

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Killing your children to hurt your partner: A South African perspective on the motivations for revenge filicide

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## Abstract

The aim of the study was to investigate the offence characteristics and motivations for revenge filicides. Revenge filicide is an act where one parent kills their own offspring for retribution to hurt and upset the other parent. The cases of 20 revenge filicide murderers (14 male and six female) were analysed to determine the motivations and offence characteristics of revenge filicide offenders. It is the first South African study to highlight the motivations and associated characteristics in revenge filicides. Themes such as a loss of social identity due to rejection; extreme rage type anger; external locus of control; sadism; a desire to cause pain and a need to inflict harm are highlighted in this article. The initial emotional response may escalate from mild anger to a level of narcissistic rage which eventually culminates in the murdering of the child to punish and hurt the other parent and to restore control.

## KEYWORDS

anger, child murder, narcissistic rage, parent kills child, rage, revenge filicide

## 1 | BACKGROUND

A parent killing their own child is incomprehensible. However, cases of parents murdering their offspring is as old as humanity itself. The act of killing your own child is known as filicide (Friedman et al., 2005). Filicide is also referred to

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as the killing of one or more children by one or both parents (Leveillee & Doyon, 2019, p. 2). The extent of revenge filicide in a global context is vague. Most countries do not have special crime categories relating to revenge filicides. These types of murders are usually recorded in the main crime category 'murder'. This makes the true extent of this unique crime difficult to determine. However, an analysis of filicide figures in the United States (US) showed that filicide comprised on average about 2.5% of all murders in the US. More functional information is available about the motives and nature of this crime. Motivations for murdering children could include illegitimate or unwanted children; unintentionally during child abuse; for altruistic reasons or mercy; due to mental illness; while intoxicated; for revenge; to prevent child testimony against a parent; for financial gain; for religious or cultural beliefs; for sexual gratification; for sympathy or attention (Myers et al., 2021, p. 206). Resnick (in Friedman et al., 2005) clustered the specific motives for filicide into five categories namely altruistic filicide, acutely psychotic filicide, accidental filicide, unwanted child filicide and lastly spousal revenge filicide. More recently filicides were also classified according to socio-demographic, psychological and criminological characteristics. The categories include men who commit filicide-suicide, filicide committed by violent and impulsive parents, single and predominantly female parents who present depressive and psychotic symptoms, filicides committed by married and female parents (this type of filicide is usually motivated by a distressed mental state) and women who commit neonaticide (Leveillee & Doyon, 2019). Neonaticide is the deliberate act of a parent murdering their offspring during the first 24 h of life (Rougé-Maillart et al., 2005).

The focus of this contribution is to extend our knowledge of revenge filicide. To our knowledge this is the first study that highlights the motivations and associated characteristics in revenge filicides from a South African perspective. Spousal revenge killers (offending partner) murder their own child to afflict hurt or retribution on the partner, spouse or ex-partner (receiving partner). In this type of murder, the spouse specifically wants the partner to suffer and feel misery (Friedman et al., 2005). The aim of the offending party is a desire to hurt their partner or ex-partner, as they themselves are emotionally and psychologically hurting. A plethora of reasons for their own grief exists but popular examples include a breakup by or a new love interest for the receiving partner, jealousy, attention seeking and retribution. The offending partner therefore wants the receiving partner, who they believe inflicted this emotional and psychological pain on them, to experience the same pain by murdering a child or children in retaliation. From this one can deduce that the murdering of the child stems from anger and disappointment towards the spouse which is misdirected and aimed towards the child (Dekel et al., 2018).

Adult parental relationship discord is often displaced and channelled towards their children. In some domestic violence cases children become the targets of the violence or scapegoats (McCloskey, 2001). The action of revenge is a form of communication between the offending party, the perpetrator, and the receiving party, the victim. Separation and abuse are also key correlator variables in revenge filicide. Filicide due to separation is often characterised by a strong narcissistic rage by the offending parent. The separation is experienced as loss and the child is killed out of resentment against the former partner. Filicide which is related to domestic violence and abuse is often related to a projected hatred towards the child. The abuser (e.g., a male spouse) often blames the wife and the child for the marital discord and their familial unhappiness (Bezuidenhout, 2018; Tibbetts, 2012). The child therefore becomes the symbolic scapegoat (Leveillee & Doyon, 2019) and if the abuser leaves his family for another partner, the wife will project her hatred and infuriation with the husband to the child who becomes the sacrificial lamb to deal with the history of the abuse and to establish some form of internal and external control.

