
**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY
AND FAMILY MURDER BY CHILDREN****Melanie Moen¹ and Christiaan Bezuidenhout²**

ABSTRACT

South Africa has notoriously high levels of violent crime. From 2016 to 2019 the number of murders committed by children in South Africa increased approximately sixteen-fold. Limited research is available on parricide in South Africa, solely related to children. Several parricide cases, which have recently been reported in the media, highlight the need for continued research in this field. The aim of this study was to determine the connection between childhood adversity and parricide by children and to highlight the importance of stable supporting environments to limit future violent crimes. Fifteen cases of children under the age of 18 years who murdered family members were included. Most of the children in this study were exposed to more than one type of adversity, which included poverty, neglect and abuse. Two case studies, which were analysed in-depth and integrated with the General Aggression Model (GAM), are presented in this article. The General Aggression Model postulates how a variety of repeated life experiences, such as being exposed to chronic adversity, can lead to the development of an aggressive temperament.

Keywords: *Parricide; family murder; adversity; childhood adversity; aggression; violence against parents; General Aggression Model.*

BACKGROUND

The correlation between adverse childhood experiences and long-term psychological problems has been established. Childhood adversity has also been linked with criminal involvement, child-to-parent violence and long-term psycho-social consequences (Moen, 2019: 69). Research has shown that children who exhibit chronic physical aggression often grow up in adverse family environments. Therefore, exposure to adverse social environments, for instance, child maltreatment, maternal antisocial behaviour and family dysfunction is linked to chronic physical aggression (Provencal, Booij & Tremblay, 2015: 123). Social adversity, which refers to violent crime, segregation, exposure to delinquent peers, poverty and poor parenting is one of the most significant risk factors for the development of antisocial behaviour (Fagan, Zhang & Gao, 2017: 1553-1564).

Historically, many South African children were exposed to inequality, poverty, various forms of violence, abuse and neglect (Eloff, 2019: 1-149). A third of the country's population live on social grants (Rossouw, 2017: np) and almost half of the adult population live below the upper-bound poverty line (Statistics South Africa, 2017: np). Poverty, high crime rates and child-headed households are some of the risk factors to which children in South African are exposed (Steyn & Moen, 2019: 80). One of the most important reasons for the increase in violent crimes by children is exposure to violence (Grobler, 2019: np). General violence levels and violence against children are regarded as serious societal problems in many countries (Violence against children, 2020: np). This societal problem is especially relevant in South Africa with its high levels of crime.

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Murder is globally recognised as one of the most violent human actions. In 2015, the United Nations shared their 17 sustainable development goals (SDG's) with the world and stated in SDG 16 that societies need to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Therefore, SDG 16 encourages all countries to reduce all forms of violence and related death rates by 2030. The South African Police Service (SAPS) released South Africa's official crime statistics for 2019/20 on 31 July 2020. In this report it was indicated that 21 325 murders were committed in South Africa between 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. This equates to an average rate of 58 murders a day. In comparison to other countries this is equivalent to about 36.3 murders for each 100 000 people of the population for a period of one year. In the Global Study on Homicide, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) indicated that the overall global murder rate has been declining steadily for the past 25 years. They found that the average murder rate was 6.1 homicide victims per 100 000 in a global context in 2017, and 7.4 in 1993. This is a slight reduction in the global average of 1.3 per 100 000 over the past 25 years. The South African murder rate, which is unfortunately not on a downward trend, but showing an upward curve is about six times (5.9) higher than the UNODC average global murder rate. Also, in 2019/20, 18 635 attempted murders were reported to the SAPS.

In 2019/20, 2695 women were murdered in South Africa, which means a woman is murdered every three hours in South Africa. In addition, about 943 children were murdered during this period (some case dockets were not finalised in time before the official statistics were released). Other violent crime categories, such as rape, robbery and assault in South Africa are also much higher than the global averages (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2019; Cele, 2020: np; Gibson, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2019). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), a worrisome number of children, aged 2-17 are globally exposed to a culture of violence and are often unable to deal with negative emotions and violence in this life stage. The fact of the matter is that South Africa is a violent country, and the children of this country are sadly, daily witnesses, victims and perpetrators of violence, since they grow up in this endemic culture of violence.

