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Why Do They Do It?: Exploring the Phenomena of Familicide and Anomie Through a Case Study of the Coleman Family Murders

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Abstract

On May 5th, 2009, in the small town of Columbia, Illinois, only a few minutes outside of the major city of St. Louis Missouri, a heinous crime was committed in the Coleman family home. The triple homicide of Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin Coleman was a vicious attack unseen in a modest suburb such as Columbia Lakes, where no other murders had been reported to police for the past three years. Violent crime was rare not only in the town of Columbia but at large in Monroe County as well (Safarik 2010).

Therefore, when Christopher Coleman called his next-door neighbor, a police sergeant and acquaintance, on the morning of the 5th to perform a wellness check on his wife, Sheri Coleman, aged 31, and their biological children Garrett and Gavin, aged 11 and 9 respectively, no one could have expected that they would be found deceased. Within a few hours, Christopher Coleman was looked at as the prime suspect in his family's deaths and was soon taken into custody. Over the course of the next few months and years leading into Coleman's murder trial, evidence was gathered to explain why a man with a seemingly stable job and home life would kill his entire family so cruelly.

It became clear upon digging deeper that Coleman did not have an ideal relationship with his wife and his work, and, to him, it seemed that familicide would be the most reliable path forward to maintain his status and lifestyle. Familicide is defined as "a multiple-victim homicide incident in which the killer's spouse or ex-spouse and one or more children are slain" (Daly & Wilson 1988). Familicide cases are particularly rare, and while themes and patterns may be visible when studying a multitude of cases, there is not yet enough data to make sweeping generalizations about those who commit familicide. Between the years 2000 and 2009, there was only an average of 23 cases of familicide each year in which an offender killed their spouse and

at least one child, while there was an average of 15,000 homicides each year in the United States during this same time period (Liem et al. 2013; U.S. Department of Justice n.d.). After committing the crime of familicide, about half of offenders committed suicide (Karlsson et al. 2021:88; Liem et al. 2013:354; Mailloux 2014:923; Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995:285; Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes 2014:127).

These cases of familicide being so rare leaves room for study, particularly surrounding the reasoning as to why an offender would commit familicide. This paper connects the phenomena of familicide to the longstanding theory of anomie developed in sociologist Emile Durkheim's discussion of suicide. By analyzing what pushes a person in society to commit suicide, there can also be a better understanding of why any person would exact violence, whether on themselves or others. In particular, when relating familicide to Durkheim's theories, the concept of anomie is essential to understanding why unrest and struggles push a person to violence.

Durkheim claims that anomic suicide occurs during times of "radical and significant change in a person's social and economic environment" (Auchter 2010). Anomic suicide was originally proposed to be related to the occurrence of this unrest at a societal level, in major events that affect swaths of people. However, in modern uses of the definition of anomic suicide, and even in Durkheim's work, literature discusses how anomic suicide can occur due to unrest within smaller communities, such as family units. For the purposes of this paper, looking at anomic suicide at the level of smaller communities is the most relevant to studying interpersonal violence.

Durkheim initially cited divorce and spousal separation as a social change that could lead to anomic suicide in his 1897 book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. This is an issue that affects

communities at a familial level, particularly between relationship partners and children. Bernie Auchter (2010) highlights a financial issue that may cause anomic suicide when he discusses the United States housing market crash of the late 2010s, highlighting the societal disturbances that occurred due to these economic changes. Even though this directly relates to Durkheim's theories of financial instability, Auchter highlights how anomic suicide, in this case, is not necessarily related to loss of money, but rather because "the rules of the games have changed—because what you thought would be true about your life and your family... has been disrupted" (2010).

This quote particularly rings true when looking at the relation between anomic suicide and familicide, highlighting both the external and internal factors that may serve as an explanation for interpersonal violence. This draws the connection that violence is not directly related to what the changes may be, but rather that *any* sort of major change is causing unrest. Durkheim's theory of anomic suicide has neat boxes, with factors relegated to financial and romantic unrest. This theory fits well with what this paper deems the established forms of familicide, which are oftentimes associated with the same factors- hostile, which is most often sparked by a divorce or separation, and pseudo-altruistic, which is most often sparked by great financial losses and shame over these losses.

However, these connections falter when analyzing the Christopher Coleman case. While he was facing issues in his relationship with Sheri Coleman due to infidelity on his part, and this infidelity could have possibly caused him to lose his job and income, he does not strongly align with either the hostile or pseudo-altruistic categories of familicide offenders. Therefore, this paper looks at the true essence of anomie and anomic suicide, and applies the findings made by

Durkheim to extrapolate a new sub-category of familicide offenders inspired by Auchter's idea that anomic suicides are founded upon a larger issue of rules changing.

The culmination of these ideas is the concept of anomic familicide, which encapsulates familicide offenders that do not fall into either the predetermined categories of hostile or pseudo-altruistic offenders. Anomic familicide draws on Durkheim's theories of anomie to better apply them on a familicidal level while also connecting to what the current literature states about familicide. Christopher Coleman serves as a case study for this theory due to the unique factors in his case that ultimately inspired the way anomic familicide is defined by this paper. Coleman exercised a level of premeditation that is very rarely seen in familicide cases, as well as having compounded financial and interpersonal issues that were on the brink of becoming disastrous. As well as this, he did not commit suicide following the crime, and in fact never admitted his guilt.

All of these factors shaped the definition of anomic familicide, which as this paper explains states that: an offender must have a proprietary view of their family, there must be a major change or issue present in an offender's life that needs to be addressed, an offender must exercise some level of premeditation, and the offender must not commit suicide following the crime. Anomic familicide ultimately represents an imposed suicide wherein an offender chooses to eliminate the family unit because it serves the best interest of the offender, eliminating stressors that may have pushed them to anomic suicide.

Methods

This paper takes an in-depth look at the Coleman family case and analyzes Christopher Coleman's reasoning as to why he committed familicide through the lens of Durkheim's theories of anomie and suicide, as well as prior research on the topic of familicide. In short, this project is

a case study of the familicide of the Coleman family. Case studies are essential to the field of sociology due to their ability to analyze a specific topic with increased depth. Case studies are also extremely relevant when looking at rare phenomena, such as cases of familicide, and especially cases as irregular as Christopher Coleman. Looking at a case study can also allow for further growth in the field of the topic, which this paper seeks to do in the creation of the definition of anomic familicide. However, there are also undeniable disadvantages to this model, which hopefully have been partially counteracted by this project's inclusion of deep analysis of previous literature on the subject of familicide. Case studies are often criticized for not being applicable to the general population. Because of this scrutiny on a single case, there is also a possibility that as a researcher, the author may miss larger issues at play. Most of all, it is difficult to draw a definitive cause and effect in these scenarios.

This paper theorizes that male offenders who commit anomic familicide, as it has been termed in this project by the author, occupy a different mindset than those who commit other forms of familicide and that in sparing themselves from death they ultimately impose the societal stresses they experience onto their family. These stresses are frequently attributed to cases of anomic suicide, thus implying that anomic familicide is also anomic suicide imposed on another. In particular, this paper will be looking at Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide and the two axes of regulation and integration as causes for suicide. Knowing that Christopher Coleman never attempted suicide even after being arrested, this project is looking at Durkheim's theories as a condition imposed upon a victim by the offender in lieu of facing societal pressures themselves.

This paper is composed largely of a literature review, focused on three main themes. The first is looking at the work of Emile Durkheim and his book *Suicide: A Study of Sociology*, where he first posited the idea of suicide as a larger societal issue. This book is also where he coins the

term *anomie*, in the context of anomic suicide, and explains the concept and societal implications. The second vein of the literature review describes research focused on uxoricide and filicide, or the killing of one's wife and one's children, respectively. This is because familicide is often compared to these two forms of homicide, and thus can be better understood by looking at these distinct components of it. The latter half of the literature analysis synthesizes existing research surrounding familicide, discussing why familicide in and of itself is a phenomenon, rather than the murder of just a spouse or child. This involves looking into the data collection of other cases of familicide, looking at the overall prevalence of familicide and the portion of familicide offenders who commit suicide. The largest portion of this exploration will be looking at legal documents relating specifically to the Coleman case and providing a full recounting of the case. It is important to fully record the facts in a way that allows the information to be accessible to the reader and better aid in understanding the conclusions that will be drawn in the final section.

Following the literature analysis, this paper engages in analysis by connecting the current literature to the Coleman case in particular. This section of the paper considers Durkheim's theories and the ways they can be shaped to apply to cases like the Coleman case, which does not align with the other pre-determined familicide categories that have been established. This analysis finds that Durkheim's theories of anomie and anomic suicide can be mapped onto the concept of familicide. This project redefines Durkheim's idea of society into smaller communities, looking at how a family unit can be its own type of society and face the same issues he described in his study of suicide.

Literature Review

Durkheim's Theories of Anomie & Suicide

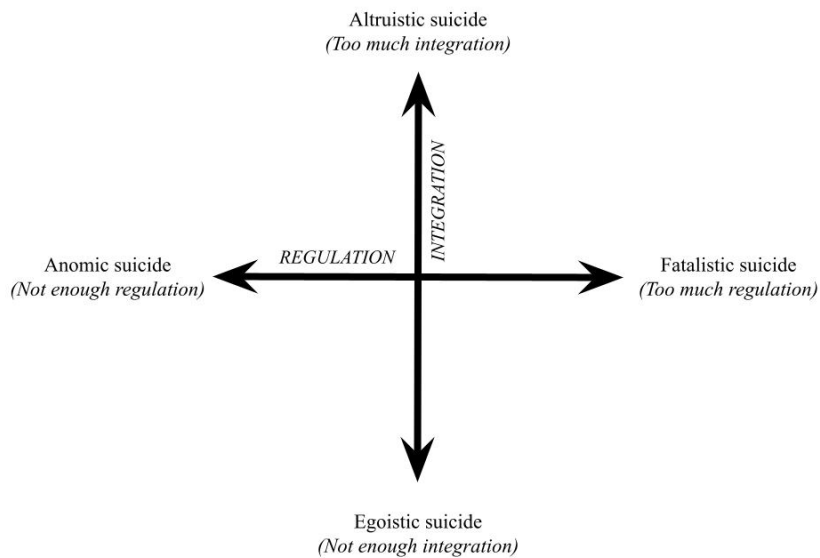
Emile Durkheim published his book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* in 1897. This scholarship was revolutionary for the time, as there were very few works written that targeted a specific sociological subject like this. To this day, his theories on suicide are referenced widely and cited as one of the first analyses of suicide. Part of what made his work so revolutionary was the concept of looking at suicide as a social phenomenon, rather than an individual issue. He took something that was viewed as a personal choice and rather attributed it to outside factors. Durkheim (1897/2002) writes of four distinct types of suicide, which are viewed on two axes of moral regulation and social integration (See Figure 1).