It is also postulated that revenge filicides mostly occur when the killer sees the child as an *object* rather than a human being, who is of significant value to the other parent (Carruthers, 2016). Due to this distorted perspective the killer experiences the child as an object rather than a human being and can therefore not elicit motivation or logic to protect the child. Consequently, the killer is unable to understand the long-term gravity of the situation and the impact their behaviour will have on the family and society. They are focussed on hurting the spouse that caused their grief and distress. Revenge filicide can also be associated with *Schadenfreude*, the sense of pleasure people derives from the misfortune of others. Dehumanization is at the core of *Schadenfreude*. Dehumanization is the process of perceiving a person or social group as lacking the attributes that defines what it means to be human. A propensity

to experience *Schadenfreude* can be linked to personality traits such as narcissism, sadism, and psychopathy (Emory Health Sciences, 2018).

Revenge filicide is not a new phenomenon, and several mythical tales concern the murder or disposal of children. An example of a mythical tale is Medea, which is often referred to in filicide literature as the Medea complex. Medea a witch and powerful woman married a male known as Jason. Jason and Medea had two children together, but he eventually deserted her to marry a younger woman Glauce, a Theban princess. Medea was outraged because of this betrayal and his new marriage after the many sacrifices she has made for him (Euripides et al., 2006). She took revenge and murdered her two sons and Jason's new bride (Euripides et al., 2006; Van der Westhuizen, 2009). The Medea complex calls to mind the Devouring Mother Archetype that Carl Jung created (Jung, 2003). The devouring mother also known as the terrible mother seemingly smothers her children to give them the best life she possibly can. She believes she is doing her best and doing the right thing but actually stifles their development and independency. The devouring mother type will resort to child abuse to get her way—'for their best interest'. Deep down in all humans this need to be in control is an inherent trait. Many humans master the art to manage their controlling nature but for some the extreme side of control is triggered by loss or emotional distress (Bezuidenhout, 2018).

As mentioned before, in this study the authors wanted to determine the motivation behind revenge filicides. Motivation is a theoretical construct, used to describe the internal (biological, psychological) and/or external (social) forces that produce legal or illegal behaviour (Leveille & Doyon, 2019). Internal and external forces that regulate behaviour is detailed in the containment theory of the criminologist Walter Reckless (1961). He is of the opinion criminal acts commonly arises from a breakdown in moral and social forces that otherwise 'contain' a person from committing crime. Reckless (1961) believed that a good self-concept acted as an insulator against the social and personal forces that pushed some people to commit an offence. There are inner and outer buffers of containment that restrain a person from committing a crime: the inner buffers stem from moral and devout beliefs. In addition, a personal sense of what is right and wrong is relevant here. The outer buffers are shaped by family members, significant others, religious clerics, teachers, or people who influence the person in some positive way. The effectiveness of containment buffers can be influenced by external factors such as commitment to a relationship and healthy family ties. The internal buffers such as a good self-concept plays an important role as well (Bezuidenhout, 2018; Tibbetts, 2012; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020).

With this knowledge of different internal and external forces that regulates behaviour in mind, 20 revenge filicide cases identified from 2003 to 2021, through electronic sources were analysed to yield some ideas of this phenomenon from a South African perspective.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, access to convicted filicide offenders in prisons were restricted and in cases of filicide, the victims cannot be consulted. Therefore, the authors opted to make use of document analysis through newspaper and court documents. Studies of this nature suggest that newspapers are a valid and reliable source of information about murder when access to official records is difficult (Adinkrah, 2017, 2018). Newspapers that cover murder cases are between 75% and 100% accurate compared to official sources (Eckberg, 2001). Often family-related murders are violent in nature and for this reason, these crimes receive extensive media coverage (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014). The broad coverage of these cases allows the researchers to use media sources to identify filicide by means open-source methodology (Parkin & Gruenewald, 2015). Note, that in South Africa the same challenge exists, namely that the South African Police Service does not have a dedicated crime category to identify revenge filicide murders. We had to identify different routes to identify the cases for our analysis.

Firstly, relevant filicide cases were identified through SA media, Lexis Nexis and Google searches using terms such as filicide, mother murders child, father murders child, stepmother murders child and stepfather murders child. Secondly, the selected cases were read to determine if the type of filicide was related to revenge killings (e.g.,

jealousy, third party, rejection, or retaliation). Twenty cases from 2003 to 2021 were identified as revenge filicides. Although we know that revenge filicide cases occurred since the earliest times, we could not identify any reports of these types of filicides until 2003. Thirdly, court records (seven cases) of completed judgements were used as official sources. These were drawn from Jutastat and SAFLII databases for completed court proceedings in South Africa. The identified filicide cases from the online searches directed the search for relevant cases on Jutastat and SAFLII. These two databases were searched as the court proceedings gave detailed accounts of the murders. Cases where court documents and/or detailed media reports (three or more news reports) could be located were used as case study descriptions in the discussion section.