Although specific crime categories exist to classify the murder rate according to gender, age and race groups, no specific crime category exists to identify the true extent of parricide. A category of violence in South Africa that concerns the authors is the murdering of a close family member by a child. What we do know is that 736 children murdered someone in South Africa during 2019. From 2016-2019 the number of children who committed murder has increased from 47 to 736 (Grobler, 2019: np). Unfortunately, no statistics are available specifically relating to the killing of a parent or a sibling (parricide) by children in South Africa because such a crime category does not exist in the official crime statistics.

Family murder, in this article, relates to the murder of one or more parents, which can include biological- or stepparents, adoptive parents or a close relative (Dantas, Santos, Dias Dinis-Oliviera & Magalhães, 2013: 1). Family murder will, therefore, refer to the killing of mothers, fathers, or superordinate elders, such as uncles, aunts, grandparents, and in-laws by subordinate family members, such as children, nephews, nieces, grandchildren, and sons/daughters-in-law. Under South African law, parricide is defined as the killing of a near blood relative (Bell, Milne, Cooper & Burne, 1951: 410). This definition of parricide is consistent with the definition of Asian, Eastern and Southern European countries that include extended family members in their definitions (Moen & Shon, 2020: 1).

The quality of the interaction between parent and child is important in order to understand parricide. In most parricide cases, the family environment is characterised by family dysfunction, abuse and extreme parenting styles. Parricide has persisted over the centuries, and is often attributed to dysfunctional families, personal psychological challenges and the availability of weapons (Moen, 2020: 4798). Parricide by young offenders is often linked with childhood adversity, such as abuse (Dutton & Yamini, 1995: 39). Shon (2020: np) agrees that the killing of parents has predominantly been framed as a violent reaction of abused children against their tormentors. Minors who commit parricide are usually victims of severe, chronic child abuse by one or both parents. Parental neglect in abuse cases is common, as parents generally fail to protect children from harm and to provide a secure and safe home environment (Meyers & Vo, 2012: 715). A high percentage of preteen murder offenders come from homes that can be described as unstable and violent. These homes are characterised by physical abuse and poor parenting or absent parents (Shumaker & Prinz, 2000: 97-115).

The authors wanted to uncover the reasons why a child younger than 18 years will murder a parent, as the connection to childhood adversity seems to exist. Therefore, in this article a specific focus on childhood adversity was applied to determine the factors that contribute to parricide. To achieve this the article is guided by semi-structured interviews, document analyses, case studies and the application of the General Aggression Model (GAM).

THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

The General Aggression Model integrates and combines several theories to explain human aggression. It is a comprehensive, integrative framework for understanding the different varieties of human aggression. The theory aims to include most factors that can cause aggression (DeWall & Anderson, 2011: 255; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020: 189).

The theory is a framework that explicitly considers the role of biological factors, environmental factors, personality development, cognitive processes, social processes, decision-making, as well as long-term and short-term factors on aggression. By connecting different processes and factors, the General Aggression Model explains how personal and situational factors influence cognitions, feelings, and arousal in humans. These, in turn, affect appraisal and decision-making processes, which, in turn, influence aggressive or non-aggressive behavioural outcomes.

The model also shows how a variety of repeated life experiences, such as being exposed to chronic adversity, can lead to the development of an aggressive temperament. Aggression is eventually the result of a chain of psychological processes, including situational events, aggressive thoughts and feelings, as well as interpretations of the situation. The General Aggression Model posits that violence often occurs because of an escalation cycle. A trigger event must take place to affect the action between two people or two groups. Once the trigger event occurs, the other person or group will likely retaliate. Reciprocal retaliation can also occur because both parties usually deem the reaction or retaliation as unjustified. Persistence of the retaliation often occurs because the role-players get caught up in a tangle, as the opposing party perceives the other party as acting with malice or evil intent and deem their own behaviour as acceptable and appropriate in the relevant situation. A very important aspect of the General Aggression Model Theory, which echoes the level of violent incidents between groups and individuals in South Africa, is that violence and aggression can ignite in a wide range of situations and because of many triggers. Aggressive behaviour, such as a murder, is the result of a chain of different psychological, biological, cognitive and social processes. People differ constitutionally and some humans are more likely than others to respond to situational events with aggressive thoughts and feelings and cognitive scripts. Continuous adversity, abuse and neglect shape these cognitive scripts for many young people. Cognitive scripts in this context can be explained as the memory structure that evolves in time because

of multiple exposures to similar adverse incidents or stimuli, deemed part of the biological and psychological processes.

