revealed that insecurely attached individuals have poor romantic relationship results and decreased satisfaction levels in relationships. Anxiously attached individuals tend to be highly watchful of signs of denial or desertion, are known to be dependent emotionally and demonstrate severe worry and protest actions when they believe their partner is inaccessible. Findings further reveal that attachment avoidance is linked to decreased relationship satisfaction more significantly than anxiously attached individuals (Guzmán-González et al., 2020).

Unforgiveness may be a result of decreased relationship satisfaction with insecurely attached individuals. Unforgiveness is an "emotional cognitive and emotional response to a transgression" defined as the breach of the norm of a direct or indirect relationship (Guzmán-González et al., 2020, p. 2824). Unforgiveness includes other emotions like hurtfulness, resentment, and anger paired with rumination and the

associated motive of circumventing the individual who committed the transgression and seeking vengeance. It is expected that individuals will avoid or disengage emotionally or physically with those who transgressed against them. Some individuals may have thoughts of revenge as they are seeking to retaliate (revenge motivation) with their transgressor defined (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2019; Guzmán-González et al., 2020).

Such motives have been theorized as ordinary reactions of individuals that block them from being harmed and shield them as individuals. Individuals can use various techniques to lessen unforgiveness, like refusing transgression, desiring fairness, reinterpreting the situation, and pardoning, amongst other things. Based on the literature, there has been a trend to theorize unforgiveness, the opposite of forgiveness, even though they are related but different concepts. Forgiveness can be a way to manage unforgiveness. It indicates a reduction of evasion, revenge motivations, and benevolence toward the transgressors, while decreased unforgiveness may not always include forgiveness. Attachment theory offers a conceptual framework for comprehending how individuals view transgressions and the connected experience of unforgiveness. Certainly, IWMs are stimulated in dire circumstances, such as personal offenses, and impact how individuals evaluate a transgression, the individual who committed the offense, and themselves (Guzmán-González et al., 2020).

Attachment traits exhibit how an individual will manage their adverse feelings, usually stimulated by a transgressor. Insecurely attached persons are less likely to regulate their emotions of hurtfulness and are more likely to experience elevated degrees of unforgiveness. Anxiously attached persons are more susceptible to signs of denial and

neglect. Beltrán-Morillas et al. (2019) state that anxiously attached individuals may experience significant unforgiveness, often conveyed in avoidance or revenge motivations. Precisely when the relationship is in danger of rifting caused by a hurtful situation, another explanation for this is that anxiously attached persons tend to catastrophize the significance of the offense and experience elevated rumination and intense pain because they perceive the offender's transgression as a validation of their unworthiness of care. In contrast, avoidantly attached persons tend to construe the harmful behaviors of other individuals more adversely because they do not believe others can be trusted and will more than likely safeguard themselves from those who have caused them harm and respond harmfully (Guzmán-González et al., 2020).

Because of their uneasiness with intimacy, they may worsen their detachment when someone transgresses against them. The type of attachment style that one embodies is associated with the experience of unforgiveness, specifically in romantic relationships. Beltrán-Morillas et al. (2019) argue that anxiously attached individuals are usually less forgiving. They are more likely to be less satisfied in their relationships and have higher relationship instability and more significant distress (Guzmán-González et al., 2020). Beltrán-Morillas et al. (2019) conducted a study that revealed that unforgiveness, driven by vengeance, might be considered by individuals anxiously attached to their companion as a rewarding adaptation strategy to counterbalance the undesirable state following their partner's disloyalty. The continuation of bitterness, hurt, and anger exhibited as avoidance and pursuing revenge towards their romantic partner can erupt the emotion of confidence, trust, and closeness within the romantic relationship. Considering the connection between

attachment uncertainty, unforgiveness, and relationship satisfaction, it is suggested that unforgiveness may play an intervening role in the relationship between attachment uncertainty and decreased relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships. Attachment styles are developed in early childhood and are known to impact how individuals handle transgressions in adult romantic relationships and are the experience of unforgiveness. Collectively, there is an indication that postulate avoidance and revenge motivations impact relationship satisfaction (Guzmán-González et al., 2020).

### **Revenge Fantasies**

Desiring revenge after an offense, such as being humiliated or triggered, can be a natural reaction to feeling deliberately hurt (Goldner et al., 2019). Fantasies about revenge are more accessible to hide and less detrimental than performing revengeful behaviors. Compared to the various social, situational, and personal restraints that may prohibit someone from acting out revengeful behaviors, limited restraints exist on the revengeful behavior's individuals daydream about occasionally. Revenge fantasies examine the revengeful behavior individuals may instinctively think of pursuing if social and personal responsibilities did not prohibit them from doing so. To better understand revenge fantasies, researchers used a graphic model of the process of revenge to explore the graphic experience of revenge fantasies and examine two possible explanations as to why individuals fantasize about revenge (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

Fantasizing about revenge is a general process of revenge. There are three phases of the process of revenge, and they each are impacted by numerous contextual factors involving development and individual differences. Phase one of the process of revenge

entails the perception of incitement and feelings and objectives that arise in reaction to the provocation. The objectives and feelings that arise from being triggered are connected to the second phase, the fantasy and action planning phase. Individuals triggered and motivated to engage in revengeful behaviors begin to daydream, plan, and enact it. Only some thoughts on revenge are acted upon, and the process of revenge can include fantasizing about it but may never be performed (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

In the third phase, individuals experience intellectual changes and search for actionable behaviors of variations in the target if one enacts the revenge behavior. If there is only a fantasy about revenge, then the variations one would experience would result from their thoughts on the imaginary and not constructed on any behavior they enacted. While the literature has not specified the overall incidence of vengeful fantasies relating to literally enacted retaliatory behavior, having thoughts about vengeance is more normal than engaging in revengeful behavior. For instance, one exploration revealed that while 71% of case participants revealed having vengeful urges, merely 29% of participants acted on their urges. Additional studies discovered that thoughts on revenge are a response to interpersonal conflict (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

Researchers have found that revenge fantasies are more common than revenge behaviors (Goldner et al., 2019). While individuals fantasize about revenge, some believe engaging in revengeful behaviors is morally wrong or dishonorable. In other situations, some individuals may feel vengeful but also develop a comprehension of why the incitement took place, which alleviates one's urge to engage in revengeful behavior. In other cases, individuals may daydream about revenge but experience cultural constraints

versus enacting it. For example, even agitated individuals may not enact vengeful behaviors because they are affected by their social norms, roles, or responsibilities, which may alleviate incentives toward vengeful behavior. Similar studies on homicidal fantasies reveal that even though actual homicides are moderately uncommon, homicidal fantasies are shockingly popular in the general population (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

Approximately 70% of case participants shared having one homicidal fantasy throughout their lives. Although several explorations have explored revenge fantasies or urges, no explorations have explained the traits of the challenges of revenge fantasies. Still, people seem to manage their urge for revenge by daydreaming about vengeance rather than engaging in vengeful behaviors. Examining the descriptive traits of revenge fantasies could be a way of understanding how revenge would manifest if it were unrestricted by social and cultural norms and physical or legal restrictions (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

Motivation for revenge is motivated by the perception that someone else's actions purposefully harmed one's social status and conceded one's possible reproductive access, compromised one's opportunities of existence, or both. Equally, men and women experience these troubles and may act aggressively against such menaces. Men and women recognize the different advantages in reaction to revenge, and sex differences exist in the extent to which revenge behavior is direct or indirect (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023). In several experimentations, investigators discovered that while both genders were similarly determined to contend for status towards the gender of the same sex, men were more likely than women to use direct violence and to strike back against threats. Women

were more inclined than men to strike back with indirect violence (Goldner et al., 2019). Men are more likely to strike back with violence than women because perhaps men believe direct physical violence is appealing as it represents a certain status or protective abilities; men are less vital to children's survival. They can take more significant risks, and men have more esteemed reputation to forfeit than their female counterparts by not violently protecting their status (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

Based on these conclusions, research believes genders will differ regarding the content of the daydreamed act in such a way that fantasies of circuitous and secret acts of revenge will be more common among women than men. Daydreams about direct and apparent acts of revenge will be more common between men than women. Individual variations like personal characteristics, attitudes, and mental abilities draw upon "evolutionarily adaptive psychological mechanisms" and impact confident choices and behaviors (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023, p. 419). That individuals make in their everyday lives. Men and women can recognize when others are deceiving them. However, everybody needs to be uniformly correct in recognizing opportunists (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

Revenge motivation is impacted by personal characteristics that make retaliation a practical reaction for specific individuals. Both men and women can feel insulted by warnings of infidelity in romantic and sexual relationships, and genders differ in the type of adverse behavior used to preserve their relationships. While some individuals potentially experience infidelity in their relationships may decide to engage aggressively by physically assaulting the opponent, some may choose to use less aggressive behaviors

like attempting to make their partners envious by flirting with other individuals. Individuals' actions seem based on their determination to gain social power or prestige. Those men and women who are more strongly determined to gain social status will be more likely than others who use adverse behaviors against their opponents and romantic partners (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