Although an attempt was made to capture as much information as possible by using content analysis, the study was limited by what was reported in the newspapers and court documents. However, content analysis of newspaper articles gives the reader a glimpse of this phenomenon in a particular society. The descriptions from these sources were analysed as units of behavioural analysis to determine the offence characteristics and motivations. In Table 1 the offence characteristics of the 20 revenge filicide cases as explained in the media and court documents are outlined.

### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Offender and offence characteristics

In the next section the offence characteristics will be outlined and described.

##### 3.1.1 | Gender, age and motives for murder

Twenty offenders were included in the sample, 14 were male and six were female. Table 2 outlines the average ages of offenders.

The mean age was 37 years. The average age of fathers was 43 years; 28 years for mothers and 35 years for stepfathers. No stepmothers were convicted of filicide during the period of investigation. The youngest father was 31 years and the oldest 52 years. The youngest mother was 24 years and the oldest 34 years.

In 60% of the cases the offenders were married at the time of the murder/s. Only one case of divorce was noted, however in several cases marital and relationship discord were highlighted (refer to discussion section). A noteworthy finding was that five of the six offending mothers were not married at the time of the murders. In the majority of the cases, there was mention of relationship discord, such as an argument shortly before the offence was committed, followed by rejection, jealousy and anger. Refer to Table 3 for a summary of the motives for murder.

##### 3.1.2 | Methods of murder and sentencing

The methods of the actual killing of the children varied significantly (refer to Table 4).

The most common method of revenge filicide murder in this sample was poison (21%) and the use of firearms (21%). Rat poison was the poison of choice and was used in three of the four cases of poisoning. The use of rat poison could be explained by the fact that it is readily available over counter sales, affordable and immediately available to the offender. Strangulation (11%); hanging (11%); stabbing (11%) and abusive trauma (11%) were also noted. In one case (5%) a boy was beaten to death, in another (5%) two boys were suffocated and in a third (5%) an axe was used as murder weapon. In one case the killing method could not be determined.

TABLE 1 Offence characteristics of revenge filicides

Case	Offender	Number of victims	Victim gender	Victim age (years)	Murder method	Motivation for murder/s
1	Father	4	Two boys, two girls	9, 7, 5, 3	Blunt force trauma to the head with a rock and nails forced into the skull	Wife was dating other men and neglected household duties. Father did not want another man to raise his children ( <i>Jealousy</i> )
2	Father	2	One boy, one girl	10, 5	Rat poison	Father was abusive towards mother and children. Described as controlling and wanting the mother to suffer ( <i>Jealousy</i> )
3	Father	3	One boy, two girls	1, 3, 6	Used an axe	Argument, father accused mother of cheating ( <i>Conflict</i> )
4	Father	3	One boy, two girls	16, 8, 21 months	Used a firearm	Marital problems, both mother and father had affairs. Father was described as controlling ( <i>Conflict</i> )
5	Father	2	One girl, one boy	9, 5	Strangulation	The mother left him and did not want to return ( <i>Rejection</i> )
6	Father	2	One boy, one girl	4, 7	Hanging	Hostile relationship between father and mother. He wanted to punish the mother ( <i>Conflict</i> )
7	Father	1	One boy	17	Shot with firearm (hired a hitman)	To avoid paying maintenance to mother ( <i>Anger</i> )
8	Father	4	Two boys, two girls	4, 6, 10, 16	Hanging	Separation from wife ( <i>Rejection</i> )
9	Father	2	Two girls	18, 14	Shot with a firearm	Conflict with ex-partner who could not get over the divorce. Threats against ex-partner ( <i>Conflict</i> )
10	Father	1	One boy	3	Unknown	Father upset because mother would not give him a second chance. The father abused the mother and children physically ( <i>Rejection</i> )
11	Mother	2	Two boys	2, 6	Shot with a firearm	Marital problems, husband threatened to leave her ( <i>Conflict</i> )
12	Mother	2	Two boys	1, 6	Suffocation	Wanted to teach the grandmother a lesson. She was lesbian and accused the grandmother of being homophobic ( <i>Anger and Rejection</i> )
13	Mother	4	Three boys, one girl	9, 8, 6, 4	Rat poison	Argument with father ( <i>Conflict</i> )

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Case	Offender	Number of victims	Victim gender	Victim age (years)	Murder method	Motivation for murder/s
14	Mother	1	One girl	Age unknown, baby	Threw baby on floor	Upset with father who refused to see mother and child ( <i>Conflict</i> )
15	Mother	4	Two boys, two girls	4, 8, 7 years, 11 months	Rat poison	Argument with father, he was cheating on her ( <i>Conflict</i> )
16	Mother	1	One boy	5	Stabbed	Blamed son for being rejected by her family. Received no financial support from the father ( <i>Anger and Rejection</i> )
17	Stepfather	1	One girl	5	Strangulation	Mother was having affairs and working at a strip club ( <i>Jealousy</i> )
18	Stepfather	1	One boy	5	Beating	Mother kissed another man ( <i>Jealousy</i> )
19	Stepfather	1	One boy	3	Stabbed	Argument between stepfather and mother ( <i>Conflict</i> )
20	Stepfather	1	One boy	4	Rat poison	Revenge against mother for ending the relationship ( <i>Rejection</i> )

TABLE 2 Offender ages

Offender	Number of offenders	Average age
Fathers	10	43 years
Mothers	6	28 years
Stepfathers	4	35 years
Stepmothers	0	n/a

Note: N = 20.