We do not contend that all young people who grow up in adverse conditions will eventually murder a family member. We believe that people differ regarding how they appraise a situation because some may have strong inner and outer containment, high frustration tolerance; they are attached to societal rules; and present with unbiased cognitive scripts. They consider all options and make decisions by deciding to remove themselves from risky situations. The majority will rather run away from home or accept their fate before they murder a family member – the source of their adversity. However, against the background of the General Aggression Model Theory, we believe that most of the case studies in this study were affected by their adverse environments and that many factors escalated and eventually triggered them to commit parricide.

METHODOLOGY

To gain an understanding of parricide a variety of documents from 1990-2019 were consulted and semi-structured interviews were conducted with three offenders. South African criminal law reports and media reports were consulted. The period from 1990 to 2019 was selected because the Juta Stat system presented completed law cases from 1990 onwards. Document analysis “is often used as a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic” (Bowen, 2009: 27). In the past, researchers in various disciplines made use of archival sources, such as court documents, autopsy reports, biographies and newspaper articles to study crimes, such as murder. Research has also shown that “when multiple methods were used to study a phenomenon, archival methods produce the highest predictive value and trustworthy results” (Shon & Lee, 2016: 3). The advantage of document analysis as a data collection strategy is that access can be obtained to a variety of document types. The researcher can verify themes by accessing a variety of data sources. A disadvantage of document analysis is that the documents are written in a specific language for a specific readership (Altheide, Coyle, De Vriese & Schneider, 2010: 127-151).

As there is no centralised database for criminal justice records in South Africa, we used a data triangulation strategy for validation purposes. The relevant parricide cases from 1990-2019 were sourced from Juta Stat and newspaper articles. Official court documents were searched through Juta Stat, an online law archive system of completed court case documents. The search engine ‘Google’ were utilised to search for relevant newspaper articles. Search phrases such as parricide, family murder and murder by children were used in the searches. Forty-six parricide cases were initially identified, with fifteen of them of offenders under the age of 18 years (refer to Table 1). Only cases of children under the age of 18 years were considered for inclusion, as this article focusses on children who committed parricide. In South Africa a child is defined as a person under the age of 18 years who cannot act independently without assistance of a parent or a legal guardian (Moen, 2018: 12; Strode, Slack & Essack, 2010: 247-249). The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) in South Africa was contacted to determine if any of the identified offenders were still incarcerated at the time of the study. Only three cases could be identified in the provincial area where the researchers reside. The three young offenders were interviewed through semi-structured interviews, but only two of these cases will be presented in-depth in this article to guide our contribution and the application of the General Aggression Model. The third case study was used in a different research project. Before the study began, ethical clearance and permission to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Pretoria and DCS.

In the interviews that were conducted, a semi-structured interview style was used to capture the uniqueness and complexities of the cases. According to Rule and John (2011: np), a semi-structured interview involves a set of questions to initiate the discussion between the researcher and the participant. The initial questions were followed by further questions and probes that arose from the discussion. This style of interviewing allows the researcher to be more flexible during the interview and creates the space that allows for pursuing lines of enquiry (Rule & John, 2011: np). It also allows the interviewer to manage the situation when the child becomes anxious. The interviews mainly focussed on the childhood experiences of the youthful offenders and how their lives were shaped by these experiences.

CASE INTEGRATION

Table 1 outlines the child parricide cases that were identified from 1990-2019. The period from 1990-2019 was selected because the Juta Stat system presented completed law cases from 1990 onwards. The fifteen identified cases are described below. The types of adversities the children were exposed to are also outlined.