Numerous personal-level factors exist relating to the process of revenge. Yoshimura and Boon (2023) and Goldner et al. (2019) discovered that impulsiveness, angry rumination, and sadistic dispositions are linked to the urge to seek revenge. Narcissism and revenge are noticeably significant when examining revenge fantasies for many reasons. Narcissists are known to be obnoxious, competitive, and disparaging towards other people. Narcissists also have an elevated number of social transgressions compared to individuals who are lower in narcissism, which means they tend to believe they are victims of other individuals overall. Elevated scores on the unprincipled or privileged dimensions of narcissism are associated with affective intensity and variability, maladjusted tendencies, and psychopathy. In entirety, it is expected that narcissism contributes to the changes in the qualities of revenge fantasies in a manner that revenge fantasies are more common, detailed, thorough, and long-lasting as a person's narcissistic tendencies and dispositions enhance (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

Prior studies also imply that narcissism, especially feelings of entitlement, is associated with vindictiveness or optimistic attitudes toward vengeance. Vindictiveness demonstrates optimistic thoughts on revenge, and narcissists believe that engaging in revengeful behavior is associated with one's sense of morality. Individuals

high in vindictiveness consider getting vengeance with their romantic partner appealing when reflecting on the advantages of revengeful behavior and less attractive when reflecting on the costs. Research states that reflecting on vengeance will be connected to a particular emotive tone. However, the positive or negative feelings that revengeful narcissistic persons face when bearing in mind their revengeful fantasies are undefined. More narcissistic individuals may view revenge as justifiable and suitable, and ideas of revengeful behaviors are linked with positive moods such as gratification and victory (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

Consequently, other researchers may suggest that daydreaming about revengeful behaviors may be an emotively rewarding experience, especially for individuals who are elevated in narcissism and vindictiveness. In contrast, Yoshimura and Boon (2023) contend that revenge fantasies may be filled with adverse feelings as narcissists are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviors in undesirable situations. Vindictive people are more likely to partake in revengeful behaviors because retaliation stems from being affronted and is associated with adverse feelings such as rage, disdain, and failure. Previous explorations on revenge have concentrated on the types of retaliatory behaviors individuals are likely to participate in and disclose. Fantasies about revenge expose the action tendencies that individuals secretly experience. Evolutionary and personal differentiation accounts regarding fantasies of revenge can further explain to what extent evolution and character traits support in explaining the progression of the process of revenge (Yoshimura & Boon, 2023).

## **Revenge Filicide and Historical Examples**

Though filicide has been extensively explored, revenge filicide is an unpopular type that is less understood than other recognized filicides. According to Myers et al. (2021), revenge filicide or spousal revenge is when a parent murders their child or children out of retaliation to inflict emotional pain onto the other parent. Moodley et al. (2019) echoed a similar definition, stating that according to Resnick's (1969) classification system spouse, revenge filicide is when a parent deliberately commits filicide to cause the other parent to suffer. While investigators have identified some motives and risk factors for revenge filicide, there is a gap in previous investigations that thoroughly elaborate on the motives and risk factors of revenge filicide.

Globally, the scope of revenge filicide is unclear. There is no specific crime category when it relates to revenge filicide. This type of crime is usually recorded and classified under murder, which causes difficulties when trying to determine the actual degree of this exclusive crime (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023). Resnick (1969) conducted a literature review over 50 years ago and learned that 4% of filicidal deaths were motivated by revenge, and an investigation by Brown et al. (2019) revealed that 9% were committed out of retaliation/envy. The Federal Bureau of Investigation reported 16,425 murders in the United States, recognizing that 2.5% of those murders were filicides, and roughly 5% (4%-9%) of those filicidal acts were driven by revenge. These statistics indicate approximately 21 revenge filicide cases in 2019, accounting for 800 homicides of US murders (Myers et al., 2021).

Although revenge filicide is uncommon, there are historical roots and filicidal

motives to this type of criminal behavior. The first "Medea complex" homicide was committed in 431 BC in ancient Greece (Myers et al., 2021, pg. 207). It was titled "Medea by Euripides" because a woman slaughtered her two small children to retaliate against her husband. Before the murder, the husband divorced his wife and left her for another woman, which triggered the desire and act of revenge. Another historical example of the "Medea complex" occurred in 8 AD, when a woman placed her son in a pot of boiling water, resulting in the young child burning to death. The woman then fed her son to her husband, who was the son's father, upon learning he raped her younger sister and removed her tongue from her body so that she could not report the traumatizing event she endured (Myers et al., 2021, pg. 207).

Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) also provided an example known as the "Devouring Mother Archetype". In this ancient example, a mother smothered her children to provide them with the "best life she possibly could," trusting that she was doing what was best for them. Under the "Devouring Mother Archetype," mothers commonly abuse their children to get their way, and control is a significant motivator. Control is an inherent trait we all possess. Some human beings can regulate their controlling nature; others cannot. In some situations, their controlling nature is triggered by loss or emotional stress, which, in the case of revenge filicide, results in the death of a child (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, pg. 35).

### **Understanding Revenge Filicide**

Parents frequently transfer their anger or frustrations onto their children during adult-parental conflict. In cases of intimate partner violence, children quickly become the

victim of ferocity or the victim. In revenge filicide cases, revenge can be viewed as a form of communication between both parents, specifically, the offending parent and the receiving parent. In these instances, separation and abuse are significant factors in this type of offense. In incidents of separation, the child is considered a loss for the offending parent, which motivates the act of revenge filicide as this is used as a retaliation method against the other parent. Filicide is connected to intimate partner violence, and violence is often connected to a projected dislike towards the child or children (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

In cases of infidelity, the male abuser regularly blames the wife and child for the marital conflict and the overall unhappiness of the family. Sadly, the child becomes the emblematic victim. Similarly, suppose the abusing partner decides to leave his family for a new love interest. In that case, the wife will project her ferocity and exasperation with her husband onto the child, who is considered the victim to deal with the abusive history and to regain some form of internal and external control. Investigators additionally assume that revenge filicide will likely occur if the offending parent views the child as an “object” instead of a living being who is significantly valuable to the other parent (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, pg. 43). Because of this altered perspective, the offender does not see a logical reason to safeguard their child's life (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

In the moment of extreme anger, hatred, and frustration, the offending parent is so fixated on retaliating against the other parent who caused them grief and agony that they are not able to comprehend the longstanding influence that murdering their child will have on the parent, family, or the community. Revenge filicide is also related to

“Schadenfreude” “and is described when an individual feels pleasure from someone else's misfortune, and dehumanization is at the nucleus of “Schadenfreude” (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 43). Dehumanization denies someone full humanity, and the desire to engage in dehumanizing behavior is strongly connected with personality disorders such as narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

### **Risk Factors of Revenge Filicide**

Revenge filicide is not new; however, the topic has not been thoroughly explored. To support addressing the current gap in the literature, investigators have conducted studies to understand the risk factors of revenge filicide better. For example, Myers et al. (2021) conducted a case study analysis of 62 cases from nine countries. Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) conducted a case study analysis and reported results from a South African perspective. The findings from each study yielded similar but somewhat different explanations of the risk factors of this type of behavior.

A first-time study explicitly investigating revenge filicide by Myers et al. (2021) revealed that psychiatric disorders and a history of intimate partner violence were the most prevalent in cases of revenge filicide. Of 62 cases, 35 (56%) offenders had an active mental disorder at the time of the offense. Personality disorder was the most common mental disorder and was present in 21 (34%) perpetrators, while antisocial personality disorder was mainly present in seven (33%) offenders with personality disorders. Depression was discovered in 13 (21%) offenders, including postpartum depression (Myers et al., 2021).

Six (10%) offenders had a diagnosis of a substance use disorder, two (3%)

offenders had an anxiety disorder, and "one each for schizoaffective disorder, delusional disorder (jealous type), and bipolar disorder" (Myers et al., 2021, p. 209). The identified offender, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, was extremely depressed at the time of the murder. Researchers also reviewed each case to verify if the perpetrators had a history of intimate partner violence. Findings showed that 22 (35%) of perpetrators had a recorded history of physical violence toward the other parent: 55% (18 of 33) were male perpetrators, and 14% (four of 29) were female perpetrators. Financial challenges, substance abuse, low socioeconomic status, and lack of employment have also been recognized as risk factors for revenge filicide (Myers et al., 2021).

Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) revealed pathological insufficiencies as possible risk factors for offenders killing their children. Pathological insufficiencies can cause a lack of empathy and respect for personhood because they perceive their child as an "object" and not a human being (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 43). Another prominent risk factor highlighted in the study was mental illness and loss of identity. Mental illness paired with parental separation has been recognized as a popular risk factor for revenge filicide for mothers and fathers. When youth are younger than nine years old and have parents with a mental illness, they are at severe risk of being harmed during separation. Filicide committed in reaction to separation is characterized by an intense "narcissistic rage" by the offending parent (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 34). The narcissistic rage is another response to the other parent leaving the relationship as the offending parent sees this as a threat to their fractured ego, commonly associated with grandiose behavior.

Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) noticed that the offending parent exhibited

behavioral characteristics regularly observed in narcissistic-related revenge incidents by individuals with a delicate ego. Outcomes from the investigation showed that the offending parent deliberately killed the child to regain control over the situation and that the act of revenge was sudden and unreasonable. However, in some cases, the revenge was premeditated, and the offending parent used excessive force and was excessively violent with the child, usually caused by a "catalyzing" interaction between the victim and offender (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 40). In cases of revenge filicide, the offending parent does not always have a prior violent criminal record. Nevertheless, the perpetrator will take extreme measures if their ego is threatened, or they do not feel in control of the current situation caused by interpersonal relationship disputes.