### 3.1.3 | Sentencing

In this sample the offenders received sentences that ranged between 15 years, 48 years and life sentences. In the majority of the cases the offenders received life sentences, with several of them receiving more than one life sentence. In South Africa a minimum life sentence is equal to 25 years in a correctional facility.

## 3.2 | Victim characteristics

On average boys and girls were almost at the same risk to be murdered with 24 (57%) of the 42 victims in this study being boys and 18 (43%) girls. The average age of the victims was 6.6 years. In 13 of the 20 cases (65%) we analysed, multiple victims were murdered.

Age categories for the victims were as follows: three (7%) were infants (neonatal to age 1 year); one (2%) was a toddler (1–2 years); 16 (39%) were children in the preschool age range (3–5 years); 16 (39%) were in the middle

TABLE 3 Motives for revenge filicide

Motive	Number of incidents
Conflict	9
Rejection	6
Jealousy	4
Anger	3

Note:  $N = 20$ .

TABLE 4 Methods of murder

Method	Number of incidents	Percentage
Poison	4	21
Firearm	4	21
Strangulation	2	11
Hanging	2	11
Stabbing	2	11
Abusive trauma	2	11
Suffocation	1	5
Beaten	1	5
Axe	1	5

Note:  $N = 19$ .

childhood age group (6–12 years); five (12%) were teenagers (13–17 years) and none of the victims in the current study were adults. In one case the age of the victim could not be determined.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Filicide is a complex phenomenon with diverse possibilities and reasons why it occurs. However, it was apparent in this study that the motivations for revenge filicides are often linked to complex personal and interpersonal relationship problems. The aim of this contribution was to determine the motivations for revenge filicides. Themes such as a sense of social identity loss due to rejection; extreme anger; loss of control; a desire to cause pain and harm; sadism as well as a loss in their internal locus of control (blaming), were key themes we identified in the study. These themes will be utilised to compare and guide our findings as summarised in Table 1 and results section.

### 4.1 | Loss of social identity

As mentioned before, several risk factors are associated with revenge filicides. Mental illness in combination with parental separation is a common factor for murdering offspring by both mothers and fathers. Children under the age of 9 years, who are exposed to parental mental illness in a time of separation are particularly vulnerable (Brown et al., 2014). Filicide due to separation is also characterised by a strong narcissistic rage like behaviour by the offending parent (Leveille & Doyon, 2019). The narcissistic rage is a secondary reaction to threats and injuries to the self which is associated with the fragility of the offender's self-experience. Freud postulates that the primitiveness of the hostility is a measure of the fragility of a person's self-experience, the acuteness of the danger of impeding self-fragmentation, and the urgency of the need for self-restoration (Stolorow, 1986, p. 489). In other words, latent

narcissists can exhibit narcissistic rage, which can be described as anger and hostility arising from threats to their fractured self (Krizan & Johar, 2015). In this study we have identified some behavioural characteristics that are sometimes seen in narcissistic related revenge episodes by persons with a fragile self. In the case studies we examined we found that the deed is deliberate, an effort was made to take control of the situation in an over-controlled fashion, the retaliation appears to be sudden and gratuitous, although a situation build-up can be identified. Some attacks were carried out with excessive violence, generally triggered by a catalysing interaction between the victim and perpetrator. The **motives** (as highlighted in Table 1) for an individual to murder their own child usually with no prior violent criminal record, is enigmatic. However, it seems likely that these individuals will go to extreme levels of violence if their self-image, locus of control and inner buffers are threatened by the negative interpersonal relationship disputes.

In seven of the cases, the parents were either in the process of getting divorced/separated or were divorced/separated. In all 20 cases, there was mention of considerable family conflict and discord before the child or children were murdered in an act of revenge. Carruthers (2016) postulates that revenge filicides are often committed in times of considerable stress (e.g., conflict or a partner that decides to leave or file for a divorce). The relevant situation such as marital discord or a divorce, strips the murdering partner of their investment, control and social status in the relationship. They might also be prone to blaming others (external locus of control) for their current situation. The sense of loss of social identity can cause extreme anger, with a desire for revenge. The murdering partner thinks of harming or punishing the partner who caused their loss of control and who ripped away their investment in the relationship. One way of accomplishing this is by harming the child or children. The killer is not concerned with the well-being of the child because they are focussed on causing pain and harm to the other person in the relationship. The murdering partner can distance him/herself from the child by seeing the child as an extension of the disrespecting partner, especially in a state of dissociation. The child is also seen as an *object* rather than a human being, who is of significant value to the other parent (Carruthers, 2016).