Moral regulation, in sociology, is defined as the code of conduct or norms imposed by society at large on individuals, who follow this code out of obligation to maintain normalcy. This can be as simple a concept as the idea that individuals understand how to wait in lines, knowing it is not socially acceptable to cut to the front and disrespect others. Those who believe it is okay to cut to the front of the line experience less moral regulation, as they view themselves and their needs to be more important than the code of conduct imposed by society. Moral regulation can also be lost at large in scenarios where society experiences a breakdown of norms. For instance, during war or a natural disaster, stealing may be an acceptable behavior due to the circumstances of society. However, if all people disregarded this code of conduct on a daily basis, there would be no order, making moral regulation important for a functioning society.

Social integration, in sociology, is the sense of community and oneness that provides solidarity for individuals. Individuals believe in and contribute to social integration because it benefits them, whether that be through resources or the comfort and safety of the community. Social integration can be seen in all scenarios where groups are formed. For instance, an

individual joining a new job may find that all of their coworkers are already friends and therefore will try to integrate with them to benefit from making their work easier through collaboration as well as gaining friendship. Low social integration can be imposed by an in-group by ostracizing an individual. For instance, if the pre-established group of coworkers decides that the new hire is strange, they may intentionally rebuff advances to integrate. However, low social integration can also be a self-imposed condition, as a person may choose not to be involved in their communities. This can be seen among those who are inherently distrustful of others, possibly due to previous bullying or paranoid beliefs, who alienate themselves from society and maintain solitude.

FIGURE 1. Visual Representation of Durkheim's Axes of Suicide



Durkheim's four types of suicide were based on either an excess or lack of regulation or integration. However, he claims that suicide in any of these scenarios is more indicative of

society at large rather than on an individual level (Tomasi 2000:12). All of these factors revolve around the functioning of society, and suicides indicate a failure of society to maintain order. Egoistic suicide, for instance, comes from a lack of integration, which leads to depression or isolation and then contributes to suicide. It can be described as “an act in which the individual self overwhelms the social self,” which can only happen in a society that is excessively individualistic (Tomasi 2000:15).

Altruistic suicide is defined as suicide due to a relationship too strongly connected to social integration. Durkheim (2002) claims there is little reason for suicide in an altruistic society because the needs of the community as a whole are more important than any individual beliefs. Therefore, altruistic suicide is seen in scenarios where the suicide is for the good of the group, such as in the case of suicide bombers or kamikaze pilots, who cause their own deaths in order to benefit their group at large.

Fatalistic suicide occurs from an excess of regulation where an individual feels as though they have no freedom or choice and are being confined by the rules of society. At the time of writing *Suicide*, Durkheim claimed that he did not think there was any true evidence of fatalistic suicide and that it was mostly theoretical. However, in modern discussion of this theory, there is a belief that Durkheim omitted data that would have been available at the time that gave evidence of fatalistic suicides occurring. In particular, authors have brought up connections to the French Revolution, in which the country was fraught with poverty caused by mistakes of the French government (Marson and Lillis 2019:163). This led to the fatalistic suicides of many poverty-stricken individuals who felt as though they were being regulated so excessively that they would never be able to recover.

Anomic suicide is Durkheim's most well-known theory of suicide, as his concept of anomie has been referenced widely by scholars and was popularized in *Suicide*. Anomie is defined as the breakdown of social norms in more modern terms, but was first described by Durkheim (1893/1960) as being more comparable to a mismatch in personal ethics and what are the beliefs of society at large. Anomic suicide comes from a lack of moral regulation, most often seen in times of social strife where society at large has conflicting views of norms and remains directionless. This maroons individuals, who feel as though they are left without a sense of purpose during times of upheaval. Anomic suicide is often associated with sudden social changes and the inability of individuals to cope with them (Durkheim 1897/2002).

In *Suicide's* chapter on anomic suicide, Durkheim (1897/2002:201) writes "It is a well-known fact that economic crises have an aggravating effect on the suicidal tendency", but this is not inherently related to the scarcity of economic resources. An increase in suicide is seen in times of prosperity as well as periods of great loss, which indicates that wealth is not the issue, but rather "disturbances of the collective order" (206). Therefore, there can be no main aggravators that lead to anomic suicide, but only factors that disrupt the social order. Economic changes disrupt social balance and order, which causes unrest and depression. These changes cause anomic suicide because a person is faced with unattainable goals, and Durkheim (1897/2002:208) states that the human capacity for feeling is an "insatiable and bottomless abyss". Durkheim (1897/2002:209) goes on to say, "To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness". This can be the case for those who may be at the pinnacle of success, as well as those who are scrambling up the socioeconomic ladder to reach a higher class.

Human beings have an inherent resilience to disappointment, which is necessary, otherwise individuals would commit suicide after facing a single adversity. Durkheim (1897/2002) claims that the only way to face these obstacles with the ignorance of peace is for the difficulties to be easy to overcome. We therefore live in a world that is designed to remove insurmountable obstacles by trying to constrict desires, or rather a society in which people are asked to find achievable goals in their life and stick to those. Society encourages people to live within their means and not try to grasp for extreme successes by creating a system in which these outcomes become impossible. Take, for instance, the concept that most people will never reach a higher socioeconomic class than the one they are born into. No individual would ever limit themselves in this way willingly, so society takes on the role of a regulator and enforces the stability of a person's community by making sure all people are staying within their means (209).

During a time of social change, people are placed into a new position that they are unfamiliar with and thus is inherently turbulent. This turbulence provides an individual with new obstacles which may be insurmountable with their current means. People are held to their ways of life by society, but when society falters in its normality, a person may come to realize that they are unanchored without the comforting bounds of societal rules. That is to say, a person may realize that they can have wishes outside of their current status, and this causes suffering when they understand this is unachievable. This causes an increase in suicides in society. In *Suicide*, Durkheim (1897/2002:213) says

Society cannot adjust them instantaneously to this new life and teach them to practice the increased self-repression to which they are unaccustomed. So they are not adjusted to the condition forced on them, and its very prospect is intolerable; hence the suffering which detaches them from a reduced existence even before they have made trial of it.

For instance, a turbulent scenario occurred during the Great Recession in the late 2000s and the subsequent crash of the housing market. During this time, the United States faced the largest collapse of the economy since the Great Depression, and many Americans lost their jobs and homes. A study of the suicide rate between 1928 and 2007 found that the suicide rate was 22.1 people per 100,000 during the Great Depression, the highest it would be at any point in the following 100 years (Luo et al. 2011:1141). This was a period of anomie and anomic suicide as many families struggled with how to manage the sudden losses they faced. This recession affected many middle-class individuals who had lived comfortably for their entire lives and were now facing a completely new scenario. All people scrambled to maintain their status and regain the capital they once possessed, but the effort was in vain. Durkheim (1897/2002:214) explains “Effort grows, just when it becomes less productive. How could the desire to live not be weakened under such conditions?”

In *Suicide*, Durkheim also provides examples that claim that economic unrest is not the only factor in anomie and anomic suicide. Domestic anomie can also occur during a family catastrophe such as spousal death, divorce, or separation (220). A study cited by Durkheim was published in 1882, studying the divorce and suicide rates across the entire continent of Europe, including countries such as Norway, Russia, Italy, Denmark, and Switzerland, to name a few. Looking at data from this survey, “The number of suicides and that of divorces vary in parallel manner because both depend on the same factor: the greater or less frequency of people with unstable equilibrium” (Durkheim 1897/2002:223). Divorce or widowhood causes dramatic changes in a person’s sense of stability, as many daily factors must be adjusted, such as living situation, finances, and childcare. While both divorce and separation may provide similar challenges, Durkheim (1897/2002:224) claims

Thus, divorced persons of both sexes kill themselves between three and four times as often as married persons, although younger and considerably more often than widowed persons in spite of the aggravation resulting for the latter from their advanced age.

Durkheim (1897/2002:224) notes that this may be because while widowhood is a scenario that neither party in a marriage wants, divorce is specifically due to the wants of one member of the marriage. Therefore, it is more of a rejection to be divorced rather than widowed. Suicides following divorce were more frequent among married men, although it is to be noted that in countries where divorce was not allowed during the late 1800s, women were more likely to commit suicide due to their inability to leave negative marriages (231). Durkheim (1897/2002:234) makes the claim that marriage is a “matrimonial regulation” in the way that it comes with its own set of laws and regulations. A marriage is a joint effort to maintain a life as a family, and divorce causes changes that disrupt the order created in a relationship.

In a following chapter of Suicide discussing individual forms of the differing types of suicide, Durkheim (1897/2002) emphasizes three classes which this paper has classified as indifferent, imperative, and disappointed, citing adjectives that Durkheim uses himself to describe the characteristics. These three classes are composed of the four types of suicide Durkheim also termed. The indifferent class becomes withdrawn and is only preoccupied with themselves, detaching from society (243). Those who commit indifferent suicide often choose slower, planned methods such as asphyxiation or starvation (244). The imperative class involves those who kill themselves “at the command of [their] conscience” and thus carries an air of enthusiasm, whether that be “happy or somber” (Durkheim 1897/2002:246). This is an “active” suicide as opposed to the indifferent class, which may involve a method such as using a firearm

or hanging, but is largely categorized by a dedicated effort to make sure the suicide method is successful (Durkheim 1897/2002:247).