Conclusions confirmed that during the time of retaliation, the offending parent was either going through judicial separation or was already divorced from their partner. Additionally, the revenge filicide resulted from an unhappy home filled with parental conflict before the child was murdered. Outcomes revealed that when the crime was committed, the offending parent was experiencing extreme stress levels, was fearful of losing control, felt powerless, and was at risk of threatening their social status in the relationship. In times of divorce and separation, the offending parent is torn about their investment and dedication to the relationship and believes that their social identity is threatened, which provokes intense rage and ferocity, causing the desire for revenge (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

In these instances, the offending parent considers ways to punish their partner, who caused their loss of control, ripped them off their investment in the relationship, and

ultimately caused their pain and suffering. A common way of inflicting emotional pain on the other parent is murdering the child or children. Often, in moments of separation or divorce, the offending parent is no longer concerned about the well-being of their child; instead, their primary focus is to cause pain to the other parent in the relationship. In intense emotional turmoil, the offending parent develops the ability to distance themselves from their child and view the child as an extension of the other parent. Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) argue that dissociation makes this particularly possible. As mentioned, the child is no longer seen as a valuable human being to the disrespecting parent but instead viewed as an “object” (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 43). When the offending parent has a powerful sense of their importance, they are deeply troubled by personal rejection, which motivates them to behave irrationally.

Parents with grandiose personalities struggle with managing and communicating their feelings of fury, hostility, or frustration, which could motivate them to retaliate and counteract the agony. Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) suggest that the offending parent feels so powerless, lost, and helpless before the killing that it triggers them to react in a dissociated manner, and feelings of despair, rage, bitterness, irritation, and anger are all significant risk factors of destructive behavior. The experience of each feeling, dissociation, and helplessness blurs the offending parent's ability to see past the current situation (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

Once the distraught parent reaches this breaking point, they see revenge as the only way to restore satisfaction and stability. Researchers stated that dehumanization is at the heart of Schadenfreude and is when another individual receives gratification from

another person's adversity, which is significantly connected to personality traits of "psychopathy, sadism, and narcissism" (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 40).

Importantly, results from the study proved that some common personality traits and behavior characteristics of narcissism and sadism were represented.

### **Motivations for Revenge Filicide**

Motivation explains the internal forces that drive legal or criminal behavior (Leveille & Doyon, 2019). Outcomes from Myers et al. (2021) case study analysis demonstrated that the motivations for these revenge filicide fatalities were hostility or hurt, rejection, being devalued, or being threatened to have their children taken away. In cases of revenge filicide, the offender trusts that killing their child will restore their sense of "integrity, self-esteem, and honor" (Myers et al., 2021, pg. 207). Offenders are usually motivated by revenge when experiencing challenges in their relationships, such as separation, divorce, or infidelity; instead, it is specific or perceived.

Both factors lead to anger and outrage, which leads to the offender wanting to harm the other parent. Making threats to leave the relationship can also lead to retaliation, as these threats cause the other partner to feel a sense of neglect, leading to unmanageable feelings of loneliness, emptiness, loss of identity, and loss of social status. Findings demonstrated other factors driving motivations to commit revenge filicide. In 24 out of the 62 cases (39%), rejection was the most popular reason for the offending parents committing revenge filicide. The other partner decided they no longer wanted to be in a relationship with the offending partner due to simply wanting a divorce or no longer desiring the partnership to avoid intimate partner violence (Myers et al., 2021).

Notably, in some cases, the offending partner made threats before the act to murder the child and the partner. Nevertheless, in other instances, no prior threats were made prior to the murder. The most common reason for seeking vengeance was over custody/visitation disputes, seen in 20 (32%) cases. In these occurrences, the offending parent is fearful of not being able to see their child/children and, therefore, retaliate against the other parent (Myers et al., 2021).

In 11 (18%) cases, the perpetrator took revenge against the other partner because of infidelity, beliefs that their partner was disloyal, or trusting their partner had decided to pursue another love interest. While some offender relationships had ended or some offenders were separated or divorced, the offending partner could not accept the other partner moving on and pursuing another love interest. Jealousy was the motivating factor in these cases and was classified as "infidelity/jealousy" (Myers et al., 2021, p. 210). The final most recognized reason for vengeance against the other partner was argument/conflict, and some instances in this category included partners arguing over financial obligations in their relationship or feeling trapped in the relationship.

Lastly, Myers et al. (2021) reported two examples of motivations for revenge filicide from their discovery to better understand motivations for revenge filicide. In one of the case studies, a father living in China poisoned and killed his son and his wife's lover following a divorce resulting from the wife's affair. Another example was that of a 35-year-old woman who slit the throat of her two young daughters in retaliation after her husband left home due to a heated argument. She also tried to kill her two older children by poisoning them with pesticides, but they survived.

### **Motivations of Revenge Filicide: A South African Viewpoint**

From a South African perspective, of a first-time study of the motivations and characteristics of offenders of revenge filicide, Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) recognized similar motives for revenge filicide when a spouse sincerely wants the other partner to suffer and experience misery. As stated previously, the primary goal of such behavior is to cause the other partner to experience the same immense emotional and psychological pain that the offending parent was experiencing. While there can be many causes for their offending partner's anguish, the most identified motives discovered were a breakup or a new "love interest, jealousy, attention seeking, and retribution" (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, pg. 34). Out of spite and revenge, the offending partner wanted their partner, who caused them emotional and psychological pain, to feel the same pain and suffering by committing revenge filicide. In these situations, the offending partner takes out their rage and disappointment toward the parent towards the child to get back at their partner (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

The outcomes also exposed extreme anger and a loss of control as motivating factors for revenge. Individuals experiencing disappointment and anger, intimidation, or annoyance behave aggressively, as this is a typical response to feelings of frustration according to the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Aggressive individuals will likely do so out of fury, disappointment, frustration, or intimidation. In revenge filicide cases, the offending partner becomes frustrated when they feel the other partner is preventing or interfering with their goals for the relationship or if their expectations of the relationship are threatened. Frustration in these circumstances can trigger the offending partner to

aggress against the receiving parent with frustration, resulting in retaliation (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

Mental health professionals contend that the offending spouse will display “inward or outward” aggression based on their “cognitive style and emotions” (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 42). In cases of revenge, inward aggression can be seen if the offending partner blames themselves for their situation, and inward aggression is strongly correlated with depression. With outward aggression, the offending partner blames others for their circumstances, followed by rage and extreme emotions. When hostile feelings towards the other partner have developed, the offending partner is likely to act very explosively, aggressively, violently, and uncontrollably (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

Extreme anger is usually a reaction to triggering circumstances, personal failures, physical attacks, or actual or imagined insults. Hostile aggression, or "reactive impulsive aggression" describes someone's aggressive response to frustrating situations, threats, or annoyance (Moen and Bezuidenhout, 2023, pg. 42). The late Sigmund Freud (1856) contended that anger is innate and not as severe of an expression of aggression. However, he believed that anger could lead to aggression if poorly managed. Moen and Bezuidenhout's (2023) study discovered that the offending partner blamed their partner for their misfortune and felt extreme anger towards their partner. It is believed that once the offending partner begins to feel extremely angry, they are unstoppable, and the ability to manage that emotion is severely restricted, which in the cases of revenge filicide results in the death of a child.

Another motivation for revenge was a loss of control. Lack of control over the

situation and anger and rejection contributed to revenge filicide. For loss of control to be a defense considered in criminal proceedings, the loss of control must be highly severe. "The loss needs to be blinding to consider mitigating circumstances" (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 44). It can be complicated to prove that the actions of the receiving partner triggered devastating emotions in the offending partner, causing extreme anger that led to the murder of their child. The anger experienced by the offending partner must be intense enough for the prosecution to prove "mens rea" (intent) in court. The anger the offending partner feels should be so significant that "mens rea" can be utilized. It must be proven that the receiving parent activated the emotion of anger in the offending partner, causing a loss of control that led to the murder of the child (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 44).

When examining the mentioned factors, it is also necessary to consider narcissistic rage. In the case of narcissistic rage, the offending partner may see the situation as a threat to their ego rather than actual or imagined, as mentioned before. If the situation is viewed as an injury to their ego or intimidation to their integrity, it can cause anxiety and anger, creating an acute stress response. The emotional reaction to the situation can accelerate from anger to rage and aggressive and violent reactions based on the severity of the damage or risk. Yet, in these instances, it is expected that the court will attempt to utilize a "men's rea" plea (intent) to kill a child, and the court will attempt to prove that the revenge filicide was premeditated to penalize the receiving partner (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 44).

## **The Etiology of Violence**

To better understand the etiology of violence, researchers reported findings of 22 parents, stepparents, and caregivers convicted of child homicide in South Africa. As stated, the trauma that is experienced in childhood plays a significant factor in cases of maternal and paternal filicide, both mentally and emotionally. Using an ecological approach, results from an African study revealed how traumatic experiences occur in various domains, such as family/relationship domains, including the death of a family member and intimate partner violence, or within the neighborhood, like criminal victimization (Dekel et al., 2020). The ecological approach supports comprehending what factors contribute to a parent, stepparent, or caregiver developing abusive behaviors towards their child as a function of the individual, relational, community societal factors, overlapping at several areas of social ecology (Dekel et al., 2020; Sorrentino et al., 2022).