The current situation that triggers the loss of control and perhaps the prelude to it is perceived as a personal rejection (often referred to as the 'narcissistic injury'), which will possibly result in an irrational reaction. They are unable to express or acknowledge the rage, aggression, or disappointment they feel which could result in the need to retaliate and neutralise the pain. Perhaps their overwhelming feelings of loss, powerlessness, helplessness incapacity festers resentment caused by the current situation before the murder and manifests with an act of dissociated behaviour (Bezuidenhout & Wharren, 2013). Their despair is so intense that the goal of self-control is blocked, and the self-organization mechanism is disrupted. Anger, resentment, frustration, disappointment, and rage are often significant motivators for destructive behaviour (Glick & Roose, 1993). These feelings, dissociation and a lack of control impairs the ability to go beyond the immediate situation. Perhaps at this breaking point the only ruminated thought is revenge to feel some form of equilibrium and gratification. As mentioned before dehumanization is at the core of *Schadenfreude* (pleasure derived from someone else's misfortune), which is linked to personality traits such as narcissism, sadism, and psychopathy (Emory Health Sciences, 2018). Behavioural characteristics and certain personality traits of narcissism and sadism came into play in this study.

It was not possible to comment on the mental status of all the murdering partners in the cases under study as the psychological reports were not always available. However, one could argue that a measure of mental illness was present in several of the cases under study. For instance, in case 20 the callous, unemotional manner in which the victims were murdered, might indicate a personality disorder. Consider the following cases:

(Case 20) A stepfather poisoned his 4-year-old stepson shortly after the mother ended their relationship. The mother stated that she ended the relationship because the stepfather assaulted her in front of her son. However, her son loved his stepfather and continued to visit him after the separation. One Sunday afternoon the stepfather asked the mother to send her son over for a visit. Shortly after she dropped off her son, the stepfather called her and stated: "..., the pain you make me feel, I will make you feel more pain." The mother immediately went to the stepfather's house, but he did not answer the door. Later that evening the stepfather phoned her again and informed her that she should phone



an ambulance. When the mother entered the ex-partner's house, she found her son shaking and foaming from the nose. The son later died because he ingested rat poison.

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(Case 10) A three-year-old boy went missing after his father failed to return him to his mother after spending a weekend at his home. The parents were in the process of getting a divorce. The mother left the father because he physically abused her and the children. Although he wanted to reconcile the marriage, she was not prepared to give him a second chance. After the father abducted his son, he phoned the mother to inform her that she will never see her son again. Shortly after the kidnapping the mother discovered a burnt lock of hair belonging to her son with a note that read, "Good luck with your life without me and ...." The father was eventually charged and convicted of murder, although the body of his son was not found at the time of the hearing. When a news reporter begged the father to reveal the location of his son, he said he couldn't because he had to protect his son from the mother. Five days after the father was sent to jail, the body of his son was found in a field.

(True crime South Africa, 2020; Remains of toddler found, 2019; van der Merwe, 2019)

In both the cases, the rejected parent could not come to terms with the fact that the relationship has ended, a sense of loss of identity occurred which ultimately led to anger and a desire to cause pain. According to the utilitarian principle it is human nature to seek acceptance and avoid rejection. Social rejection is associated with lower quality of life which ultimately affects a person's interpersonal relationships. Feelings of rejection is linked to aggressiveness, social isolation, jealousy, rage, and depression (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Rohner (2004), relates rejection with hostility and aggression as well as a general inability to control aggressive feelings.

In case 20, the stepfather experienced the separation and rejection as extremely distressing. He ultimately wanted the mother to feel the same pain he experienced by punishing her. Similarly, the father in case 10 could not accept the fact that the marriage was over. He left a message to the mother hinting at his desire to cause her extreme pain. In both cases we can postulate that the murdering partner experienced a sense of loss of social identity. In both cases the mothers ended the relationship which stripped the murdering partners of their social status and power. In these case studies it was clear that the murdering partner wanted to exert power and control over the receiving partner. We believe revenge filicide murders are often both instrumental and expressive in nature. Perhaps a hostile-instrumental dichotomy is applicable to explain the motives for these types of murders. Instrumental and expressive or hostile aggression are distinguished by the rewards or goals they offer the individual. Firstly, the offending partner had the goal to hurt the receiving partner which is instrumental. A cold calculated action to obtain your goal or aim no matter the cost (Bartol & Bartol, 2021). The expressive part of the murder occurs in response to severe emotional distress such as seeing the partner with a new love interest. The offending partner's goal is now more erratic and emotionally laden and they want to make the victim to feel their pain. They experience intense and disorganised emotions which causes anger which in turn perhaps triggers their action to kill the child to make the other partner suffer.