The disappointed suicide type differs from both types because it holds a passion that the indifferent type does not have, but holds an anger that the imperative does not. These suicides are often born of irritation and are found frequently in the cases of those who have committed a homicide prior to the suicide (Durkheim 1897/2002:248). Durkheim (1897/2002:248) states that this form “appears to be involved in the nature of anomic suicide.” As previously discussed, anomie sets an individual up with unrealistic expectations and causes disillusionment that leads to disappointment. In this chapter, Durkheim (1897/2002:248) emphasizes

A man abruptly cast down below his accustomed status cannot avoid exasperation at feeling a situation escape him of which he thought himself master, and his exasperation naturally revolts against the cause, whether real or imaginary, to which he attributes his ruin. If he recognizes himself as to blame for the catastrophe, he takes it out on himself; otherwise, on someone else. In the former case there will be only suicide; in the latter, suicide may be preceded by homicide or by some other violent outburst. In both cases the feeling is the same; only its application varies. The individual always attacks himself in an access of anger, whether or not he has previously attacked another.

Therefore, it is unnecessary what method this disappointed suicide takes (e.g. asphyxiation, hanging, etc.), as it is rather more about the experiences of the emotion prior to the act that defines it. With this knowledge of Durkheim’s typologies, it can now be connected to interpersonal violence outside of the realm of suicide.

Murder-suicide, Uxoricide, and Filicide Cases

As established by Durkheim when looking at anomic suicides of the disappointed class, there is the possibility that an irritated individual may take out this anger on another person that they view as the cause of their disillusionment. This violent outburst is only described as that, but

does not specify who the victim of this attack may be. However, in combination with Durkheim's theories of divorce inspiring anomic suicide, it is necessary to look at information relating to the killing of strangers (i.e. homicide), spouses (and for purposes here, wives specifically, i.e., uxoricide) and children (i.e., filicide).

Authors have studied the connection of Durkheim's suicide theories to other forms of violence, such as author J. Michael Bozeman (2014:174) stating "While Durkheim's suicide typologies were originally applied to self-destruction (suicide) and not to the destruction of others (murder), it is interesting to note that... research appears to reveal some merit in the application of typologies to both manifestations of violence." Other works have compared Durkheim's work to countries outside of the United States, with a study by William A. Pridemore and Sang-Weon Kim (2007) looking at socioeconomic change in Russia following the end of the Cold War. Rapid changes following the collapse of the Soviet Union showed a positive correlation to the rate of homicide in the general population, and society at large was left unanchored as the country collapsed (Pridemore and Kim 2007:240).

Homicide-suicide and Uxoricide Cases

Marieke Liem (2009:153), a foremost researcher on familicide (i.e. the killing of one's spouse and one or more of their children), studied what she calls "homicide-suicide", because, according to her, "Although homicide-suicide is often referred to as murder-suicide, 'murder' denotes the legal aspect of intentional homicide, whereas 'homicide' includes both murder and manslaughter and is therefore the preferred, more encompassing, term." However, for the most part, a majority of cases are still technically murder-suicide as manslaughter in these scenarios is far less common. Liem (2009:154) states that studies of suicide often neglect to mention

homicide, and vice versa. Therefore, it is essential to gain a better understanding of homicide-suicide before beginning to study more complicated topics such as filicide, uxoricide, or familicide. Homicide-suicide serves as the basis for many of these crimes, and when studying a crime like familicide that is so strongly linked to interpersonal violence, it becomes relevant to look at the most basic and common forms of interpersonal violence in society. These crimes build on each other in severity, with the parts of each playing a role in how familicide has developed as its own classification.

Homicide-suicide incidences are relatively rare, but over half of these incidences are of men killing an intimate partner with a firearm before killing themselves (Liem 2009:155). Homicide-suicide prevalence is difficult to quantify, because as was previously established, the inclusion of manslaughter in the homicide classification is not generalized across all studies. Looking at countries with similar demographics as the United States, a study of the prevalence of homicide-suicide in Australia between 1989-1996 (n=144) claimed the rate per 100,000 to be 0.22, while a study of England and Wales between 1996-2005 (n=203) claimed the rate per 100,000 to be 0.05 (Liem 2009:156).

The United States, however, has varying statistics due to its size and the cultural differences between each state. Countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom are viewed as one large entity, while studies of homicide-suicide in the United States can be divided down to a state, or even a city, level. While the overall prevalence of homicide-suicide in the United States between 2001-2002 (n=408) was at a rate of 0.19 per 100,000 people, the quantity alone in these two years far surpasses the number of cases reported over a several-year span in Australia and the United Kingdom (Liem 2009:156). Studies looking at certain states found the rate to vary

between 0.27 per 100,000 in Kentucky, 0.38 in Virginia, 0.5-0.7 in Florida, 0.26 in New Hampshire, and 0.30 in Oklahoma (Liem 2009:155-156). Therefore, while the rate in the overall United States may be lower than in Australia in close time periods, the rate varies drastically based on what state is being studied.

It has been theorized that countries with a higher homicide-suicide rate also have a higher overall homicide rate, possibly due to the availability of weapons. This may contribute to the high rate of homicide-suicide in the United States, especially when taking into account the usage of and the broad availability of firearms (Liem 2009:156).

Three rough theories have been created in order to explain homicide-suicide. These theories can be distinguished into those that describe the origin of aggressive behavior, the direction of aggression, and the outcome of aggression (Liem 2009:154). The origin of the aggression vein contains what is called “strain theories”, which most clearly mirror Durkheim’s idea of anomie. This anomie is created when “certain groups are restricted in attaining a cultural value (e.g. wealth) through institutionalized means (e.g., work)” (Liem 2009:154). Liem cites the work of Merton, who states there are five adaptations for strain. However, the two coping strategies for anomie most relevant to this paper are retreatism and rebellion, which produce opposite outcomes, and both involve violence. Retreatism involves isolation and therefore suicide, while rebellion involves lashing out, which at its extremes can end with homicide (Liem 2009:154). Scholars have also theorized that rather than societal strain, there may be a personal strain that is characterized by “preventing an individual from achieving positively valued goals, removing or threatening to remove positively valued stimuli, and presenting or threatening to present an individual with noxious or negatively valued stimuli” (Liem 2009:154). This may

include scenarios such as job loss, financial struggles, or loss of an intimate partner (Liem 2009:154). This personal strain leads to feelings of inadequacy that inspire anger, and thus, homicide.

When looking at the direction of aggression, the stream analogy for lethal violence claims that lethal violence has “two distinct currents flowing through time, the homicide current and the suicide current” and the combined currents amount to the “overall amount of lethal violence” (Liem 2009:154). Liem (2009:154) explains

In this model, suicide and homicide are alternate forms of death, constituting a function of two sets of causal mechanisms: forces of production and forces of direction. Forces of production are social and cultural factors that influence the total amount of lethal violence. Forces of direction are cultural and structural factors that prompt perpetrators to direct their violent drives inward to suicide or outward to homicide.

Those who are more likely to express blame outwardly will result in homicide, while those who internalize blame are at increased risk of suicide. However, homicide-suicide rides the line between both of these scenarios. Therefore, the conclusion is that the perpetrator becomes frustrated because they cannot “live *with* nor *without* the victim” (Liem 2009:155). The act of homicide allows the perpetrator to overcome helplessness, but the guilt of the homicide drives them to suicide. Liem (2009:155) also states that “Perpetrators of intimate partner homicides who committed a serious suicide attempt have a high prevalence of unemployment, depressive disorder, previous suicide threats and suicide plans, in line with suicide victims.” This may lead to the idea that homicide-suicide behavior is more aligned with suicide than homicide (Liem 2009:155).

However, these outcomes of aggression do not appear from nowhere. Homicide is a phenomenon that has existed from the dawn of time and has been theorized about for just as

long. In that same way, suicide also has sparked theorization. Therefore, theories about the concept of homicide-suicide have been developed. The psychodynamic theory works upon the ideas of Freud to claim that suicide is just an internalized form of the impulse to commit homicide, and once the homicide is committed, the perpetrator is still left with guilt and shame that causes suicide (Liem 2009:155). The psycho-evolutionary theory is based on the concepts of Darwin, stating that violence is, especially when used against an intimate partner, an “instrument to exercise control” (Liem 2009:155). Homicide is seen as an “evolutionary development”, but the concept of homicide-suicide does not fall neatly into this theory because suicide serves no purpose at an evolutionary level. (Liem 2009:155). Social integration theory follows the same theories previously established by Durkheim on the subject, adding that homicide suicide becomes more likely as an individual becomes increasingly isolated from society (Liem 2009:155).

When looking at the victims of homicide-suicide, Liem (2009:154) claims “Homicide-suicide constitutes a very serious form of interpersonal violence that occurs mainly in partnerships and families. Therefore, it makes sense that four common types of homicide-suicide were identified. These include homicide-suicide of “spouses, children, family units, and extrafamilial units” (Liem 2009:157). This system has been used most frequently when looking at homicide-suicide cases in recent years. For the purpose of this literature review, extrafamilial homicide-suicides will not be studied as they do not pertain to the subject at hand.

The homicide-suicide of an intimate partner or spouse is, as previously mentioned, the most prevalent form of homicide-suicide. It is also committed largely by men, as women who murder an intimate partner almost never commit suicide, as the crime is usually due to some

form of abuse and they do not feel the need to reconnect with their partner in death (Liem 2009:157). It has been found that intimate partner homicides are more premeditated than homicide-suicides of an intimate partner, as oftentimes a homicide is caused by a build-up of resentment over time, while a homicide-suicide may be a more sudden snap that leads to the guilt of the suicide (Liem 2009:157). Liem (2009:157) also highlights that “Intimate partner homicide-suicide perpetrators are often found to suffer from mental illness, with depression being the most commonly cited disorder.” As well as this, men who commit intimate partner homicide-suicides are “reported to be over-controlling and dependent” (Liem 2009:157).

Filicide Cases

Unfortunately, the domestic violence that leads to intimate partner homicides is treated as an ordinary circumstance in today’s society. This manner of death is not rare or particularly shocking. However, the same cannot be said for child homicide-suicide. Studies have shown that “The United States has the highest rate of child murder among developed nations” according to Philip J. Resnick (2018:83) and that child homicide is most often committed by a parent. The homicide of an individual’s child, whether biological, adopted, or otherwise is known as filicide. Ninety percent of those who commit filicide are biological parents (Resnick 2018:83). 2.5% of homicide arrests each year are filicide cases, which is equivalent to about 500 arrests each year (Resnick 2018:83).