This approach explores different aspects of a person's childhood and background, including traumatic experiences, which generally impact how a mother or father interacts with their offspring as their experiences carry over into their relationships with their child and any circumstantial factors that impact their day-to-day lives. Sorrentino et al. (2022) states that this theory additionally incorporates societal constructs (structural factors) that are strengthened through various social environments—for instance, the formation of parental conduct established in the tolerability of violent behavior to reprimand children. Structural violence is not used to lessen the accountability of filicidal parents. Instead, it is to share insight and support with understanding how structural violence extends outside the personal while including structural and cultural sources of violence. Consequently, it

is no shock that violence toward children is so prominent in South Africa and other countries, recognizing that child murder is the most severe act of violence toward children at extreme rates (Dekel et al., 2020).

Researchers reported data on the impacts that traumatic experiences possibly have on 14 female and eight male offenders of filicide and how these experiences may have led to violent acts toward their children. Using an ecological approach, different aspects of trauma not discussed in this literature yielded unique findings. For example, results from incarcerated parents who murdered their children revealed that many of the participants were abandoned by their parents (Dekel et al., 2020; Frederick et al., 2022). Statistics demonstrated that 13 filicidal offenders were moved from one household to another during childhood and were abandoned by their parents. Offenders shared that moving was a traumatizing event because the moves felt like a loss as they had to depart from parents or caregivers whom they had established a close connection with. One participant who murdered her newborn baby reported that she missed her mother deeply when she had to move to her grandmother's house (Dekel et al., 2020).

Data also revealed that once participants were removed from their homes with their parents, their grades deteriorated, some had difficulties concentrating in school, and one female participant who murdered her 1-year-old child reported dropping out of school. Male participants disclosed seeking affirmations from other males again through gang affiliation, which often involved substance abuse. Substance abuse and misuse were also familiar among 17 case participants as a coping mechanism to manage traumatizing events, which possibly increased offenders' inclination for violent behavior. Another

filicidal mother reported that she used substances to forget the sexual abuse she endured as a child, stating that she began using drugs to forget what happened during her childhood (Dekel et al., 2020).

Dekel et al. (2020) and Frederick et al. (2022) have both recognized that intoxication can significantly contribute to filicidal acts. Fourteen of the participants were inebriated at the time when the offense was committed and believed if they were not inebriated that, their child would still be alive. Physical violence was also prevalent in filicidal offenders. Six male participants stated they were perpetrators of physical abuse, and 11 women reported they were in abusive relationships. Many offenders witnessed domestic violence during their childhood, which may have likely impacted their acceptance of abuse and influenced their perpetrating behavior toward romantic partners. Offenders reported narratives of how they had also been abused in romantic relationships in adulthood (Dekel et al., 2020). Frederick et al. (2022) examined familial difficulties like Dekel et al. (2020), and the examined studies yielded similar results. For example, offenders in Frederick et al. (2022) found that many filicidal offenders witnessed violence against their mother, the death of a parent, or parental substance abuse or parental mental illness.

Another aspect of concentration in the study conducted by Dekel et al. (2020) was violence that impacted family members and the death of loved ones. The exposure to death and violence seemed to have desensitized case participants within this study from an early age. Narratives shared by offenders included witnessing their parents being murdered, observing parents fighting with friends, and aggressive and violent behaviors

towards family members. Filicidal offenders also reported experiencing a loss due to parental incarceration, which was another traumatizing event in their child's life. Even though they recognized these traumatic experiences, offenders reported rarely having the chance to grieve, and not one person recognized their deteriorating actions and consequently did not connect their violent behaviors to their grievance. Also, as stated, gang affiliation was prevalent, specifically in cases of paternal filicide. Gang affiliation led to some male offenders abandoning school and becoming involved with drug trafficking to escape poverty due to challenges with obtaining employment (Dekel et al., 2020).

Research also suggests that family dysfunction contributed to males seeking a life somewhere else. Often, these gang affiliations encourage males to adopt violent behaviors due to peer pressure from gang members to gain a certain status and respect. Being a part of a gang requires members to follow specific rules and norms within the gang, and if a member does not adhere to certain expected behaviors, they risk being beaten or killed. One case participant who lost his mother during childhood and was a gang member reported that he adopted aggression and controlling and violent behaviors from gang affiliations. An example provided by the participant was that he beat his five-year-old stepson to death (Dekel et al., 2020).

The participant reported that his stepson did not listen to him, which caused him to feel embarrassed because he could not control his son. Researchers state that the stepfather likely was shameful and weak, which prompted aggressive behavior to obey the beliefs of "hegemonic masculinity" that he adopted (Dekel et al., 2020, pg. 8).

Nineteen participants grew up in some of the most violent neighborhoods and daily were exposed to traumatic events. One participant reported witnessing the enforcement of punishment within their community when he observed another community member being beaten and hit in the head with a large stone, which resulted in his death (Dekel et al., 2020).

The literature has explored adverse parenting experiences, family, sexual, and intimate partner violence, substance abuse, isolation and lack of support, gang involvement, and ideologies of culture as potential pathways to violence. Several explorations have noted a considerable number of adverse childhood experiences experienced by filicidal offenders. The more adversities a child experiences during childhood, the more likely they will have challenges in adulthood. Scholars found that several encounters with childhood adversity are a substantial risk factor for several harmful outcomes for youth in the upcoming generation, specifically when it pertains to violence, mental disease, alcoholism, or drug abuse. Not only do parents of adverse childhood experiences have difficulties later in life, but their children are also put at greater risk as well (Frederick et al., 2022).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Chapter 2 explored the risk factors and motivation for revenge, revenge fantasies, anger and aggression, etiology of violence, as well as attachment states of mind when trying to comprehend the psychology of filicide revenge filicide. Investigations by Myers et al. (2021) discovered four motivating factors of revenge filicide: rejection, custody/visitation dispute, infidelity or jealousy, and argument conflict. Moen and

Bezuidenhout (2023) identified extreme anger, loss of social identity, and loss of control as motivating factors for revenge. A loss of social identity and control, combined with anger felt by the offending parent, is severely overwhelming, forcing the parent to experience extreme emotional distress. A loss of control provokes extreme rage in the offending parent, triggering a "blinding" and narcissistic rage (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 45).

When the offending parent experiences the accrual of these adverse emotions, it motivates them to inflict emotional pain onto the other parent, occasionally inhumanly, to restore a "reciprocal justice balance" (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 45). The offending parent is desperate to regain control of the situation and restore their sense of self. Investigators argue that the desire to reinstate equilibrium triggers "reactive impulsive, expressive violent" behavior, resulting in the act of revenge filicide (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023, p. 42).

Conclusions from this literature review also revealed risk factors of revenge filicide. Myers et al. (2021) and Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) found psychiatric disorders (personality disorders) to be risk factors for revenge filicidal acts. Myers et al. (2021) also recognize intimate partner violence, substance use disorder, and lack of employment as some of the risk factors for revenge, while Moen and Bezuidenhout (2023) identify loss of social identity and parental separation as being prominent risk factors for revenge filicide. Results from each study are significant, as they may support future investigations for recognizing youth at risk of being victims of revenge filicide. Findings may also support identifying appropriate therapy interventions within

correctional mental health programs.

The recognized gaps identified in this literature review are insufficient literature on revenge filicide. The gaps in the literature that need to be addressed are the risk factors that put children at the highest risk of being a victim of revenge filicide, the motivations of revenge filicide, and how or if poor parent-child relationships lead to filicidal acts. Another concern is that there are few investigations on children at risk of becoming victims of revenge filicide (Myers et al., 2021). An additional recognized gap when exploring revenge filicide is that much of the published literature on revenge filicide was collected secondhand and not directly from the researcher, causing findings to possibly be inaccurate and ultimately reduce the validity of an investigation (Léveillé & Lévesque, 2020). There also is not much awareness of how or which attachment styles can lead to the act of a parent murdering their child (Barone & Carone, 2021).

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the motivations and risk factors associated with revenge filicide. Frederique et al. (2023) stated that risk factors are the attributes that increase the risk of unwanted behavior, and Leveillee and Doyon (2019) described motivations as the internal forces that drive legal or criminal behavior. Myers et al. (2021) identified marital separation, child/custody disputes, infidelity, and rejection as motivating factors for revenge. Risk factors that were identified from the same research study were psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, a history of intimate partner violence, and low socioeconomic status. Exploring additional motivations and risk factors of revenge filicide can provide further insight into why parents murder their children.

Chapter 3 included the rationale for conducting this study. The research questions, design, my role and responsibility as the researcher, and the population are defined and explained. I also discussed the methodology, including criteria for participation selection, data collection analysis, issues with trustworthiness, protection, confidentiality of case participants, and ethical considerations.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I answered the following research questions in this study,

RQ1: What are the motivations of revenge filicide?

RQ2: Which risk factors related to revenge filicide are the most prevalent?