In both cases they asked for the children under false pretences to punish the receiving partner. Both murdering partners knew that they did not plan on returning the child unharmed and kept on punishing the receiving partner in a sadistic manner through text messages and notes. Both gave false hope to the receiving partners, which emphasize the narcissistic-sadistic, as well as the instrumental premeditated nature of the crimes. The murdering partner (case 20) informed the mother to phone the ambulance, while he knew that the child had no chance of surviving. In case 10 the father indicated that the mother would have to live her life without the father and the son but refused to tell her that their son is dead thus prolonging the pain. Even after he was arrested and convicted of the crime, he refused to give her peace of mind. He knowingly prolonged her suffering and pain in a revengeful expressive/hostile egoistic manner. Both murdering partners egotistically focussed on *their* own feelings and pain while blaming the receiving partner for their misery (external locus of control). They completely ignored and dissociated themselves from the receiving partner's needs and feelings. The dissociative reaction is perhaps a consequence of the splitting of the ego

(into good and bad objects) and superego from the rest of the personality. The result is that individuals are unable to control their feelings of anger and hostility and the loss of control results in a revenge filicide. One could therefore argue that a form of narcissism was at play because narcissism is an extreme self-involvement to a degree that it makes a person ignore the needs of others around them (American Psychiatric Association, 2012). In both cases the receiving partner and child's needs were negated.

## 4.2 | Extreme anger

Many of the murders in this study were motivated and characterised by extreme anger followed by aggressive destructive actions. According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis people who are frustrated, disillusioned, annoyed, or threatened will in many cases behave aggressively, since aggression is a natural, almost automatic response to frustrating circumstances. Moreover, people who exhibit aggressive behaviour are likely frustrated, disillusioned, annoyed, or threatened (Bartol & Bartol, 2021). Frustration occurs, after the blockage or interference of a goal, automatically produce an urge to aggress against the frustration. The blockage of goals and anticipated expectations can lead to an aggressive response in retaliation. Cognitive psychologists regard inward and outward aggression as the result of different cognitive styles and emotions. Inward aggression is driven by self-blame and is associated with depression. Outward aggression is due to a preference to blame others and is dominated by anger and emotions (Chan, 2007). Every emotion produces a motive and motives produce action potentials. Therefore, emotions can only be considered in reference to the feelings they arouse, and the actions necessary to satisfy these motives when experiencing the emotions. Consequently, once adverse attitudes have developed towards the receiving party reactive-impulsive expressive violence which is emotionally charged is highly likely. In terms of extreme anger Bartol and Bartol (2021) postulate that expressive or 'hostile aggression occurs in response to anger-inducing conditions, such as real or perceived insults, physical attacks, or one's own failures'. Hostile aggression - later called reactive-impulsive aggression is an aggressive response to a frustration, perceived threat, or provocation. The aggressor's goal is to make a victim suffer. Freud believed that anger is instinctual and a less intense expression of aggression. He believed that aggression would result if energy produced by anger is not released (catharsis). In several of the cases in the current study the murdering partner tended to blame others, blaming (external locus of control) also triggered intense feelings of anger towards the receiving partner (DiGiuseppe & Tafrate, 2007).

Chrysippus (in Graver, 2007, p. 69) holds that our resources for controlling emotions after they begin are extremely limited: 'Emotions stand on slippery ground. One push, and they slide right down the slope. There is no way to stop them.' Seneca (in Graver, 2007, p. 70) agrees and states the following:

For once the mind is stirred into motion, it is a slave to that which is driving it. With some things, the beginnings are in our power, but after that they carry us on by their own force, not allowing a return. Bodies allowed to fall from a height have no control of themselves: they cannot resist or delay their downward course, for the irrevocable fall has cut off all deliberation, all acceptance, they cannot help but arrive where they are going, though they could have avoided going there at all. Even so the mind, once it propels into anger, love, and other emotions, is not permitted to check its impulse. Its own weight must carry it to the bottom.

One could argue that in the majority of the cases the culmination of built-up feelings associated with anger became uncontrollable and spilled over in an aggressive manner namely murder. Consider the following cases where anger ultimately led to revenge filicide.