Additionally, Resnick (2018:83) claims that the rate of child homicide decreases as a child grows older. However, men are more likely to kill older children, to be unemployed, and to be facing separation from their spouses (Resnick 2018:83-84). Further, “Fathers are more likely to kill when there is doubt about paternity and when the child is viewed as an impediment to

their career” (Resnick 2018:84). Overall, though, society views a man who kills his children as less shocking or evil than a mother who kills her children, as there is a societal expectation for mothers to have unconditional love for their children (Resnick 2018:83). Because of this, women who commit filicide are also given more lenient sentences, as it is believed that the circumstances must be extraordinary in order for a mother to harm their children (Resnick 2018:89). Resnick (2018:89) states that “Fathers are also more likely to be sentenced to execution than are mothers.”

When looking at methods of filicide, studies of many cases have found that the form of violence depends on the age of the victim and the gender of the parent (Resnick 2018:84). For infants and young children, they are most often killed with hands and feet, while older children are often killed with knives and firearms (Resnick 2018:84). Fathers are more likely to use violent methods such as “striking, squeezing, and stabbing” while mothers use more impersonal methods such as drowning or suffocation (Resnick 2018:84).

There are many motivations for filicide, but Resnick largely looks at them from the point of view of why a mother would commit them. Melissa Tetzlaff-Bemiller (2013:13-14) more concisely looks at all factors in this passage:

Pathological child murder is when the offender has an altered state of mind, a homicide-suicide, or when a parent or caregiver was suffering from a mental illness, depression, or acute psychosis. Unwanted child murder is when the mother denies or conceals the pregnancy prior to the murder, or neonaticide. Accidental child murder includes various forms of abuse and neglect such as shaken baby syndrome or battered child syndrome. Revenge or retaliation child murder involves revenge or retaliation against the spouse or girl/boyfriend and usually involves the father as the offender. Altruistic child murder occurs when the child has a disability, or the offender feels nobody will be available to love and care for the child. Non-accidental child murder would include sudden infant death syndrome or Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy. A final classification motive is religion which would include denial of medical intervention.

However, these explanations are only those that come from explicit data and do not take into account theoretical explanations. Mary McCluskey (2019) looks at how male filicide is characterized by media coverage, but still gives an idea of the reasoning behind why a father may commit this crime according to their narratives. In particular, McCluskey (2019:59) states that hegemonic masculinity and the idea of the “born criminal” are the largest perspectives seen when the media covers cases of male filicide.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to “the form of masculinity in a setting that structures hierarchal gender relations between males and females, between masculinity and femininity, and among men” and is the concept that prioritizes male supremacy in society (McCluskey 2019:59). Hegemonic masculinity was viewed in the cases analyzed by McCluskey (2019:60) through placing blame on women, proclaiming innocence, and asserting the independence of men and the father-figure. The concept of the “born criminal” is that men are “constructed as violent and aggressive for decades”, oftentimes displayed through physiological concepts such as testosterone levels, as first introduced by criminologist Cesare Lombroso (McCluskey 2019:66). Men are viewed as predispositioned to being violent and aggressive, and therefore when they lash out it may be more acceptable or, at the least, less shocking than if a woman were to do the same.

When looking back at Liem’s (2009) study of homicide-suicide, filicide followed by suicide is part of an “extended suicide.” According to Liem (2009:158), “The main intention of parents killing themselves and their children is reported to be their own self-destruction, with the children being killed as part of an ‘extended suicide’.” However, in cases of filicide, suicide is not always a logical next step for the perpetrator depending on whether or not the act was

malintent (e.g. a parent shaking a baby out of frustration versus killing a child out of revenge against an estranged spouse).

Familicide and Family Annihilation

Familicide and family annihilation are a culmination of all of these factors, combining the homicide of a spouse as well as children. Familicide has undergone many changes in definition over time, but most recently has been accepted as “a multiple-victim homicide incident in which the killer's spouse or ex-spouse and one or more children are slain” (Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995:275). Family annihilation, on the other hand, is a term that has often been used interchangeably with familicide but has formed its own definition over time. In a paper studying familicide, Liem and Koenraadt (2008:307) state “In some publications, those who kill their spouse and child(ren) are also referred to as ‘family annihilators’, as they typically end the lives of all family members.” However, to fully “annihilate” a family would require removing all family members, thus implying the suicide of the perpetrator following the act of familicide. Therefore, family annihilation may better be defined as an act of familicide followed by suicide (Martinez 2018:144) with familicide being defined as the homicide of a spouse and child(ren).

Because the definition of familicide is not a concrete description used by all people involved within the criminal justice system, it can be difficult to determine the prevalence of this phenomenon. At the very least, it is understood that familicide and family annihilation are rare scenarios. Worldwide, familicide appears at an incidence of 1 to 2 familicides per every 10 million people (Karlsson et al. 2021:90). Liem et al. (2013:354) found 207 total familicide cases in the United States between June 2000 and June 2009, which amounts to approximately 23 cases per year. Liem et al. (2013:354) also noted that there were 583 victims reported among

these cases. Richard Martinez (2018:146) states that familicides and other mass killings, which includes other serial killings and spree killings such as mass shootings, account for less than 0.1% of the 20,000 annual homicides in the United States. Looking at similar countries, Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995:279) found that in Canada, there were 61 incidences of familicide between 1974 and 1990, and in the United Kingdom, there were 48 instances of familicide between 1977 and 1990. Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes (2014:124) found that there were 59 cases of familicide in the United Kingdom between 1980 and 2012. Overall, it is clear that familicide cases are not frequent, even in countries like the United States with high rates of violent crime.

However, even though these cases are uncommon, the concept of a stereotypical offender still appears throughout the research. Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995:279) call familicide a “male monopoly”, as depending on the data surveyed, men make up anywhere between 93% and 96% of familicide offenders (Mailloux 2014:921; Karlsson et al. 2021:88; Liem and Koenraadt 2008:307). This is in contrast to instances of filicide or homicide of a spouse, in which Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995:279-280) found that men only represent “76% of nonfamilicidal spouse killings in Canada and 81% in England and Wales; and only 52% of nonfamilicidal filicides in Canada and 48% in England and Wales.”

Familicide offenders have been found to range between 18 years old and 90 years old (Liem et al. 2013 354:355; Oathout 2020:19), but a large majority are in their 30s or 40s (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:307; Karlsson et al. 2021:87; Liem et al. 2013:356; Mailloux 2014:921-922; Oathout 2020:19). It has also been reported in some studies that familicidal men are oftentimes older than their spouse (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:307; Karlsson et al. 2021:90). Oathout (2020:19) reports on racial makeup in familicide cases in the United States between 2009 and

2019, which states that “27 offenders were white (69%), 5 were Hispanic (13%), 4 were black (10%), 2 were Asian, and 1 was American Indian.” However, most studies do not comment on racial makeup, as there is not enough available data to draw conclusive evidence on whether or not race may be a significant factor.

The characteristics of victims are looked at far less commonly in these cases. This is because, most often, their demographics are irrelevant to the crime, as the nature of familicide reflects more on the offender than the victims. Even still, though, some studies do take note of victimhood makeup. When looking at victimhood, the data becomes skewed between whether cases are looking at the specific definition of familicide popularized by Wilson, Daly, and Daniele that claims familicide as killing a spouse and children, or rather the broader definition that had been used prior, which claimed familicide as killing more than one relative of either the perpetrator or spouse. Therefore, data on the victims should be extrapolated with more caution than data related to perpetrators.

Most of the cases studied contained “one adult victim and between one and five child victims” (Karlsson et al. 2021:87), with most cases containing between three and four total victims (Oathout 2020:20). A large majority of the adult victims were women, making up between 87% to 100% of adult victims in cases (Karlsson et al. 2021:87-88; Liem et al. 2013:355). When looking at all definitions of familicide, most adult victims were also married to the perpetrator at one point in time, not taking into specific account whether they were divorced or separated at the time of the incident (Karlsson et al. 2021:87-88). Women were found to be “between the ages of 25 to 44 years old,” which does skew younger than the age demographics for male perpetrators (Mailloux 2014:922; Karlsson et al. 2021:88). This may be attributed to the

fact that women are oftentimes younger when having dependent children that would be killed in a familicide event, thus highlighting a younger demographic.

For child victims, it has been repeatedly highlight that there is no gendered disparity and that any lean towards more male or more female child victims is incidental (Karlsson et al. 2021:93; Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995:280). In most cases, male children accounted for 48-59% of familicide child victims, with female children accounting for roughly 41-52% of familicide child victims (Karlsson et al. 2021:88; Liem et al. 2013:355; Oathout 2020:20). Children over the age of 17 were the least common victims, most likely due to their proximity to the offender since they were less likely to be dependent on the perpetrators (Mailloux 2014:922). Children of all ages become victims, with some studies reporting that the mean age for child victims is between 7 to 12 years old (Karlsson et al. 2021:88), while others state that children between 3 to 5 years old are the most common victims, followed by children aged 0 to 2 years old (Mailloux 2014:922).

The most noteworthy data gathered about child victims is the prevalence of stepchildren being victims of familicide. While the number of stepchildren that become victims of familicide is not staggering, it is relevant when looking at the proportion versus biological children and versus the number of stepchildren in the average population. Multiple studies indicate an overrepresentation of stepchildren in familicide cases, with some figures indicating “up to 29% of the child victims were stepchildren” (Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995:281-282; Karlsson et al. 2021:93) and some stating that “1 out of 5 cases included step-children” (Liem et al. 2013:356). This overrepresentation has been attributed to jealousy of a spouse’s previous partners and

relationships or a possible lack of investment into non-biological children by perpetrators (Karlsson et al. 2021:93).

The methods used by those who perpetrated familicide are largely the same. Familicides are most often committed with a firearm. Firearms are also used in homicide-suicide cases 88% of the time (n=408) according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's National Violent Death Reporting System, and similar research has also claimed this rate to be as high as 92% in murder-suicide cases (n=591) (Auchter 2010:10-11). The United States also sees a higher rate of intimate partner homicide than other similar countries (Auchter 2010:11). Ultimately, this number is extremely high, which has been attributed to the United States' relaxed regulations on firearms in comparison to similar countries. Therefore, it is unsurprising that familicides are committed in comparable manners to other inter-personal violence.