In qualitative research, the researcher seeks to comprehend a phenomenon's

meaning through the participants' lens (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 16). Case studies are used to support researchers in studying a modern phenomenon in a meaningful way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 37). For this study, I conducted a multiple exploratory case analysis, using multiple sources of information, as I hoped to gain a better understanding of the motivations and risk factors of revenge filicide within the real-life context of case participants convicted of murdering their child. Lastly, using this methodology may have strengthened the transferability of the conclusions of this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I used thematic analysis to collect, analyze, and identify the data's main points, common themes, or patterns. I collected data on offenders convicted of murdering their children through secondary sources such as academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, and court documents. By gathering secondary data, I developed a new understanding of the case participants' motives and risk factors contributing to revenge filicide. Interviews were not conducted for this study, nor were data from surveys, focus groups, offenders, or observations incorporated.

When conducting a qualitative analysis, the researcher must know their biases and how they plan to manage them. Researchers have personal biases but must remain neutral and unbiased throughout the process (Stadtlander, 2015, p. 94). The topics and cases that I studied were challenging to explore. To manage researcher bias, I remained focused and neutral and documented any personal reactions, triggers, feelings, and emotions that arose when analyzing data to promote the accuracy of the findings.

NVivo 12 Pro was the qualitative data analysis software I intended to use to

manage and store my data. NVivo 12 Pro could have supported thematic coding and organizing the massive data collected for my study. This software could have also been helpful for sorting, managing, categorizing, and analyzing coded data (Dhakal, 2022). However, due to the nature of my study, I decided to do my analysis using hand coding instead of using NVivo 12 Pro. The methods used to sort through data were Post-it notes, color coding, categorizing, and memos to manage data throughout the process.

As the sole researcher for this study, I was responsible for addressing ethical obligations to the case participants selected for this study. While I was not approved to work directly with case participants, I still had to protect case participants' personal and confidential information (Stadtlander, 2015, p. 105). Data collected from this study were saved on password-protected flash drives and was kept in a secure and confidential space to avoid breaches of confidentiality.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Qualitative researchers are interested in gaining in-depth insights into a phenomenon through the lens of other people, and the researcher intentionally selects case participants. Purposeful sampling, a nonprobability sampling approach, was used for this research study to obtain a homogeneous sample. This technique was appropriate because it allowed me to use my knowledge to identify and select case participants who would likely provide relevant and helpful information. I used this process to strategically identify and select information-rich cases about the phenomenon, which allowed me to recognize themes, categories, and patterns in offenders convicted of revenge filicide (see

Bayar & Karaduman, 2021).

Using this technique, I chose case participants that precisely fit the criterion for my study. All participants in the study crimes fit the definition of murder, which is an intentional criminal act of violence by another human being that results in the death of another human being (Liem et al., 2020). A multiple exploratory case study was the methodology for this study, and thematic analysis allowed me to analyze the data and identify common themes and patterns. Using thematic analysis, I was able to identify any likenesses and differences between case participants convicted of this crime to learn the motivations and risks of each offender. I gathered data from legal and court documents, media sources, and pre-existing data sets, which provided viewpoints on every case participant, from legal professionals, law enforcement, current or former spouses, mental health experts, families, and offenders, to add to the existing literature, hoping to provide a better understanding of revenge filicide.

This multiple exploratory case study included Black, White, and Hispanic male and female offenders convicted of murdering their children in criminal court. No Asian case participants were identified in the group as anticipated. I identified 12 case participants from secondary sources with U.S. residency, whose ages ranged from 18-65 years old and examined data on revenge-motivated filicides from 1995-2024. Additional sources were unnecessary as I reached data saturation with 12 case participants identified from secondary data. Demographic variables were not part of this study's inclusion or exclusion criteria. To gain access to criminal records, I submitted a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) form via email to request access to records from federal

agencies. However, those requests were not granted. Once I was able to identify cases through other secondary sources, such as legal and court documents found in the Nexis Uni Database in the Walden Library, media sources, and pre-existing data sets from the Center for Judicial Excellence, I closely examined each case to determine if revenge was a motivating factor in filicide cases.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data were collected from secondary sources. The secondary sources used for this study were pre-existing data sets on revenge filicide cases from the Center for Judicial Excellence, media sources, and legal and court documents found in the Nexis Uni Database in the Walden Library. Collected data were related to the research questions for this study, based on the inclusion criteria of male and female offenders convicted of revenge filicide. I used thematic analysis for this study as this process is flexible and helpful with interpreting data by identifying main themes, points, and patterns within the data. I used thematic analysis to conclude a variation of viewpoints from each case participant on the phenomenon and ideas. Thematic analysis also ensured the reliability, replicability, and accuracy of the results and reduced the potential biases (see Naeem et al., 2023). NVivo 12 Pro was intended to be used for support with sorting, storing, managing, and organizing all data collected from secondary sources. However, due to the nature of my study, I decided to do my analysis using hand coding instead of NVivo 12 Pro.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in research includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability in the truth of the results. In qualitative research, credibility is whether the researcher believes the data on the phenomenon under investigation is accurate and believable. To increase the credibility of my research, I used multiple case studies to gather the same consistent information. Data triangulation involves using several credible sources to recognize patterns and themes. I used pre-existing data sets, media sources, and legal and court documents for this study to guarantee authentic data collection. Transferability is when the results of a study can remain faithful in other settings or contexts. I used the same data collection techniques to ensure transferability, and the coding and analysis were detailed throughout the process (Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

Dependability relates to the reliability of the research study. To achieve dependability, I provided the specific steps used to conduct this study, which allowed similar findings to be produced as the steps were repeated. Confirmability relates to the study's findings on the case participants' lived experiences without the researcher's biases. Confirmability can increase the trustworthiness and validity of the study. To ensure confirmability, I remained neutral and reported findings from case participants rather than my biases (see Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethics in research includes limiting the risk of case participants, maintaining privacy and confidentiality, and ensuring research is conducted ethically throughout the study. Confidentiality in research is the non-disclosure of case participants to ensure that participants used for the study cannot be identified (Kamanzi & Romania, 2019). There were no ethical concerns in this study because secondary sources were used to eliminate

ethical concerns relating to case participants. Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved my proposal before I gathered any data to guarantee the safety of case participants used for this study. Interviews were not conducted. There were not any direct interactions or observations with offenders convicted of revenge filicide; therefore, confidentiality agreements were not required for this research study. While conducting the research, I complied with ethical practices by storing all data on my laptop within my home and saving it on password-protected flash drives. All notes or documents used for the study were kept in a secure area.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I discussed the purpose of this qualitative study, the research design and rationale, the research questions used for the study, and my role as the sole researcher. Next, I discussed the chosen methodology, participation logic and selection process, and data analysis plan. Finally, I discussed issues with trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the motivations and risk factors associated with revenge filicide. There were two research questions in this study:

RQ1: What are the motivations of revenge filicide?

RQ2: Which risk factors related to revenge filicide are the most prevalent?

Chapter 4 includes a discussion of the means of obtaining each case, the research setting, demographics, data collection, and analysis procedures. Also discussed are evidence of trustworthiness, conclusions, and a summary of this study. I conducted a comprehensive data analysis to answer the research questions through thematic analysis.

### **Setting**

The petition to obtain court documents and public records entailed waiting several weeks to months to receive access to documents. Some requested documents and records were not released because I was not a resident in certain states, could not locate the correct case/docket number for certain cases, could not identify which court some the cases were filed in, or was not cost-efficient. These difficulties caused problems with making access to data inaccessible. Due to these limitations, pre-existing data sets on revenge filicide cases from the Center for Judicial Excellence, media sources, and legal and court documents found in the Nexis Uni Database in the Walden Library were used. The study was completed in a private office setting. Archival data were gathered for this study and thoroughly analyzed in an environment where external influences would not

negatively impact the data or case participants. No significant incidents affected the setting, as the data were analyzed in a private office.

### **Demographics**

The multiple exploratory case study included 12 cases. All case participants included in the study resided in the United States, were African American, White and Hispanics, and were convicted of murdering their children. No Asians were found in the group of the identified case participants, as anticipated. Offenders' ages ranged from 23 years old to 60 years old. There were no specific demographics for this study; every participant met the same criteria, and a sample size of 12 case participants was used to ensure data saturation. Court and legal documents, media sources, and the pre-existing data sets entailed descriptions of children murdered by their parents as reported by case participants (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Case Participants*

Case Participant	Case Participants Race	# of convicted murders	Age of victim	Year of an adverse event	Murder Method
1. Amy Herbert	White	2	7-9	2007	Knife
2. Daryl Keith Holton	White	4	4-12	1997	Chinese-made semi-automatic rifle
3. Julie Orellana J.O.	White	1	8	2018	9mm semi-automatic handgun/steak knife
4. David Dean VonHaden	White	2	2-4	1996	Suffocation
5. Jokeera Viola-Morgan	African American	2	8-18 mos.	2015	Drowning
6. Susan Dianne Eubanks	White	4	4-14	1997	38-caliber revolver
7. Aramazd Andressian Jr	White	1	5	2017	Suffocation
8. John Jonchuck	White	1	5	2015	Drowning
9. Narges Shafeirad	Mexican	1	5	2015	Poisoned/Drug Overdose
10. Phillip Raymond-Hernandez	Mexican	1	9	2013	Hatchet
11. Arthur Morgan III	African American	1	2 ½	2011	Drowning
12. Toney Moreno	White	1	7 mos.	2015	Drowning

**Data Collection**

Archival data were used for the study due to my inability to interview case participants. The case participants needed for this study were a highly vulnerable population, which prevented me from being granted permission to collect data directly

from case participants. The secondary sources used for this study included a pre-existing data set from the Center for Judicial Excellence, with direct links to media sources and legal and court documents. Secondary sources also included legal and court documents in the Nexis Uni Database in Walden Library. To gain access to filicide cases, I used the following link which took me directly to the Center for Judicial Excellence homepage. <https://centerforjudicialexcellence.org/2016/12/05/12516-press-release-58-children-murdered-by-a-parent-who-could-have-been-saved/>. After navigating to this link, I scrolled down and clicked on the word “snapshot” in red, which took me directly to the [Filicide in U.S. Family Courts: A Snapshot - Google Sheets](#). This Google Sheet provided me with a pre-existing data set with offenders of filicide, along with direct links to the different media sources covering the case.