Table 1: Parricide cases by children from 1990-2019

CASE	AGE	RACE AND GENDER	TRANSGRESSION	TYPE OF ADVERSITY
1	12 years	Indian female	Had her grandmother murdered by two men	Physical- and verbal abuse by grandmother and father
2	13 years	Coloured female	Stabbed her father with a knife	Unknown, poverty in community
3	14 years	Black male	Killed his mother, grandmother, brother and sister with an axe	Neglect, poverty, physical punishment
4	15 years	White male	Shot his mother, father and sister; raped his sister	Strict father, his mother struggled with motherhood
5	15 years	Indian female	Drugged and strangled stepfather	Hard life was described during trial. No details were provided
6	16 years	White male	Killed his grandmother with a sword	Unknown
7	16 years	White male	Shot his grandmother and grandfather.	Sexual- and physical abuse. Neglect
8	16 years	White female	Stabbed and strangled mother with help of boyfriend	Neglect, alcohol abuse by father
9	16 years	White male	Shot father, mother and brother	Physical abuse
10	16 years	White female	Stabbed sister to death	Sexual abuse, parental divorce
11	16 years	White female	Threw a petrol bomb at her father and his girlfriend	Poverty, neglect, parental alcohol abuse, sexual abuse
12	17 years	Black male	Killed his stepfather with a knife	Poverty, witnessing regular abuse
13	17 years	White male	Killed his parents with a knife and a cricket bat, asked friend to assist with disposing the bodies	Alcohol abuse by family, emotional abuse
14	18 years	Black male	Stabbed guardian (aunt)	Poverty, neglect, violence in community
15	18 years	Coloured female	Stabbed stepmother	Physical abuse, poverty, neglect

The analysis of Table 1 will be outlined in the Results and Discussion section of this article. In the next section, two case studies from Table 1 were selected for an in-depth discussion to provide a detailed account of the types of adversities the offenders were exposed to. The cases will be described where after the integration of the cases with the General Aggression Model will be presented. In both the case studies, semi-structured interviews and documents (court records and newspaper articles) were used to describe and analyse the cases. The case study of a 16-year-old boy (Case 7) and 18-year-old boy (Case 14) will be described and integrated with the General Aggression Model. Pseudonyms have been used.

Case 7: Sybrand (16-year-old male)

Sybrand is the youngest of three children. He has two brothers, four and six years older respectively. He was raised by a single mother, and he never met his biological father. His father left his mother when he discovered that she was pregnant with Sybrand. His mother, a shop assistant, struggled to provide for the family and at one point, the welfare services threatened to remove the children from her care. Sybrand mentioned that the family constantly moved around and that his mother was seldom at home. When he was 2 years old, his mother decided to move back to her parents' home. Her parents lived on a farm. At that stage, the grandmother wanted to adopt Sybrand, but his mother refused.

When Sybrand started his formal schooling, he had to stay in the residence at school. During the interview, he described himself as a difficult child. He swore at people and burned down a tractor at a young age. The family decided that it would be better for everyone if his grandmother home schooled him. He described himself as his grandmother's favourite. For some reason unknown to us, his grandmother did not treat his brothers or his mother well. The relationship between the grandmother and the daughter deteriorated to such an extent that the grandmother chased the whole family away from the farm. His mother decided to move in with her boyfriend, but only discovered a while later that he was married. The family stayed on their own for a while, but Sybrand's mother met another man and they decided to move in together. The mother's new friend had children of his own who also moved in with the family. Sybrand described the man as difficult. He would often get intoxicated and break items in the house. Over the years, the situation deteriorated to such an extent that Sybrand decided at the age of 12 years to run away from home and go back to his grandparent's farm. Sybrand described the years that followed as turbulent. He moved between homes for several years. At the age of 12 years, he also worked at a shop and got involved with older friends who used drugs. He started smoking and using drugs such as CAT (Meth-cathinone) and Tik (Methamphetamine). He explained that he would disappear for months on end without anyone looking for him. Sybrand attended five different schools but was expelled from them due to bad behavior. At one stage, he also stayed with an older woman who involved him in sexual acts.

During this period, he also met an older man who took care of him. He stayed with him for a while, and according to Sybrand, the man had a positive influence on him and acted as guardian to him. He, however, got involved with drugs again and at the age of 16 years, he decided to move back to his grandparents on the farm. Sybrand said that at that stage his grandmother suffered an illness that affected her cognitive functioning. After the illness, her behaviour became erratic and life with his grandparents became stressful to Sybrand. His grandmother would often punish him by hitting him and burning him with hot objects. She would also sometimes threaten to 'murder them all'. During the interview, Sybrand said that she 'pressurised' the home environment with her erratic behavior.