In regard to familicides, multiple studies of numerous cases have found firearms to be the most common method of homicide (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:308; Karlsson et al. 2021:87; Liem et al. 2013:355; Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995:285). Liem and Koenraadt (2008:308) found that in studies of Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, firearms that belonged to the perpetrator and were present in the home for some time were used in a "large proportion" of the familicide cases they studied. Karlsson et al. (2021:87) found that firearms were "the method of homicide in just over half of the cases", with other methods used being stabbing, strangulation, suffocation, setting fire, poisoning, and blunt force trauma. Liem et al. (2013:355-356) found that "most familicide victims were killed with firearms, followed by pointed weapons and strangulation," with their data stating that 73% (n=361) of cases were shootings, and 12% (n=60) of cases were killings with sharp instruments.

Even in studies that looked specifically at Canada and the United Kingdom such as Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995:285), they found that “shootings constituted a substantially and significantly larger proportion of familicides than of other filicides,” with Canada showing that 49% of familicides were committed with firearms while only 27.3% of filicides were committed with firearms, and in the United Kingdom 28.3% of familicides were committed with firearms while only 2.1% of filicides were committed with firearms. However, in the United Kingdom, the rate of 28.3% is lower than in other English-speaking countries, which may account for how Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes (2014:126) found, in their study of England alone, that shooting was the sixth most used method of homicide in familicide cases. Rather, they found that stabbing was the most common method, being used in just under a third of familicide cases (n=19) at 32.2% (Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes 2014:126). However, their sample size is relatively small, so this may account for the difference seen here versus in North America. Bernie Auchter (2010:11) highlights the point that guns are used so frequently in cases similar to this because firearms are “more efficient than other weapons, can be used impulsively, and can be used to terrorize and threaten” which aligns well with what is known about familicides.

Liem and Koenraad (2008:308) also highlighted that firearms are used most commonly in the aftermath of a familicide if a perpetrator chooses to commit suicide. Studies show that about half of familicide perpetrators commit or attempt suicide following the killings, although the exact rate can change based on the sample of cases (Karlsson et al. 2021:88; Liem et al. 2013:354; Mailloux 2014:923; Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995:285; Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes 2014:127). Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995:285) and Mailloux (2014:923) report that half of the male perpetrators of familicide commit suicide immediately following the act. Karlsson et al. (2021:88) also states that most studies report around a 50% suicide rate, although they do also

mention that in their review of eleven studies, they found that rate varied between 14% and 100%. Liem et al. (2013:354) meanwhile states that 64% of perpetrators commit suicide following the act of familicide, while Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes (2014:127) claim this number to be 81% (n=48) in their study. Ultimately, it seems reasonable to follow the longest-standing and most frequently cited data of Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995) that claims the rate to be about 50%.

Above all else, the most commonly cited question is why a perpetrator of familicide would do such a thing. While many criminologists and psychologists have studied familicide cases and attempted to categorize the reasonings they find through the scattered remains of the histories of these families, ultimately they all seem to draw the same conclusions. There are multitudes of titles given, whether you choose to believe in the “murder by proxy” and “suicide by proxy” types (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:308), the “despondent” and “hostile” offender types (Karlsson et al. 2021:93-94), or the “hostile accusatory familicidal killer” and the “despondent nonhostile killer” types (Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995; Martinez 2018:149-150), these all ultimately refer to the same conglomeration of behaviors and actions. At the end of the day, the name we give them does not make the crime any more understandable, as understanding can only be reached through an intense study of the background of familicides. Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes (2014:118) explain this best when they quote and expand upon the works of Fox and Levin, stating “this type of murder ‘serve(s) as a necessary, even if distasteful, means towards some desired outcome’ and that some will kill from ‘a warped sense of love and loyalty.’”

Overall, these cases come down to a series of basic factors that then unfold into further issues, which Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes (2014:117-118) describe as

A long history of frustration and failure, through childhood and into adult life. He has tremendous difficulty both at home and at work in achieving happiness and success. Over time, repeated frustration can erode a person's ability to cope, so much so that even modest disappointments seem catastrophic.

This series of frustrations can lead to what Auchter calls overenmeshment, which seems to be at the core of all types of familicide. Auchter (2010:11-12) describes overenmeshment as a condition in which perpetrators view “their family members as possessions that they control or [they] don’t see any boundaries between their identity, their wife and their children.” This overenmeshment leads to all types of familicide because, at its core, familicide involves a person feeling an entitlement to the lives of their family. This person feels as though they are so interconnected that they are allowed to make these decisions on behalf of the family, up to the most extreme point of determining when they will live and die. When analyzing the two major factors that influence familicide, it is important to remember the overenmeshment, and thus the control, that a perpetrator is flexing on their family in order to lead to this scenario. Liem et al. (2013:352) highlights this when they stated, “Both types of familicide perpetrators appear to be characterized by a need to stay in control over the family situation when the family is threatened to disintegrate by relationship or financial problems.”

The Coleman family themselves were extremely close, with their routines revolving around each other’s. Sheri organized her work schedule around driving her children to school each day even when they could’ve taken the bus, Christopher was involved with his son’s sports teams, and the family ate dinner together each night (Safarik 2010:8). It is not unlikely that Coleman was unfamiliar with making decisions on behalf of his family, as he was the primary breadwinner of the family with a stable, full-time job. His wife and children became part of his identity as a father and husband, and when you are so largely defined by these roles, they

inevitably become part of you. It therefore seems likely that when faced with the option of familicide, Coleman felt as though he had the authority to make this decision for his family.

Hostile Familicide

The most commonly accepted form of familicide mirrors the interpersonal violence already seen in uxoricide, or the killing of one's wife. Multiple studies have shown the evident comparison between familicide and uxoricide, as oftentimes the perpetrator's ire lies with their spouse more so than their children (Martinez 2018:149; Liem and Koenraadt 2008:307; Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995:278). This form of familicide is called by many titles, whether that be murder by proxy (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:308), the hostile offender (Karlsson et al. 2021:93-94), the livid coercive killer (Martinez 2018:152), or the "hostile accusatory familicidal killer" (Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995; Martinez 2018:149-150), but is most ultimately related to violence against a spouse with children serving as incidental victims in the violence. It can be most commonly described through the use of the phrase "If I can't have them, no one can", as it is often spawned from rage and jealousy by the perpetrator at the threat of separation or divorce from their spouse (Mailloux 2014:924).

It is first important to highlight the rates of domestic violence in murder-suicide scenarios. Because this form of familicide is so heavily reliant on uxoricide, it is relevant to highlight the rates of interpersonal violence in these relationships that may then spawn familicide. Auchter (2010:10) highlights a study that found that 70% of cases of murder-suicide between romantic partners had some form of domestic violence present before the crime, but only 25% had note of this violence in arrest records. Prior domestic violence is always the greatest risk factor in these murder-suicide cases, with other social and demographic factors

relating to “poverty, unemployment and family stressors, which include disagreements over money, sex and children” (Auchter 2010:11).

There is minimal research available on the rates of domestic violence within familicide scenarios due to the high rate of suicide following the act and the previously established low rate of reporting domestic violence to the police. However, what numbers have been studied find a wide range of domestic violence in familicide scenarios, with numbers ranging from 39-92% of perpetrators having a history of domestic violence (Karlsson et al. 2021:90). There has been other research that states that “79 % of women killed in familicide had been abused by their killer” while other research states that “64 % of female victims experienced increased severity of abuse prior to the fatal attack” (Mailloux 2014:923).

This hostile form of familicide is characterized by the violence of control exercised on a family by an offender, which at some point goes too far and causes these deaths. Martinez (2018:152) makes the claim “When the wife tries to leave with the children, in an attempt to reassert control and to counter feelings of humiliation, the husband perpetrates extreme violence.” The perpetrator “commits the final act of control by killing the entire family” due to the fact that “the need for control is a common characteristic among the majority of familicide perpetrators” (Mailloux 2014:924). Multiple studies of hostile offenders have found this need for control, claiming that the perpetrators have a “proprietary view of the family” (Karlsson et al. 2021:94; Martinez 2018:149) and that the familicide is spurred on by a loss of control over not only their spouse, but also family life (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:307).

When delving deeper into themes moreso than just loss of control over the family, it is often cited that male familicide perpetrators are spurred on by grievances related to a perceived

end to his romantic relationship with his partner. Liem and Koenraadt (2008:315) claim that these men are “unable to manage the anger, jealousy and rage against their spouse over their separation.” This separation may be through a scenario such as a “break” to take time apart, a divorce, or infidelity on the part of his wife. Again and again, studies cite relationship struggles in these cases of hostile familicide, with Mailloux (2014:922-923) stating “Perhaps the greatest risk/predictive factor... is when the partner, in most cases the woman, attempts to leave or has left the relationship. This attempt to end the relationship may create suspicions of infidelity and feelings of sexual jealousy.” Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995:287) state “The killer professes a grievance against his wife, usually with respect to alleged infidelities and/or her intending or acting to terminate the marriage.”

To look at more specific statistics, Karlsson et al. (2021:88) found in their literature review of multiple studies relating to familicide that “recent or current separation and relationship problems were prevalent characteristics in the samples.” Recent or current separation was reported in 75-85% of the cases, while relationship problems were reported in 74-83% of the cases. In a study by Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes (2014:129), they found that “Family break-up was the most commonly-reported primary motivation” for familicide, with 39 cases, or 66.1% of the total cases they studied, showing this main motivation.

However, all of these reasons are directed primarily at the spouse, as she is the one perceived to be leaving the relationship. This provides credence to the idea that hostile familicide is intertwined largely with uxoricide rather than filicide, as the children are not perceived as leaving voluntarily but rather as being “taken” by the spouse who is leaving. Therefore, the violence towards the children is viewed as secondary, with the spouse being the primary target (Martinez 2018:149; Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995:286).

To explain then why children are targeted at all, it has been hypothesized that children are viewed as an extension of their mothers (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:307). The children must be a target in some way in order to become victims to familicide, and so therefore they must also be a target of the rage or jealousy of the perpetrator. As Mailloux (2014:924) explains it, “The perpetrator is unable to separate the children from the partner, and rationalizes that if the partner is attempting to end the relationship, the children must also be attempting to do so.” To view it from a psycho-evolutionary perspective as Liem and Koenraadt (2008:307) do, it can also be rethought as the idea that “a woman’s threat of withdrawal or estrangement constitutes a loss of control over her reproductive capacity. In this case, children may be perceived as ‘her’ children and, accordingly, equally responsible for her betrayal.” This also relies on a belief that the fathers view the family as a complete unit, and therefore cannot differentiate between children and spouse when on a familicidal spree (Mailloux 2014:924).