When accessing cases on Nexis Uni, I searched terms such as filicide or "revenge filicide" or "spousal revenge" or "parental kill” of children". From there, I read through the cases and identified which ones met the criteria for my study. The link I used to access those cases was <https://advance-lexis-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/api/permalink/6310fcb8-45b2-495a-9762-cc5c1a04c91b/?context=1519360&identityprofileid=GJRQ8X51685>. Multiple jurisdictions rejected the petition for court and public records via email communications or stated that it would take several weeks to months to receive access to certain documents.

Each case participant resided in the United States, and each case participant's age, race/ethnicity, date of murder, and weapon used were documented in a Word document.

Documenting the ages of offenders and dates of the murders supported me in choosing 12 case participants that fit the criteria for my study aligned in Chapter 3. There were challenges with identifying revenge-motivated filicides of offenders between the ages of 18-50 years between 2000-2024. Due to this barrier, the criteria were changed to identify case participants between 18-65 years old and identified revenge-motivated filicides from 1995-2024. Case participants who did not meet this criterion were excluded from this study.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were collected and analyzed concurrently while conducting this qualitative exploratory case study. Legal and court documents, media sources, and pre-existing data sets provided viewpoints on every case participant, from legal professionals, law enforcement, current or former spouses, mental health experts, families, and offenders. The data from this study were hand-coded, and to ensure credibility, accuracy, and transferability, archival data were reviewed a minimum of three times. Initially, I planned to use NVivo 12 Pro data analysis software to manage and store my data. However, due to the nature of my study, I had such intimate knowledge of my data that it was best to do my analysis by hand coding instead of NVivo 12 Pro. From hand-coding the data, initial codes were developed by highlighting words, direct quotes, and phrases from the court, legal documents, and media sources.

Codes were then cross-examined to other codes in other cases to identify similarities and differences amongst cases. Codes that were alike were then combined to produce categories. Initial codes were later grouped into more prominent themes. Four to eight

codes were found per case, which led to the development of three themes: Severe lack of emotional connection, Motivation/desire to control, and deep desire to inflict pain and suffering. I used a deductive process that guided the thematic analysis, in which archival data were collected to answer the two research questions for my study.

For example, the case of Author Morgan III generated six codes:

1. Failed Relationship
2. Revenge
3. Custody battle
4. Murder
5. Separation
6. Drowning

Susan Eubank's case generated eight codes:

1. Divorce
2. Custody battle
3. Revenge
4. Betrayal
5. Inflict pain
6. Poor coping skills
7. Weapon used
8. Anger

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Researchers must address the evidence of trustworthiness within their research.

An audit trail and reflective journal were used to eliminate personal bias when conducting data analysis and to enhance my study's credibility, dependability, and conformability. Several techniques were used to guarantee trustworthiness during the study period. All data were gathered from reliable sources, including a pre-existing data set, media sources, and legal and court documents. If there were any inconsistencies presented within one source, the source was thoroughly reviewed against the other sources until the most dependable data were identified and incorporated. This process harmonized with Lemon and Hayes's (2020) method of ensuring credibility by using several sources to collect the same reliable information.

Transferability is when the study's findings can remain reliable in other settings or contexts and is commonly determined by the reader of the study, not by the writer. Chapters one, three, and four, outlined the design of the study, data collection methods, and analysis procedures. The data collected within this study could contribute to this research topic area (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). To enhance transferability, I used cross-case comparisons and detailed coding and analysis. Using reliable archival data on revenge-motivated filicides within the United States supported me in increasing the trustworthiness of this study. It was necessary to conduct several series of coding to allow other researchers to duplicate the study and transfer findings.

A study's dependability refers to its reliability. Korstjens and Moser (2018) contend that dependability can be achieved by using an audit trail that provides the specific steps that were used to conduct the study and the coding process. To enhance dependability, I read through each case several times, cross-referencing individual pieces

of data one against the other and repeating the coding process a minimum of three times to ensure precise findings. Confirmability was accomplished by trying to remain neutral and report findings indicative of the data rather than my biases (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). The study's case participants' behaviors were reported as precisely as possible. Reviewing the data on the crimes committed by parents was difficult, but I took time to review the data, affording time between reading about a new case. I was conscious and attentive to any signs of researcher bias to avoid intervention in the data collected and reviewed.

### **Results**

The data analysis implied themes in the two research questions based on a coherent group of 12 male and female U.S. case participants. John Bowlby's attachment theory was the theoretical framework that I used to analyze data.

The data analysis rendered three themes:

- 1: Severe lack of emotional connection
2. Motivation/desire to control
3. Deep desire to inflict pain and suffering

Table 2 identifies themes, categories, and codes of parents who murdered their children out of revenge.

**Table 2***Codes, Categories, Themes*

Codes	Categories	Themes	Research Questions
Infidelity Failed Relationship Separation Strained Relationship Divorce	Degrees of a failed relationship	Severe lack of emotional connection	RQ2
Custody Visitation disputes	Custody Battles		
Poor relationship with mother/father Parental death	Parental failed relationships		
First-degree murder Weapon used Arson Attempted murder Asphyxiation Drowning Stabbing	Violent criminal activity	Motivation/desire to control	RQ1
Methamphetamine Marijuana Alcoholism	Substance misuse and abuse		
Revenge Inflict pain Threatening behavior Mental Illness	Behavior associated with mental illness	Deep desire to inflict pain and suffering	RQ1
Betrayal Rage Anger Jealousy	Strong negative emotions		

In this study, I focused on two research questions:

RQ1: What are the motivations of revenge filicide?

I relied on archival data to review, code, categorize, and analyze the motivations of revenge filicide. The first codes that were generated for the first research question were first-degree murder and revenge. The categories assigned to these codes were violent criminal activity and behaviors associated with mental illness. The final phase was identifying the themes of motivation/desire to control and deep desire to inflict pain and suffering.

RQ2: Which risk factors related to revenge filicide are the most prevalent?

I relied on archival data to review, code, categorize, and analyze which risk factors related to revenge filicide were the most prevalent. The first code identified within the second research question was infidelity. Other codes were generated, such as failed relationship separation. The categories assigned to these codes are degrees of failed relationships and custody battles. The final step was identifying a theme that had a severe lack of emotional connection.

### **Theme 1: Severe lack of emotional connection**

All case participants in this study reported having a failed or strained relationship with their spouse. In some cases, infidelity was the cause of the failed or strained relationship that resulted in separation or divorce. The termination of the relationship caused extreme anger and the desire for revenge. Participants also reported being in heated custody battles and visitation disputes. For example, Amy Herbert was severely angry that her husband divorced her. Her anger intensified when she learned her ex-

husband was starting a new relationship with his fiancée and building a new family and home with her children. Amy was afraid of losing custody of her children and was furious that they were developing a close relationship with her ex-husband's new spouse.

Another example of a severe lack of emotional connection is the case of Daryl Keith Holton. Mr. Holton's wife characterized her relationship with Mr. Holton as "up and down" (State v. Holton, 2002, pg. 6). Mr. Holton obtained a divorce due to his wife's infidelity and sought custody of the children. A third example is presented in the case of David Dean VonHaden. David's wife asked for a separation in 1996, which resulted in a divorce due to the marriage deteriorating after his wife had an affair. After the separation, his wife retained primary custody of the children.

A final example is the case of Aramazd Andressian Sr, who smothered his 5-year-old son with his jacket to get back at his estranged wife for their strained relationship. Andressian and his wife were in a "tumultuous divorce" and a bitter custody dispute (CBS News, 2017, para. 5). The mentioned cases present an overwhelming presence of a severe lack of emotion and align with previous research on how a lack of emotional connection can lead to revenge-motivated filicides.

## **Theme 2: Motivation/desire to control**

Each case presented the motivation and desire to control. The cases that were analyzed revealed that the act of murder was intentional and with the intent to regain control of the unfavorable situation through retaliation. As stated, in all cases examined, the parents were in strained relationships, separated, or divorced. Some of the violent criminal activities were carried out with extreme force, using weapons such as an axe,

gun, suffocation, or drowning.