On the day of the murderous incident, he was upset, although he was unclear about what exactly caused his mood. He described it as "...everything that was bad in me came out..." Without thinking it through, he took a firearm shot his grandfather and then his grandmother. When asked why he shot his grandfather, he said that he felt sorry for him. He did not want his grandfather to live without his grandmother. After shooting his grandparents, he took their vehicle and started driving around. He was uncertain of his immediate future and even considered suicide by shooting himself. He phoned a family friend who worked for the Police services, but the friend was not sure how to handle the situation and Sybrand carried on driving around. He said that he phoned friends and told them what he had done, but none of them believed him. Later that day he left the vehicle with his sister and carried on with life as if nothing had happened. A week after the murders the police arrested him. He said that the arrest felt like something from a movie scene. After a few hours in police custody, he confessed to the murders. He said that he was tired of the questioning and wanted them to stop interrogating him. When asked why he murdered his grandparents he said that he was confused and young at the time.

Sybrand received a sentence of 12 years and at the time of the interview he was still in prison. He obtained his Grade 12 senior school certificate while incarcerated. He currently works as a butcher in prison and has had several online relationships with women who contacted him through Facebook and social media. During the interview, he expressed his remorse for committing the murders, he also mentioned that he struggled to trust people. He intends to become a handyman when he is released from prison.

Integration of the case study with the General Aggression Model

Sybrand was upset on the day of the murders. He described the day as "...everything that was bad in me came out..." (factors in the immediate situation), he was neglected from a young age, consumed drugs and the family was poor, which could have caused developmental delays. He never met his biological father, which could have contributed to feelings of rejection and poor self-esteem (constitutional process). He was raised in a household characterised by neglect and abuse. An older woman sexually abused him, and his grandmother physically abused him when he returned to their farm. His mother's partners abused alcohol and behaved violently in front of the children. He displayed oppositional behaviour from a young age and was expelled from five different schools. He burned down a tractor at one of these schools. He got involved with older children who introduced him to drugs such as Tik and CAT (social processes and peer pressure). He does not know his biological father and his mother does not protect him from outside influences or provide a stable home environment. He grows up in a poor household (structural process). Due to neglectful parenting, he decides to stay with other adults at a young age. His mother does not intervene or insist that he returns home when he moves in with strangers. The adult woman he lives with, sexually abuses him at the age of 12 years. His family is poor and at one point, the welfare department threatens to remove the children from the mother's care. In the neighbourhood he lives in it is easy to get involved with drugs (lower-class focal areas for youths in these areas). He also stays with his grandparents for long periods. He continues the cycle of bad behaviour by going to one school, misbehaves, getting expelled and moving on to the next school. His family life is also characterised by uncertainty. He cannot attach or bond to anything significant. The family move from one place to the other. His mother moves from one relationship to the other. He is exposed to violent behaviour in the different households he lives in. Over time, he develops favourable cognitive scripts regarding aggression and misbehaviour. Throughout his life, he is used to misbehaving and moving on from situations that are undesirable or difficult to him. He learns to avoid responsibility and builds up a pattern of evasion.

One can argue that, on the day of the murders, the prolonged, accumulated negative factors spilled over into murder. The tension was building up because his grandmother tortured and threatened him. After the murders, Sybrand continued known behaviour (memory constitution) by fleeing the scene of the crime - evasion. He informs several people of his deeds and parks the vehicle at his sister's house. In the following days, he moves from one place to the other without regard, regret, or concern for the consequences of his behaviour. A clear link is established between prolonged childhood adversity and violent behaviour. Sybrand's exposure to continued adversity escalated from misbehaviour to drug abuse to murder.

Case 14: Xolani (18-year-old male)

Xolani is one of seven children. He has six half brothers and sisters. The family lived in an impoverished area in Gauteng. Xolani was raised by his parents from birth to the age of 11. At the age of 12 his parents separated, and he went to live with his mother. While his parents were still married his basic needs were provided for. After the divorce he still had contact with his father, however, Xolani mentioned that his mother struggled financially and consequently there was not enough money to care for the children.

Shortly after the parents separated, Xolani developed delinquent behaviour. He first started stealing from the school and later from the community and family members. He would steal food and cell phones from people in the community. In Grade 10, at age 16 he dropped out of school. He also started using drugs and was involved with a group of older children who had a negative influence on him.

At home his brother mistreated him and would often hit him. Xolani stated that the beatings became unbearable, and he decided to sleep outside the house. His days were mostly filled with criminal activities, where he would rob community members at knife point. Shortly after he left school, his mother passed away. His maternal aunt moved in to act as guardian and to take care of the children.