Christopher Coleman and his wife were undergoing marital issues at the time of the familicide, in particular relating to the possibility of the two of them divorcing. In December of 2008, Sheri told her friend via text message that Christopher had told her he wanted a divorce (People v. Coleman 2014:12). Sheri also mentioned to a friend that she believed Christopher was having an affair with one of her friends, Tara Lintz (Safarik 2010:8). Multiple friends of Sheri claimed that Christopher said Sheri was “ruining his life”, but he feared getting a divorce because it would affect his job at Joyce Meyer Ministries, a Catholic ministry (People v. Coleman 2014). Even though Christopher was the one who was seemingly inciting the end of the relationship, he seemed unable to let go of Sheri. This highlights the idea that he was unable to live with or live without her, as well as the fact he may have lost access to his children in a divorce.

Pseudo-altruistic Familicide

The secondary form of familicide, henceforward referred to as pseudo-altruistic familicide, is opposite from hostile familicide in most ways. Pseudo-altruistic familicide is also referred to by many terms, whether that be suicide by proxy (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:308), the despondent offender type (Karlsson et al. 2021:93-94), the altruistic offender (Martinez 2018:149), the civil reputable killer (Martinez 2018:152), or the despondent nonhostile killer (Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995; Martinez 2018:149-150). However, Karlsson et al.'s (2021:93-94) description of the behavior of this familicide offender as “pseudo-altruistic” is perhaps the best name for this type, as it is frequently treated as though it is violent simply because the perpetrator may have had good intentions.

The pseudo-altruistic offender is seemingly more likely to commit suicide afterwards due to the nature of the crime, because most often it is viewed as an extended suicide (Liem et al. 2013:352; Karlsson et al. 2021:93-94). The pseudo-altruistic offender is known for his explanations as to why he commits familicide, because in his eyes, he is doing it for the sake of his family. Most often, he thinks murdering his family will relieve them from suffering, shame, pain, humiliation, hardship, rejection, or stress that is soon to be imposed upon them (Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes 2014:135; Martinez 2018:152; Liem and Koenraadt 2008:308; Mailloux 2014:923-924). The pseudo-altruistic offender holds the same “proprietary” view of his family as the hostile offender, but rather it is because he is the “provider, controller, and central figure” in the family’s life (Liem et al. 2013:352). Again and again, it is mentioned how the pseudo-altruistic perpetrator feels as though he is “protecting” his family by ending their lives (Mailloux 923-924; Liem et al. 2013:352; Liem and Koenraadt 2008:308).

Pseudo-altruistic familicide perpetrators are oftentimes rescuing their family from hardships brought on by their own behavior, most often in relation to financial issues. Karlsson et al. (2021:87) found that “financial- or employment-related problems were reported in over half of the familicides” studied in their literature review, and Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes (2014:129) found financial difficulties to be the “second most commonly-reported primary motivation” in familicide cases behind relationship troubles, with 10 cases, or 16.9% having evidence of financial struggles. As well as this, Liem et al. (2013:352-357) studied cases of familicide in relation with the annual unemployment rate and found a significant connection, stating that “financial problems such as the loss of a job or an increasing debt are pronounced.” In another study, Liem and Koenraadt (2008:308) also stated that they “found financial factors to be greatly influential on familicides”.

In relation to statistics about unemployment, there was data that found unemployment to be a significant risk factor in murder-suicide cases when found in combination with domestic violence, with Auchter (2010:11) stating that “it was not a risk factor in and of itself but was something that tipped the scale following previous abuse.” As well as this, Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995:288) found that men who committed familicide were found to have trouble holding jobs, and Mailloux (2014:922) states “Men who commit familicide ... are likely to have a poor employment history characterized by short term employment periods that often resulted in termination.”

According to Martinez (2018:152), “The father’s identity is deeply tied to the family and his ability to provide,” so therefore when he is unable to make ends meet due to unemployment or some other financial struggle, he sees suicide as the most reasonable option. However, for a multitude of reasons, he feels as though he cannot leave his family behind. One possible

explanation is that he may wish to keep the family together as a singular unit, and therefore commits familicide in order to maintain the family in life and death (Mailloux 2014:923-924). This can also be used as a form of control that he may have lost in losing his job, and exercising his ability to maintain the family gives him some control back (Liem et al. 2013:352).

A pseudo-altruistic offender may also feel that the family is unable to live without him, and thus thinks he is protecting them from the grief or shame of his suicide by also killing them (Karlsson et al. 2021:94; Martinez 2018:152). Most frequently, though, it seems as though the pseudo-altruistic perpetrator is protecting the family from some unnamed hardships that they would be unable to face without him there. This may be because he is so despondent over the state of his own life, he also feels as though he needs to protect his family from all future suffering as well (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:308). However, in all studies that mention the perpetrator's need to protect the family, it is also mentioned that he commits this crime for what he views to be altruistic reasons, and does not usually harbor any hostile feelings towards the family (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:308; Wilson, Daly, and Daniele 1995:287-288; Martinez 2018:149-150). However, it is still worthwhile to categorize this as *pseudo*-altruistic familicide, as it cannot be overlooked that the family is not complicit in these plans.

The topic of anomic suicide is also broached in some discussions of pseudo-altruistic familicide, as Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes (2014:132) highlight that a perpetrator who commits a familicide based purely on financial failings has been "over-socialized into a belief that consumption determines quality of life." An overall social disapproval of the choices he has made in his life displays that the family has underperformed, and therefore is no longer useful. Without the family, the offender has lost a large component of his life and may be pushed into

anomic familicide and suicide (Yardley, Wilson, and Lynes 2014:135). Mailloux (2014:923) also touches on the topic of anomic familicide, stating

Anomic familicide occurs after a drastic and sudden change or loss that negatively and significantly impacts the ability of the family to sustain their current quality of living. Such impacts and the loss of control may leave the main family provider feeling panicked and desperate.

Auchter (2010:11) also comments on the topic of anomie, stating that financial disruption and overenmeshment could be catastrophic and lead directly into cases of familicide. By his description,

Anomic suicide is not suicide because you've lost all your money but suicide because the rules of the game have changed — because what you thought would be true about your life and your family and your 401(k) and the loyalty of your company has suddenly been disrupted.

Ultimately, however, there has been very little discussion of anomic familicide outside of these few studies, and it seems as though research in this area has not been advancing.

The Role of Mental Illness

As a final addendum to this literature review, it is important to note what is known about familicide and mental illness at the present date. However, this section was reserved for the end because the discussion of mental illness or any mental disorders in relation to violent crime should be analyzed carefully. As much as mental disorders can be demonized, it is also easy to place some amount of blame on mental illness that can be attributed to the free will of an offender who committed a calculated crime that requires a significant amount of forethought. In relation to familicide, it has already been made evident in certain cases that there is a past history of domestic violence perpetrated against victims before the actual homicide took place. It is the

opinion of the author and other psychologists in the field that there is some amount of psychocentrism, where society at large is quick to justify familicide at the expense of the victims (Buiten and Coe 2022:282).

Psychocentrism is defined as “the view that human problems are due to a biologically-based flaw or deficit in the bodies and/or minds of individual subjects”, and according to Buiten and Coe (2022:285), when society views familicide only through a psychocentrist lens, it “essentializes and naturalizes experiences of mental distress, denying their social and structural causes.” It is important when discussing any social phenomenon to analyze all angles of a scenario, and this paper would be providing an incomplete picture if it put forth evidence of “psychopathy” and narcissism displayed in certain cases of familicide without also highlighting the behavior influenced socially more so than mentally.

Buiten and Coe (2022:282) note in their studies that reporting about familicide “mirrors broader feminist concerns about the tendency to frame fatal family violence at the hands of men in individualized terms – often as driven by mental illness – at the expense of an accounting of gender and power,” and this paper seeks to address these concerns adequately through discussions of the patriarchal control men hold in familicidal situations. It is simple to generalize when trying to provide an overview of many cases of familicide, but it is also essential to highlight the individual choice that is made by perpetrators in these homicides, as Buiten and Coe (2022:289) note that passive language “frame(s) violence as a response to these stressors” that is “out of the perpetrator’s control.” Buiten and Coe (2022:290) state

Constructions of the ‘nice’ man who kills his family operated to support assumptions of these violent acts as inexplicable, devoid of a context of control and coercion. Representing violence as out of character bolsters the mental illness/distress frame, as ‘nice men’ cannot be conceived of as violent but can be conceived of as sufferers of mental illness or distress.

Understanding that these crimes are not devoid of context is what makes the study of familicide so important, because no person harms those closest to them without exercising some amount of control. Ultimately, allowing mental illness to take the blame for a heinous crime like familicide not only demonizes all people with mental illness, but also allows an offender to shirk responsibility for a crime that is based in power. While familicide offenders may be facing distress, this does not excuse their actions, and that is necessary to adequately interact with their cases.

With that caveat, the literature addressing statistics about mental illness and familicide can be addressed. Information is mixed on the exact numbers of how many perpetrators suffered from any sort of mental disorder and what they may be, and it is impossible to address this if they committed suicide after the fact. Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995:278) state that familicide would “attest to a state of mind in which one no longer perceives what is in one's interests... and/or is disinclined to pursue them, hence is either insane or so despondent as to be suicidal,” however, I think it has been proven by the prior analyzation of the reasonings given for familicide that the perpetrators do find the crime to be in their best interest. In fact, others have gone on to say that they find those who kill their spouse or children not to be psychotic at all based on the clinical definition (Martinez 2018:150). However, Liem and Koenraadt (2008:308) in their study of those who committed familicide who were institutionalized did display some level of acute or chronic psychosis.