For instance, David Dean VonHaden killed his two-year-old daughter and four-year-old son children because he was jealous and angered that his wife cheated on him, divorced him, and began dating another man. Toney Moreno killed his 7-month-old son by dropping him off the bridge because the child's mother no longer desired to be in a relationship with him. Phillip Raymond Hernandez was angry that his wife won the custody battle, which resulted in him beheading his 9-year-old son with an axe as he slept on the family couch. Susan Dianne Eubanks shot and killed her four young children: ages 14, seven, six, and four. She was outraged towards her children's father, who had chosen to leave her, and stated, "You betrayed me," in a note addressed to the children's father (People v. Eubanks, 2011, para. 6).

In these scenarios, it was evident that the offending parents were motivated by either rejection/betrayal, jealousy/conflict, custody battles, or marital discord. They demonstrated they would go to great lengths to regain control of their undesired situations. The participants identified in this case study were experiencing severe pain, emotional distress, and sorrow. Each wanted the inflicting parent to experience the same pain as they were experiencing to regain control of the situation (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023).

### **Theme 3: Deep desire to inflict pain and suffering**

In cases of revenge filicide, the offending parent's primary motive is to inflict the same level of pain and suffering that was inflicted on them (Myers et al., 2021). In the examined cases for this study, law enforcement officers found letters written by case

participants to their former spouses, informing them of their deep desire to inflict pain and suffering. Below are the narratives, quotes, or phrases from case participants reported in court and legal documents or media sources reflecting the offending parent's desire to inflict pain and suffering.

Jokeera Viola Morgan drowned her two daughters in her bathtub when she learned her children's father was having an affair. Morgan stated that the children's father was neglectful of the children, unfaithful, abusive, and once poured a pot of boiling oil on the father after she caught him in bed in their home with another woman. Morgan fantasized about stabbing the children's father with a "hot knife" and had expressed a desire for him to feel the same "burning pain inside" (Morgan v. State, 2020, pg. 4). as she felt. Daryl Keith Holton and his wife were undergoing a bitter custody dispute and informed her that she would "regret it" if she took his children away from him (State v. Holton, 2002, pg. 7).

Julie Orellana murdered her 8-year-old daughter and attempted to murder her 15-year-old daughter in retaliation from her ex-husband for the deterioration of their relationship. At the crime scene, detectives found a letter expressing that she intended to inflict suffering on her ex-husband by murdering their daughters. Another portion of the letter reads, "It's your turn to suffer" (LeRose, 2020, para. 7). Susan Eubanks's children had different fathers, and Eubanks was outraged toward their fathers, who ended the relationship. At the crime scene, deputies found five notes addressed to both fathers. One read, "I've lost everyone I've ever loved. Now it's time for you to do the same" (People v. Eubanks, 2011, para. 6). She added, "You can use any money from her

worker's disability case to bury the kids and find your rainbow" (People v. Eubanks, 2011, para. 6). In another letter, she wrote, "Say goodbye" (People v. Eubanks, 2011, para. 19).

At the crime scene where Amy Herbert murdered her children, two blood-stained notes were found written by Amy Herbert that read: "I sure hope you two lying adulterring home wrecking whores can have more kids because you can't have these" (Herbert v. Rogers, 2016, pg. 4). Another quote from her letter reads, "You wanted your own life. You got it. I'll be damned if you get the kids, too" (Herbert v. Rogers, 2016, pg. 4). Narges Shafeirad was going through a bitter divorce and murdered her son the day she was due in court for a custody battle. Court documents revealed that Narges said to her ex-husband, "I will make you cry. You will be sorry" (Baker, 2017, para. 3). Table 3 reflects the communications of case participants conveyed through letters or notes left at the crime scene, text messages, phones, or voicemails.

**Table 3***Codes, Quotes, and Case Participants*

Codes	Quotes/Phrases	Case Participant's
Infidelity	"Obtained a divorce due to his wife's infidelity."	Daryl Keith Holton
Failed/Strained Relationship	"Tumultuous divorce."	Aramazd Andressian Jr.
Separation	"Couple separated and went through a bitter divorce."	Narges Shafeirad
Divorce	"Severely angry that her husband divorced her."	Amy Herbert
Custody battle	"He killed the girl so her mother could never get full custody of her."	John Jonchuck
Visitation disputes	"The kids had been taken away from me and given back to me, taken away from me and given back to me enough."	Daryl Keith Holton
Poor parent relationships	"Defendant's mother abused her by slapping her and dragging her by her hair."	Susan Eubanks
Parental Death	"He lost his father at 6, his best source of unconditional love, in an industrial accident."	Tony Moreno
First-degree murder	"Convicted of first-degree murder."	Author Morgan III
Weapon used	"Used an axe to behead his son."	Phillip Raymond Hernandez
Arson	"She then locked his body inside her car and set it ablaze."	Narges Shafeirad
Attempted murder	"15-year sentence for the attempted murder of her 11-year-old daughter."	Julie Orellana

Codes	Quotes/Phrases	Case Participant's
Asphyxiation	"Smothered his 5-year-old son with his own jacket to get back at his estranged wife for their strained relationship."	Aramazd Andressian Jr
Drowning	"Dropped his 7-month-old off the bridge."	Toney Moreno
Stabbing	"20-25 stab wounds to her son's chest, 50-55 stab wounds to his back. Five defensive wounds on arms, 30-35 stab wounds to her daughter's chest, and approximately 30-35 stab wounds to her back."	Amy Herbert
Methamphetamine Marijuana	"Angry meth addict" "His system showed the presence of THC, an ingredient in marijuana."	John Jonchuck Phillip Raymond Hernandez
Alcoholism	"The defendant's mother and stepfather were alcoholics who fought constantly and had affairs."	Susan Eubanks
Revenge	"I've lost everyone I've ever loved. Now it's time for you to do the same."	Susan Eubanks
Inflict pain	"I will make you cry. You will be sorry."	Narges Shafeirad
Threatening behavior	"She told me she was going to make me pay for divorcing her, and that was going to make me cry forever."	Narges Shafeirad
Mental illness	"Schizoaffective disorder, major depressive disorder, and personality disorder."	Jokeera Viola-Morgan
Betrayal	"You betrayed me."	Susan Eubanks

Codes	Quotes/Phrases	Case Participant's
Rage	"She wanted him to feel the same burning pain inside that she did."	Jokeera Viola Morgan
Anger	"It's your turn to suffer."	Julie Orellana
Jealousy	"Concerned that her kids were getting close to her ex-husband's fiancée, that he was building a new house."	Amy Herbert

### Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the motivations and risk factors associated with revenge filicide. Chapter 4 described the results from secondary data gathered from the Center for Judicial Excellence, media sources, and legal and court documents on 12 case participants who committed revenge-motivated filicides. This chapter discussed data collection methods, their analysis, and the environment where the data were gathered, with a summary of the case participants' demographics.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data, creating codes and themes for each group. The themes generated from this study were a severe lack of emotional connection, motivation/desire to control, and a deep desire to inflict pain and suffering. The conclusions of this study were satisfactory to answer the two research questions for this study. Chapter 5 will summarize the results of this study, interpretation of the findings, and limitations. Chapter 5 will also discuss recommendations for further research, study implications and conclusions, and how this study can inform social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

Although filicide has been thoroughly researched, revenge filicide continues to be underexplored. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the motivations and risk factors associated with revenge filicide. Revenge filicide refers to a parent murdering one or more children to exact vengeance and emotional suffering on the child's other parent, likely the offending parent's present or previous partner (Myers et al., 2021). Some motivations include rejection, rage, conflict, divorce, marital discord, divorce, or jealousy. Risk factors can include mental illness, parental failed relationships, and substance abuse and misuse. I expanded upon prior research by examining the motivations and risk factors of revenge filicide to convey information on why parents murder their children.

I used an exploratory multiple case study method to examine revenge filicide's motivations and risk factors. Due to the inability to collect data directly from case participants because they were a vulnerable population, the analysis was completed through secondary analysis. The data for this study was collected from media sources, pre-existing data sets on revenge filicide cases from the Center for Judicial Excellence, and legal and court documents found in the Nexis Uni Database in the Walden Library.

This thematic analysis produced codes, categories, and themes between the examined case participants, which became evident through manual coding. To address the gap in the literature on the motivations and risk factors of revenge filicides, I conducted a multiple exploratory case study on 12 case participants who murdered their

children out of retaliation to the other parent. The research questions related to the conclusions, codes, categories, and themes were:

RQ1: What are the motivations of revenge filicide?

RQ2: Which risk factors related to revenge filicide are the most prevalent?

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Numerous researchers have studied filicide since the 1960s; however, studies specifically exploring revenge filicide are scarce (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023; Myers et al., 2020). Most of the research has focused on and thoroughly explored other types of filicides, such as altruistic filicide, unwanted child filicide, and accidental and acutely psychotic filicide (Frederique et al., 2023). While revenge filicide has been mentioned within research studies on filicide, this study focused exclusively on the motivations and risk factors of revenge filicide. The themes generated from this study were consistent with earlier research, validating some of what is known about offenders of revenge-motivated filicides.

The theoretical framework used for this study was attachment theory. Attachment theory states that a child's relationship with their parent is the most significant. It sets the foundation for every social and love relationship the child will have as they grow into adulthood (Chen, 2023). Findings revealed that some case participants in this study lacked healthy relationships with their parents during childhood, which can positively or negatively impact their behavior as adults (van der Horst et al., 2020).