Different versions of the murder were documented. In his first version Xolani explained to the researcher that on the day of the murder he had an argument with his brother. Xolani took a brick and hit his brother with it. His aunt tried to intervene where after he turned around and stabbed her to death. In his second version he told the social worker that his aunt refused to give him money for drugs, which resulted in him stabbing her to death. His third version was extracted from the court documents and autopsy report. The reports stated that Xolani and two friends entered the home where they found his intoxicated aunt on the floor. According to the documents she insulted him where after one of his friends raped her. Xolani then took out a knife and slit his aunt's throat. The friend slit her throat a second time and the second friend mutilated her private parts. After the murder, Xolani took his aunt's cell phone and money. He fled to his girlfriend's house where he was later arrested. He received a ten-year prison sentence. At the time of the interview, Xolani was already 23 years old. He expressed his regret for his actions that led to the death of his guardian. He cried throughout the interview.

Integration of the case study with the General Aggression Model

Xolani was with his friends on the day of the murder. When they entered the house, they found his aunt intoxicated and lying on the floor. Xolani's friend decided to rape his aunt, which led to him slitting her throat. Xolani stated that he wanted money for drugs and that his aunt insulted him (factors in the immediate situation). Xolani was physically neglected from a young age, consumed drugs and the family was poor. His parents got divorced and he started stealing at a young age. He was raised in a household characterised by neglect. His older brother physically abused him. After his mother's death his aunt moved in with the family. She abused

alcohol. Xolani displayed oppositional behaviour from a young age and left school in Grade 10. He got involved with older children and got addicted to drugs (social processes and peer pressure). He stated that his days involved robbing community members. This would imply a lack of discipline and structure by the caregivers in his life. The fact that he left school at age 16 does not seem to be problematic. It is accepted by his caregivers. No one protects him from outside influences or provides a stable home environment. He grows up in a poor household (structural process). Within the neighbourhood he resides in it is easy to get involved with drugs (lower-class focal areas for youths in these areas). He is also exposed to violent behaviour and alcohol abuse in the household he lives in. Over time, he develops favourable cognitive scripts regarding aggression. Throughout his life, he is used to misbehaving with little consequences or intervention from the adults in his life.

On the day of the murder the verbal altercation between Xolani and his guardian, as well as the negative behaviour (rape of aunt) of his friends triggered the murder. Xolani is used to family members solving conflict through violent behaviour. He is also used to getting what he wants through violence (memory constitution). After the murders he carries on with life until he is arrested. Xolani was neglected and exposed to childhood adversity from a young age. He received little physical- and emotional support from family members. The fact that conflict was often resolved violently, contributed to rape and murder on the day of the incident.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our study is the first to examine the types of adversities to which young South African parricide offenders are exposed, and the first to integrate childhood adversity and family murder with the General Aggression Model. We aimed to create an awareness for the specific adverse 'situatedness' of children who commit these crimes by presenting descriptive case studies to illustrate the adverse circumstances that often go hand-in-hand with these types of murders.

Fifteen incidents of family murder by children under the age of 18 were identified. From 1990-2019, 21 offenders and accomplices were responsible for the deaths of 25 victims. In four of the 15 cases, the offenders were assisted by one or more accomplice(s). Of the 19 offenders 12 were male and seven were female. The average age of the 15 offenders was 15 years. The victim cohort constituted of 15 female and ten male victims. Five mothers and five fathers were victims of parricide, while four stepparents and five grandparents were killed in the parricide incidents. Six other family members, such as: brothers, sisters, and an aunt were also killed in the parricidal killings.

In this study, it was apparent that the children committing the parricide, were exposed in their homes and communities to various types of adversities. The adversities faced varied from: poverty and neglect to physical-, sexual- and verbal abuse. In two of the 15 cases the types of adversities could not be determined. It is important to note that most of the children in this study were exposed to more than one type of adversity. In six of the cases the children were exposed to physical abuse and in six cases poverty was reported. Five cases of neglect were noted, while three cases were exposed to sexual abuse and three to alcohol abuse by the parents. One case of divorce; one of community violence; and one of emotional neglect, were also noted. Overall, the most prevalent adversities to which the offenders were exposed were, namely: neglect; poverty; and physical abuse.