Liem and Koenraadt (2008:308-312) go on to state that the “role of depression is particularly pronounced” in cases of familicide, and that “familicide perpetrators resembled both filicide and uxoricide perpetrators with regard to a high prevalence of a history of mental health care, abuse in childhood and degree of psychopathology.” As well as this, 27% of uxoricide

offenders had a previous criminal offense, only 4% of familicide offenders did, but 65% of familicide offenders suffered from a personality disorder while only 33% of uxoricide offenders did (Liem and Koenraadt 2008:312). Liem and Koenraadt (2008:312) also state that narcissistic tendencies are high, which aligns with what Mailloux (2014:923) noted, stating that “male perpetrators who present with traits of narcissism [e.g. lack of empathy], or are later diagnosed with narcissism, are much more likely to survive the familicidal act.” This is aligned with the ability of Liem and Koenraadt to be able to study them, as the narcissistic offenders do not seek suicide due to these narcissistic tendencies.

Mailloux (2014:922) also states that there is “some suggestion” that male perpetrators were suffering from borderline personality disorder or depression at the time of the familicide, but there is no way to make a correlation between these mental disorders and the act explicitly. Similarly, Karlsson et al. (2021:90) found that mental health problems such as “depression, psychosis or paranoia, personality disorder, obsessive behavior, and substance abuse disorder” were prevalent, but the studies where this data was visible did not compare these issues in relation to the prevalence in the general population, and thus there is no way to determine the relevance of this information.

In the Coleman case, there are no outright indicators that Christopher Coleman suffered from a specific mental illness. He never received any diagnosis for a mental illness that was brought up in trial or in study of his life. While it may be easy to claim that any person who commits a crime such as familicide displays some traits of mental illness, it is not within the bounds of this paper to diagnose Christopher Coleman with any sort of mental illness. While he displayed an extreme lack of empathy in the homicide of his wife and children, it cannot be explicitly classified as narcissism or antisocial personality disorder.

Case Facts

The following facts come from the Criminal Investigative Analysis of Mark Safarik from 2010, as well as the appeals reports for the court cases *People v. Coleman* in both the years 2014 and 2023. Safarik is a retired Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Special Agent who served as the Executive Director of his company Forensic Behavioral Services International, LLC at the time of this report. He claims that he conducts his Criminal Investigative analysis with his “knowledge drawn from personal investigative experience, educational background, specialized training, and research conducted” (Safarik 2010). Per his report, Safarik claims that he was contacted by the Illinois office of the FBI and redirected to the Columbia Police Department, where the current Chief of Police retained him as an investigator for the Coleman triple homicide case. Data gathered from this report came from Columbia Police detectives, interviews with those who knew the victims, and any documents and information the police had access to at the time. Safarik’s report was completed in February of 2010, and therefore only encapsulates information gathered from prior to the crime until this date.

All other information is gathered from two legal filings, both appeals from Christopher Coleman after being found guilty of homicide. These rulings are *People v. Coleman* (2014) and *People v. Coleman* (2023). These appeal filings give insight into evidence presented in court, as well as evidence that was ruled inadmissible in court but provides knowledge otherwise beneficial to examining the state of mind of Coleman. The appeals documents highlight a complete timeline and other data not mentioned in Safarik’s report, as well as including testimony from Coleman’s affair partner Tara Lintz and information about the homicide trial. Appeals were filed on behalf of Coleman due to concerns related to admitted evidence, with cited issues being testimony relating to handwriting analysis and IP addresses, as well as written

evidence and witness testimony claiming that Christopher Coleman had hit or abused his wife Sheri.

All facts here on out will be reported with the understanding that Christopher Coleman was convicted and found guilty of the triple homicide of Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin Coleman, and he will be discussed as the offender.

On May 5th, 2009, at 11:10 am, Christopher Coleman was brought into the City of Columbia Police Department and interviewed about the events of the previous night and that morning. On May 4th, Coleman picked up his children from school and took them home. His wife, Sheri, got off from her shift at work at 4 pm, and they ate dinner as a family at 5 pm. After this, they went to the snow cone shop a few minutes away and then came home. Christopher Coleman then went to the Pound 4 Pound gym at 8:25 pm, as confirmed by the digital card login system at the gym, and was home by 9 pm. He then watched television with Sheri until 10 pm, when he walked through the house to make sure all of the windows and doors were locked. He set his alarm for 5:30 am so he could go to his workout the next morning, and then went to sleep (Safarik 2010).

The next morning, Coleman awoke at 5:30 to go to Gold's Gym in South County, Missouri. Security camera footage from his neighbor, Police Sergeant Justin Barlow, showed that Coleman left his house at 5:43 am and placed a call to Sheri at the same time, despite just being in the house with her. This camera would not capture any more activity in or around the residence during the claimed time of death of Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin. Coleman claims that when he left the house that morning, Sheri was alive, and although he did not check on his children, he assumed they were also fine. While at the gym, Coleman texts his wife three times at 6:23 am saying he was almost done with his workout and would be home soon, as well as

questioning if she was awake. After not receiving a response from her, he texts her twice more at 6:27 am to wake her up. He then places two phone calls to her, one at 6:35 am and one at 6:43 am, but does not leave a message either time despite not receiving a response. At 6:48 am, he calls his neighbor Sergeant Barlow to do a wellness check on his wife because he has not heard from her and is concerned. At 6:52 am, Coleman calls Sheri one last time, receives no response, and does not leave a message.

Sergeant Barlow entered the Coleman residence at the request of Christopher and called for backup to help with the search of the home. Barlow noted a screen to a rear window leaned against a lawn chair. However, he also noticed that there was no debris of wet grass or dirt on the floors in the home, despite the fact that Barlow himself tracked in debris (Safarik, 2010). It had rained the night prior, and therefore an intruder would have left some evidence unless they had cleaned. Officer Donjon of the Columbia Police Department joined Sergeant Barlow in his search of the home while Barlow went outside to meet Coleman, advising him to wait outside while the search continued. Coleman arrived home at 6:56 am and had called Sergeant Barlow while driving on the Jefferson Barracks Bridge, which is normally seven minutes away from the Coleman residence and can be seen from the entrance to the Columbia Lakes suburb. Barlow testified this trip from the bridge to the Coleman residence took Christopher Coleman thirteen minutes to complete (People v. Coleman 2014).

After a search of the house, Barlow and Donjon testified that they discovered spray-painted threats inside the home as well as the bodies of Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin. Barlow told Coleman that his family “didn’t make it”, and Coleman went outside and cried on the sidewalk. After about twenty minutes, Coleman was taken to the police station via ambulance, where a nearly six-hour interview was conducted. Coleman never asked how his family was killed, and

approximately four hours into the interview, Trooper Bivins, the officer conducting the interview alongside Barlow, asked Coleman if he knew how his family had died (People v. Coleman 2014). Coleman responded that he did not know.

During the interview, Coleman asked for a jacket even though the officers did not find the room to be cold. Coleman laid the jacket over his arms but did not put it on fully. The officers noticed scratches on Coleman's arm. Coleman claimed one set of scratches had been obtained a few days prior, although he could not remember how, while the other abrasion had been received by hitting his arm on the gurney in the ambulance that brought him to the police station. At another point, the officers left the room, and Coleman picked up their notes to read them.

When asked about his marriage, Coleman told the police that his marriage was good. He later admitted that near the end of 2008, they attended counseling to work out some problems with their marriage. After pushing, Coleman admitted that he was having an affair with a high school friend of Sheri's named Tara Lintz, who lived in Florida. He originally denied the affair, but "after being advised that investigators were talking to Tara, defendant [Coleman] admitted to the affair, but minimized its intensity" (People v. Coleman 2014). Investigators traveled to Florida and interviewed Lintz, where she revealed that Coleman had told her that he was serving Sheri divorce papers on May 5th, 2009. Lintz also revealed that they had planned to go on a Caribbean cruise on June 14th, 2009. They had also planned a tentative wedding date of January 2010 (People v. Coleman 2014).

Lintz told investigators she was looking at engagement rings, registering on wedding registration websites, and looking at homes in the St. Louis area where she and Coleman could live after he divorced Sheri. Tara Lintz said she and Coleman communicated constantly between

November 2008 and May 2009, and they professed their love to each other. They had also met up in Florida, Arizona, and Hawaii when Coleman was away on business and had sex. Tara and Christopher had matching promise rings, and Tara wore hers to the trial of Coleman for the triple homicide of his family. On Coleman's laptop, investigators found notes relating to Lintz, such as her "birthday, height, eye color, shoe size, ring size, jean size, favorite flowers, and perfume preferences, and her likes and dislikes regarding food and sports teams" (People v. Coleman, 2014). He also noted when she got her period, her dog's birthday, and their future daughter's name.

Several hundred explicit photographs, videos, texts, and emails sent between Coleman and Lintz were discovered on their devices, some of which were shown during the trial with all genitalia blacked out. The videos were not permitted to be shown, but the audio was allowed while the technological investigator described the contents of the video.

Coleman had told Lintz that he would be picking up the divorce papers on May 4th, 2009, and would give them to Sheri and ask them for a divorce. However, her name was supposedly spelled incorrectly, so he had to wait until the 5th. On the morning of the 5th, Lintz had no communication with Coleman. She learned of the murders when Christopher Coleman's father called her and told her that Sheri and her children had been murdered. Lintz also testified that Coleman texted her while he was being interrogated and later called her after being released from the station (People v. Coleman 2014).

When the case went to trial, Dr. Michael Baden, a famed forensic pathologist who worked on the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. testified that the bodies had been dead for far longer than the hour that Christopher Coleman was at the gym. The crimes showed a level of premeditation, strength, and persistence

that would be highly unlikely to be achievable in the short time frame that Coleman was gone, as well as displaying a level of personal violence that is most often observed by offenders that share a relationship with the victim (Safarik 2010). Coleman strangled all three victims with a ligature that was not recovered, so it is not known exactly what the object was, but this method requires persistence and a commitment of both time and effort. Strangling with a ligature requires at least two minutes of consistent pressure to cause death, meaning it would've taken roughly at least 7 to 10 minutes to commit the crime. Safarik notes that using this method ensures that Coleman was committed to making sure no one survived this crime (2010).