(Case 4) A police superintendent and his wife had marital problems. The husband was dissatisfied with his wife's long working hours and her affair with a colleague. It was later established that he also had

an extramarital affair. On the night of the murders, the mother arrived late from work. Her explanation was that she left something in the office and had to turn back to fetch it. The father checked the odometer of the vehicle and realised that his wife only travelled to work and back. During the court proceedings he indicated that his wife's lie made him feel very angry, sad, frustrated and disappointed. It was later established that she worked late, but did not want to tell her husband this because her long working hours has become a contentious issue in their marriage. Later that evening the father woke the mother to ask her to choose between work and him. She indicated that there was no choice to be made. Her nonchalant answer infuriated him. He took the gun from the safe told the mother that she must live with the consequences of her decisions. He first went to the eldest child's bedroom and shot her in the head where after he shot the younger daughter in similar fashion. At this point the mother was screaming at him to stop, however he calmly walked to their son's room and shot him too. He looked at his wife and shouted: "You see, now your children are dead". His wife testified that he calmly looked her in the eye every time he pulled the trigger to shoot one of the children. Directly after the murders he told his wife that she can relax as he was not planning on shooting her. He attempted to commit suicide but was unsuccessful.

(Breytenbach, 2008; Schroeder, 2009; Nkomo, 2011; Van der Westhuizen v S (266/10) (2011) ZASCA 36)

(Case 1) A week before the murders the mother and children moved out of the house they shared with the father. On the day of the murders, the father arrived at the grandmother's house where the mother and children were staying. He was armed with a panga (a panga is like a traditional machete knife but thinner and longer) and a knife. The grandmother feared the father and allowed him to take the children. The four children were found dead in two separate locations. The bodies of three of the children were found with five-inch nails pinned into their skulls and necks, while the youngest child was bludgeoned to death. After the father was arrested, he said he killed the children to keep them safe from their cheating and irresponsible mother.

(Mokgobu, 2021; Molefe, 2021; Molosankwe, 2020)

Cases 1 and 4 are examples of a murdering partner experiencing intense frustration and anger towards the receiving partner. In Case 4 the murdering partner felt that his wife chose work above him. His feelings of anger were also fuelled by the fact that she rejected him and chose another man. In Case 1 the murdering partner thought his wife cheated on him and she moved out of the house with the children, which could have led to feelings of rejection and anger. These cases can be described as examples of outward aggression where the partner is blamed for the relationship problems and extreme fatal aggression is used to punish the partner or to take revenge. In Case 1 the murders are extremely violent, an indication of extreme hostile or expressive reactive-impulsive aggression. In Case 1 the partner justifies his actions by blaming (external locus of control) the mother's infidelity for his violent actions. The fact that the murdering partner in Case 4 makes eye contact when committing these crimes can be seen as an extreme desire to control the situation and witness her pain. The murdering partner clearly wanted his wife to understand that she was to be blamed for the murders and his behaviour. The fact that he told her that he was not planning on shooting her also points to *Schadenfreude*, sadism, a desire for prolonged suffering and extreme control as well as expressive aggression. Also, he refers to their children as *your* children. This links with the dehumanization hypothesis, where the children lose their humanity and are seen as objects. It therefore becomes easier to commit murder when the child is not perceived as one's own. Both these case studies can in addition be linked to loss of social identity due to rejection by the receiving partner and it highlights the negative consequences in a reciprocal social exchange partnership.

### 4.3 | Loss of control

The desire to control was a prominent theme in this study. In several of the cases, accumulative feelings of rejection, anger and an inability to control the situation ultimately led to the revenge filicide. The loss of control needs to be on an extreme level to be considered as a defence in court. The loss needs to be blinding to consider mitigating circumstances. It will be very difficult to prove in court that the actions of the one party caused overwhelming emotions which led to extreme anger and a murder (Parsons, 2015). 'The anger should be of such significance that mens rea (intent) can be claimed. With the anger trigger it must be established that the loss of control was due to things said or done which constituted circumstances of an extremely grave character' (Parsons, 2015, p. 96). When considering the behavioural and psychological explanations of loss of control one might also consider narcissistic rage. The initial stimulus may be an experience of or an injury to the self, real or imagined. When the stimulus is experienced as a profound narcissistic injury or a threat to integrity, resulting in differing degrees of anxiety and/or anger and a fight or flight response. The emotional response may escalate from anger to rage and to violent behaviour depending on the intensity of the injury or threat (Brookbanks, 2009, p. 200). The court will still test mens rea (the intent) to murder a child. In this sense the court will aim to prove that the offending party planned the act and had the intention to murder a child to punish the receiving party. Maintaining control, blaming the receiving partner and a lack an internal locus of control was highlighted in the following cases.