These findings confirmed prior research and aligned with Eriksson et al. (2020) assertion that a lack of attachment between a parent and their child can be a risk factor for

filicidal acts as the parent lacks an emotional attachment with their child. Due to the lack of research on revenge filicide, I used secondary data to produce a thematic analysis of 12 offenders of filicide. This brought forth the initial codes associated with the first research question, which were first-degree murder and revenge.

Next, I assigned categories to these codes, which are violent criminal activity and behaviors associated with mental illness. The first code associated with the second research question was infidelity. Additional codes were generated, such as failed relationships and separation. The categories assigned to these codes are degrees of failed relationships and custody battles. This analysis also generated three themes: severe lack of emotional connection, motivation/desire to control, and the deep desire to inflict pain and suffering. The methods and weapons parents used to murder their children were also explained.

While this study generated three themes, the two most prominent were a severe lack of emotional connection and the deep desire to inflict pain and suffering. All 12 case participants reported having a strained or failed relationship, in some cases from infidelity, that resulted in divorce or separation and were in the process of bitter custody battles and visitation disputes, wanting to inflict deep pain onto their spouse. For instance, Tony Moreno intentionally threw his 7-month-old son off a 90-foot-high bridge in retaliation to the boy's mother for ending their relationship. During the trial, legal officers highlighted that not only did Moreno aggressively and deliberately kill his son, but while he was committing the act, he sent "demonic" text messages to the mother to add to her "unfathomable grief" (Truesdell, 2017, para. 8). Legal officers also stated that

just moments before his son's death, Moreno sent text messages that were classified as “callous and scornful” (TheMiddletownPress, 2017, para. 12).

Another example that supports the two most prominent themes from this study is the case of John Jonchuck. Jonchuck grabbed his 5-year-old daughter out of the back seat of his car and threw her over the rail and into the water to prevent the daughter’s mother from getting custody of their daughter. In this case, the jury determined that Jonchuck acted out of vengeance. Lastly, Julie Orellana killed her 8-year-old daughter and tried to murder her 15-year-old daughter in an act of revenge against her ex-husband for the deterioration of their relationship. At the scene of the crime, investigators discovered letters written by Orellana, expressing her intent to inflict deep pain and suffering on her former spouse by killing her two daughters. Another section of the letter reads, "It's your turn to suffer” (LeRose, 2020, para. 7).

While I hoped that attachment theory would provide a more nuanced understanding of how a lack of attachment between a parent and their child could lead to filicidal acts, the secondary data used for this study did not present much information on the emotional attachments offenders had with their child before revenge-motivated filicides. From the data, I was expecting to gain deeper insight into how the lack of attachment that parents have to their children could be a risk factor in cases of revenge filicide. Out of the 12 cases used for this study, there was no observation of the parent's attachment style with their child.

What I did become aware of was that some case participants, such as Susan Eubanks and Tony Moreno, had poor relationships with their mothers or fathers or experienced

parental death. For instance, Susan Eubanks was physically abused by her mother and had an unstable relationship with her mother and stepfather. Additionally, Eubanks lost her mother at the age of 8 years and sometimes lived with her stepfather in a trailer, where she would witness him getting drunk and urinating on himself. There was not much data revealed on the relationship that Tony Moreno had with his parents, but data showed that he lost his father when he was 6 years old in an industrial accident.

The data from this study supports previous research by Frederick et al. (2022) and Dekel et al. (2020) that revealed traumatic experiences in one's childhood can have a long-term effect on relationships in adulthood. Frederick et al. (2022) found that filicidal offenders who experienced the death of a parent or were victims of physical violence are at higher risk of committing filicide acts. Dekel et al. (2020) found that exposure to death at an early age, violence, and aggression can lead to desensitization, causing them to feel less sensitive to violence, lack empathy, and increase aggression. The indicative data also supports previous research by (Bezuidenhout, 2023; Myer et al., 2021) that failed relationships, custody disputes, revenge, and jealousy are known motivations in revenge filicide cases, and traumatic experiences are well-known risk factors for revenge filicide.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study added to the literature on revenge-motivated filicides, there were quite a few limitations within this qualitative study. One limitation that was unexpected and stood out within this study related to case participants. When collecting data, I recognized that some case participants had more data available than others. For example, Julie Orellana and Susan Dianne Eubanks had far more data on their life history and

murder cases than case participants such as Toney Moreno and Arthur Morgan III. Some cases had far less media coverage, causing challenges with data triangulation and the ability to compare sources on some participants.

Another limitation of this study related to the number of case participants.

Conclusions from this study cannot account for all filicidal offenders, as this study only included 12 African American, White, and Hispanic male and female case participants living in the United States, ranging from age 23 years old to 60 years old. Participants for this case were selected using secondary data based on convenience and availability. An additional limitation of the study is related to the data collection methods. As mentioned, I was not allowed to collect firsthand data from the participants used in this study. I had to rely on archival data because I was not granted permission to collect data from live participants. This raised the concern of biases from firsthand data collectors.

Data were gathered from a pre-existing data set that provided direct links to media sources and legal and court records. I also used the Nexis Uni Database in the Walden Library to collect additional data from legal and court documents that provided additional data on revenge-motivated filicides. Even though I attempted to take every preventive measure possible to diminish the collection of wrongful information, it was essential to be mindful that a study on revenge filicide relied on viewpoints and willingness to disclose their experiences within alternative sources truthfully. I ensured that the data were cross-referenced within alternative sources. Still, there was no definite way to verify that everything written within the alternative sources for all individuals involved was reliable. However, as mentioned in Chapter 4, data triangulation was used to increase the

credibility of this study's findings and minimize as much bias as possible.

There was also the limitation of needing to be granted access to the requested original documents from the courts or law enforcement agencies. In some instances, primary records were not released to me because I was not a resident in certain states; in other instances, the correct case/docket number could not be located, and some inquiries still needed to be responded to. Also, many agencies requested fees for providing records from submitting the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, which could have been more cost-efficient for this study. This limited me from having direct access to public records.

Lastly, I was the only researcher, data collector, analyzer, coder, and presenter for this study, which could have resulted in biases and misinterpretation of the data. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) contend that this could compromise the study's credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. To manage this limitation, I transcribed all data at least three times before coding the data and crossed reference codes and categories generated from the data.

### **Recommendations**

In this study, I examined the risk factors and motivations for revenge filicide. Future researchers may gain more of a richer understanding of the motivations and risk factors for revenge filicide if they speak directly to case participants to collect primary data from offenders of filicide or submit additional FOIA requests. This may provide a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon than what was collected from archival data.

Additionally, future researchers could explore early attachment experiences and filicide. While most filicide research has focused on attachment theory and explores attachment styles between a mother and her infant, future researchers should explore both male and female parents' attachment styles with their infants during their developmental stages. Future research should also explore the relationships that offenders of filicide had with their parents during their developmental stages. Attachment theory and styles shed insight into comprehending the parent's inner conflicts that are believed to have developed during the parent's infancy years.

A more profound understanding of this theoretical framework can provide insight into early attachment relationships to close relationships in manhood and womanhood while offering a significant approach for the identification of risk in the context of child maltreatment, specifically for those associated with insecure attachment style, child maltreatment, sudden separation and other traumatic experiences during childhood (Eriksson et al., 2020). Exploring early attachment experiences and offenders of filicide, in addition to the attachment style the offender has to their spouse, could provide a thorough understanding of infancy caring experiences and the level of connection in adulthood, which may increase the comprehension of specific susceptibilities that could cause an individual to be at a higher risk of murdering their child.

### **Implications**

The implication of the research study supports positive social change by examining the motivations and risk factors of revenge filicide. This study validates previous research on revenge filicide. It suggests recommendations on how to increase

the knowledge of legal professionals, law enforcement agencies, clinicians, and child protection professionals who commonly work closely with offenders of filicide. This may increase the safety of children and others in the communities while increasing proactive measures. Examining this phenomenon provides more information that helps identify potential filicide offenders while also examining their similarities.

Examining similarities of offenders can give educational insights into how they operate before the offense. Continued research should involve significant attention to the unfavorable situational circumstances within families before the filicidal act, such as divorce and custody battles. Being aware of similar situational circumstances among offenders of filicide prior to the offense may permit law enforcement personnel the ability to recognize parents who are more likely to commit revenge-motivated filicides due to unwanted circumstances of the offending parent within the family unit.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the motivations and risk factors of revenge filicide. Upon completing a thematic analysis, findings supported some of what has been found in previous studies on revenge filicide. The study case participants were in similar undesired situations when they murdered their children. Results showed that each case participant experienced a severe lack of emotional connection, which resulted in a strained or failed relationship, desired to regain control of their situation, and wanted to inflict pain and suffering on their current or former spouse.

The themes generated from this study are significant for law enforcement personnel, legal professionals, clinicians, child protection personnel, and future

researchers by supporting them with recognizing and understanding the motivations and risk factors for offenders of filicide. Increasing awareness of the motivations and risk factors of filicide offenders may support implementing safety measures, enhance detection, preserve children's lives, and promote community members' overall safety.

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