Adolescent family murder is often portrayed as an offence committed by teenagers against abusive or blameless parents (Heide, 2013: 1-445). A study of family murder by children in South Africa found that parricide offenders had predominantly been exposed to dysfunctional home environments (Moen, 2020: 4799). Flowers (2013: 73-99) contends that parricide is often attributed to dysfunctional family dynamics, personal psychological challenges, and the availability of weapons. Children who commit parricide often come from

homes where accumulated neglect, physical punishment and abuse exist (Moen, 2020: 5798). Shumaker and Prinz (2000: 97-115) agree that a high percentage of these offenders come from homes that can be described as unstable and violent, characterised by physical abuse and poor parenting. Meyers and Vo (2012: 723) are of opinion that several accumulated systemic factors should be considered when considering parricide, and that a single factor analysis should be avoided. Therefore, we considered the General Aggression Model Theory in the case studies. The General Aggression Model illustrates how processes and factors that people bring with them to a situation can guide their behaviour. These situations and processes produce an internal set of thoughts and feelings that are likely to yield aggressive behaviour.

The case studies of Sybrand and Xolani also relate to the hardships and adversities that are typically observed in parricide cases by children. Sybrand was exposed to neglect, poverty, physical-, verbal- and sexual abuse, while Xolani was exposed to poverty, neglect, alcohol abuse and physical abuse. The findings correlate with our findings that children who commit parricide are often exposed to more than one type of adversity from a young age.

There are notable characteristics in this study that warrant commentary. First, the case studies of Sybrand and Xolani highlight the fact that stressors on the day (factors in the immediate situation) of the murders cannot be understood without taking into account the prolonged childhood adversities that presented over an extended period. Sybrand grew up in a poor household (structural process) where he was abused and neglected. Later he got involved with older children who introduced him to illegal substances (social processes). In the neighbourhood he lived in it was easy to get involved with drugs (lower-class focal areas). Xolani had a similar upbringing. He also grew up in a poor household, characterised by neglect (structural process). He was also involved with older friends and used drugs (social processes). Sybrand never had to take responsibility for his actions and was expelled from five schools. He moved from one difficult situation to the other. As soon as he got into trouble in one situation, he simply left and moved on (memory constitution). He never claimed accountability for his behaviour or the outcome of his misbehaviour. Xolani learned from a young age to use violence as means to an end (memory constitution), therefore, on the day of the murder it was easy to move from, threatening people at knife point, to murder. He was also used to physical punishment as a means of solving problems, which could have contributed to him committing murder.

CONCLUSION

Children who grow up in homes that are characterised by violence usually internalise this type of behaviour. The normalisation of violence is of particular concern in a society such as South Africa that is characterised by a culture of violence and high rates of violent crimes. As mentioned before, South Africa is a particularly violent country, one of the most significant reasons for the increase in violent crimes by children is the normalisation and exposure to violence (Grobler, 2019: np). The first level of violence breeds violence is at the level where people, often in their early years, internalise the idea that violence is an acceptable and legitimate way of asserting and protecting one's interests. Therefore, children who grow up in violent families internalise the idea that violence is acceptable and tend to also internalise the verbal and emotional interaction that is a characteristic of these families. Violence between parents in the home, and violence against children by parents and siblings, as well as violence in the school environment are factors that contribute to the normalisation of violence (Centre for the study of violence and reconciliation, 2007: np). One can argue that violent behaviour is internalised and that children who commit parricide simply act out internalised aggressive behaviour.

As mentioned before, we do not contend that all young people who grow up in adverse conditions will eventually murder a family member. However, we believe that the environment individuals find themselves in is critical for their general health and well-being. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand the threats to health and well-being, as well as understand the environments in which individuals find themselves (Davids, Roman & Leach, 2015: 953). We also highlight the importance of stable, nurturing environments in ensuring a reduction in violence.

While we have conducted one of a few studies on parricide in South Africa, our study has shortcomings. First, our study is not a complete representation of family murder incidents by children in a jurisdiction. We utilised a convenience sample, based on a limited number of court cases and newspaper reports. Cultural factors that might have played a role in the parricides were not in the scope of this study. Future researchers should investigate cultural and ethnic differences in parricides. It is recommended that the Police services should keep detailed crime statistics of juvenile offenders. Crime categories relating to murder and violent crime by children are particularly important.

DECLARATION

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