(Case 6) A father hanged his four-year-old daughter and his seven-year-old son due to marital discord. The court record stated that the marriage was characterised by antagonism and hostility. His wife increasingly resisted his attempts to exert power and control over her and just before the murders the father realised his marriage was over. He was not prepared to endure this and murdered his children in an effort to punish his wife. During the court proceedings the psychologist testified that "...the fathers' core issues were power and control over his wife and children, and as her attempts to resist him over time lead to him feeling increasingly threatened. The psychologist further testified that he felt alienated by his wife due to her refusal to behave submissively. When this only escalated the conflict, and disempowered him further, he felt the need to retaliate against her. He did this by killing the children. In his mind he was getting back at her and sending her the implicit message that their deaths were her fault, because she refused to submit to him."

[2011(1)SACR 368 (ECG)]

(Case 11) A mother left her 4-month-old baby in someone else's care before she went to fetch her two sons from school. After picking up the boys from school she drove them to a remote field near their home. She first shot the youngest child and proceeded to shoot the eldest twice. She claimed that she wanted to commit suicide, but that there were no bullets left to take her own life. The mother claimed that on the day of the murders, she felt overwhelmed with her personal circumstances. In court it was established that the parents had an argument on the morning of the murders and that she wanted to hurt the father and prevent him from handing over the children to the woman she thought he had an extra-marital affair with. Evidence from a forensic criminologist during the court proceedings suggested that the mother was strong-willed, selfish, and jealous. The clinical psychologist testified that "the mother's interpersonal style was characterized by being domineering and over-controlling. She had strong needs to control others and expects respect and admiration in return. She may be driven to appear competent and authoritative, and likely has little tolerance for those who disagrees with her plans and desires...her need to be in control in relationships probably taxes the endurance of those close to her." The mother told the police officers on the day of the murders that "if she could not have her children, no one else would."

[CC122/2016]

Case 11 resonates with the Devouring Mother Archetype of Jung. She believes that she is doing her best for everyone, and that her actions are in their best interest therefore she will resort to murder to get her way. Cases 6 and 11 are examples of murdering partners who wanted to maintain control at all cost. The fact that the receiving partners ended the relationships altered their equilibrium and made them feel out of control. Through the murders the murdering partners wanted to exert their control by deciding who lives and who dies. In both cases 6 and 11 the murdering partner blamed the receiving partner (external locus of control) for their pain and loss of control. Locus of control is the aspect of self-esteem that relates to the amount of control an individual perceives they have in their life (Raymond & Hayes, 2014). A connection exists between serious crime and an external locus of control. It was established that violent offenders in general have a more external orientation. An external locus of control is defined as a general belief that you do not control the outcomes associated with your behaviour (Ahlin, 2014). Although the father in case 6 wanted to dictate and control his family relationships, his actions preceding the murders point to the fact that he did not feel in control and blamed his wife for his pain and his aggressive actions. The mother in case 11 is described as controlling and authoritative. It is speculated that the father who hinted that he was leaving her could have been the proverbial last straw that broke the camel's back and she decided to punish him by shooting their children. Her motivations could have been purely instrumental and premeditated in nature because of her controlling nature. It is also possible that the instrumental-expressive dichotomy was at play, as she wanted hurt her husband and made him suffer.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Using court records and newspapers as data, we examined revenge filicides in South Africa. To our knowledge, our study is the first to systematically examine the motivations related to revenge filicides from a South African perspective. This contribution investigated the motivations for revenge filicides, but also highlighted several offence characteristics associated with these crimes.

We therefore postulate that the sense of loss of social identity and the anger experienced by the murdering partner, becomes an overwhelming, blinding rage that is all encompassing. The murdering partner with a propensity to control and blame (external locus of control) becomes enraged by the pain they experience. The blinding anger, which in some instances is described as a narcissistic rage, is caused by extreme emotional distress. The accumulation of the overwhelming negative emotional experiences leads to a desire to cause pain at all cost, sometimes sadistically, to ensure reciprocal justice balance.

Ultimately the murdering partner wants to restore their equilibrium in other words their sense of control and sense of self. The principle of *lex talionis* comes to the fore with devastating consequences for the receiving partner and children due to the reactive-impulsive expressive violent behaviour. Therefore, the 'narcissistic' injury has been counterbalanced by an act of revenge filicide.

## 6 | LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Using newspapers and official documents has limitations. The filicide cases in this study do not necessarily represent an exhaustive list of cases in South Africa as the current study only focussed on the period between 2003 and 2021. Even though we utilised several search engines, consulted court reports and engaged in peer discussions no clear evidence could be gathered in terms of documented revenge filicide cases in South Africa before 2003. Although an attempt was made to capture as much information as possible, the study was limited by what was reported in the newspapers and court documents. Nevertheless, content analysis of newspaper articles gives the reader a glimpse on real life social occurrences and the descriptions in these documents can be analysed as units of behavioural analysis (Moen & Shon, 2021).

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that no conflict of interest exists.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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