Sheri is hypothesized to be the first killed due to the fact that strands of her hair were found on Gavin's body, displaying that the ligature may have caught on her hair and transferred it to the next victim. Sheri had a blunt force injury to the eye consistent with being punched, indicating she was likely awake at the time of her death as there would be no need for Christopher Coleman to hit her in her sleep. Her body was found perpendicular to the pillows of the bed, and her positioning indicated to police that her body had been moved post-mortem. Her hair had been positioned to hide her face, indicating an attempt at *depersonalization*, which Safarik states is "activity by the offender that attempts to depersonalize or objectify the victim. Objectifying a victim is an attempt to take away their identity and personality. An offender may depersonalize the victim because he is uncomfortable with the enormity and implications of what he has done" (2010). This behavior is notable due to the fact that both children were also positioned in a way that obscured their faces, making it another indicator that the offender is someone who had a personal relationship with the victims. It is also noteworthy that if the offender only targeted Sheri, it would have been possible to kill only her; however, they

increased their risk by staying and killing the two children, showing that the offender also had a proprietary interest in this act.

Gavin, aged nine, was killed next, again assumed due to the transference of hair on the ligature, as well as the fact that his body had been spray-painted on, but his brother, Garrett's, only had residual spray, indicating the can was empty by this time. On the bedsheet covering Gavin's body, Coleman had spray-painted the words "Fuck You". Gavin also had a fracture to his larynx, which was an injury indicating that Coleman had used significantly more force than necessary to kill him, possibly due to his size being smaller than Sheri's. Garrett, aged eleven, was the last killed. The bedsheet covering his body had residual evidence of red spray-paint, but no visible written words.

Photos from the coroner showed advanced rigor mortis, also known as stiffening of the body, and prominent fixed lividity, also known as pooling of blood in the lower points of the body in all three of the bodies (Safarik 2010). These factors, as well as body temperature, are used to discern an approximate time of death for a body. Dr. Michael Baden states that based on these factors and the low temperatures of the body, the time of death for all three victims was estimated to be before 3 am on May 5th (People v. Coleman 2014). This is inconsistent with the time Christopher Coleman claimed the crime would have happened, which was between 5:43 am and 6:52 am when the bodies were discovered.

Investigators also took note of spray-painted threats inside of the home, which used profanity and referred to Sheri as a "bitch" and claimed that she had been "punished", as well as claiming that the killer was always watching (Safarik 2010). Another threat stated, "I saw you leave", assumedly directed at Christopher Coleman. These threats served to reinforce that Coleman was not home at the time of the crime but also made direct connections to the written

threats that had been received in the months prior. During the investigation following the murders, police discovered that the spray paint used was "Apple Red" from the brand Rustoleum. Christopher Coleman had purchased a can of this exact spray paint in February of 2009 at a hardware store in St. Louis, which was confirmed by retrieval of a receipt from the store that had been signed by him (People v. Coleman 2014).

Case Analysis

This case analysis is based on the testimony of Mark Safarik from Forensic Behavioral Services International, a larger picture of what may have occurred during the crime, and the explanations as to how Christopher Coleman was convicted of this crime, despite the fact he maintains his innocence to this day. All other information is gathered from two legal filings, both appeals from Christopher Coleman after being found guilty of homicide. These rulings are People v. Coleman (2014) and People v. Coleman (2023).

The triple murders of Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin Coleman may have occurred on May 5th, 2009, but the beginning of this crime starts much further back. On November 14th, 2008, Christopher Coleman received his first communication from the supposed offender who would go on to kill his family, sent through the anonymous online prayer hotline for his employer, Joyce Meyer Ministries (Safarik). Coleman would receive three more communications from this anonymous offender before the date of the murders- the second being on the same day as the first, the third taking place nearly two months later on January 2nd, 2009, and the final taking place over three months later on April 27th, 2009. The third and final communications were unique to the former online messages due to the fact that these threats were delivered as written letters placed inside the mailbox outside of his residence.

Safarik notes a multitude of issues with these communications, first and foremost leading with the timeline of when these threats were sent. Considering the intensity of the threats, the author allows his concerns to go unaddressed for months on end without enacting any of his promised actions (2010). However, the content of these threatening communications is perhaps more confusing than the timeline established by the offender, because if a person stops to analyze the words for a few minutes, they begin to realize that the motives of the offender are unclear.

Coleman worked as the head of security for Joyce Meyer Ministries, an evangelical Christian group headed by the eponymous Joyce Meyer. Therefore, at first, it would seem reasonable for him to receive threats relating to Meyer, claiming that she needs to “stop preaching bullshit” (Safarik). There are multiple references to anger and disdain toward Meyer, yet she is not the target of the offender’s violence. In fact, the writer goes on to say “Chris’s family will die”; “I will kill his wife and kids”; and “If Joyce doesn’t quit preaching the bullshit then they will die”. The offender chooses not to attack Meyer, or the person directly connected to her, Coleman, but rather the wife and children of her head of security. This thread of threatening violence against the Coleman family continues through all of the communications until the date of the murders.

As Safarik notes in his analysis, “the author has no interest in Joyce or Chris or what they do. The threats are a ruse meant to serve as a way to do what he really wants to do” (2010). In this case, his ultimate goal is to kill Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin. Following the murders, Joyce Meyer Ministries was still functioning, and, until his arrest, Coleman was employed by the company. Therefore, what did the communications accomplish? What was gained from murdering three innocent people unrelated to his supposed enemy? If the initial reason for the

threats was that Joyce Meyer was preaching, and the offender's acts did not stop this, then would he not continue to work towards the goal of stopping her?

Of course, following the murders, investigative research was done into the threats, and two important pieces of information were discovered. First, it was noted that the threatening emails were tracked by cybercrime investigators back to Coleman's own laptop. Secondly, investigators observed that in the threats, the word "opportunities" was routinely misspelled as "oppurtunities". When investigating Coleman's computer, they discovered multiple documents in which the word "opportunities" was misspelled in this same manner (People v. Coleman 2014).

These threats served as the supposed motive behind the offender's crimes; however, Safarik notes logistical issues with the way the murders were committed as well that make it unlikely that a random assailant would have done the crime. All of the following data is taken directly from Safarik's analysis and 2010 forensic report. First and foremost, there were procedural issues with the physical layout and location of the home that would cause an offender not to commit the crime at the time and place that they did. Safarik took two walk-throughs of the crime scene- one during the day and one at nighttime. An immediate concern was the lack of natural light during any time that did not have bright daylight, and Safarik identified that it would be nearly impossible to follow a path through the house and find any of the bedrooms without hitting furniture or awakening the victims. Using additional lighting such as the overhead lights would have alerted Sheri Coleman and given her time to ready her loaded handgun kept in the bedroom. Therefore, it is likely that the offender was already aware of the layout of the house, or that the lights did not need to be off because the offender was a member of the household, such as Christopher Coleman.

The offender also used spray paint to paint messages in the living and dining rooms of the home, which were visible from the street due to the layout of the house. It would also be impossible to do this accurately without proper lighting, which comes back to the previous point of lighting concerns. However, an offender would not want to be seen through the front windows of the home, and thus this choice does not make sense in terms of their plan. It would be possible for any number of people to see into the window of the Coleman home due to its location in a suburb with minimal space between houses, as well as no foliage or fences for cover. The house is fully visible from all four directions by at least some other location. It would also thus be impossible for the offender to drive directly to the house, as a strange car in a close-knit suburb would cause suspicion and be able to be noted by the security cameras located caddy-corner to the Coleman home. Therefore, the offender would have to approach on foot, which is dangerous due to reasons already discussed.

Due to the threats received directly at his residence, Christopher Coleman also installed a security camera system that viewed multiple angles of the home. The cameras had exposed wires that could have been cut, but instead, the offender chose to take the entire DVR that held the camera footage. This DVR, as well as the ligature used in the strangulation of the victims, and the spray-paint, can, were not recovered at the scene of the crime, meaning the offender would have had to leave the property on foot with all of these items on their person.

Secondly, Safarik analyzes the motive of the offender in relation to the demographics and lives of the victims. The primary target of the crime was Sheri Coleman, who was a 31-year-old white woman who had formerly served in the military, where she met Christopher Coleman. She was a mostly private woman who did not openly share her personal information or issues with those she was not close to. Most of her time was spent as a stay-at-home mother, although she

worked part-time at a local clothing store, where she had great relationships with all her coworkers and no known enemies. Due to her part-time job, her schedule was unpredictable and oftentimes not consistent. Because she oftentimes took her children to school during the year and also because of her previous time in the military, she woke up routinely every morning between 5 am and 5:30 am. This makes it particularly strange that she was supposedly not awake when Coleman left the house on the morning of the 5th because he woke up at the exact time she always did.

Christopher Coleman spent frequent time away on business trips, but when he was not on these trips, he worked from home. The head of operations for Joyce Meyer Ministries was in Fenton, Missouri, with no administrative offices in Columbia, so it made sense for him to remain at home on days when he was not needed for direct security. As for attending the gym in the morning, Coleman had first taken up membership at Gold's Gym on June 17th, 2007, but between this time and May 5th, 2009, he had only gone this early in the morning on three other occasions (Safarik, 2010). Therefore, it makes no sense that an attacker would choose this morning to strike because this day was entirely out of the normal routine for the family. On an average morning, Christopher would have still been home, and Sheri would have been awake already. There was no motive nor opportunity for this crime, so why exactly would an offender, namely Coleman, commit it?

It has been established that Coleman was having an affair with Tara Lintz, and it seemed Sheri was aware of this fact, as she communicated it to her friend. As well as this, she told another friend that she had received strange messages on her MySpace page saying she "did not deserve her husband" (Safarik 2010). After her death, multiple of Sheri's friends told police that Sheri was upset because Christopher Coleman wanted a divorce from her. According to her

friends, Christopher Coleman cited multiple reasons for this divorce, such as stating that Sheri was ruining his life, Sheri and his kids were in the way of his job, and Sheri and his kids were “keeping him from his destiny and what God wanted him to do” (People v. Coleman 2014). Multiple of Sheri’s friends also testified to the fact that Christopher Coleman was afraid he would lose his job with Joyce Meyer Ministries if he divorced her. One friend showed evidence of a message from Sheri stating that Christopher Coleman had “beat her”, but this was not allowed to be testified to in court (People v. Coleman 2014). When employees from Joyce Meyer Ministries were interviewed, it was also made clear that in most circumstances, a person would not be allowed to work there if they were engaged in an adulterous affair.

Anomic Familicide – An Analysis

When looking at the case of Christopher Coleman versus what was previously established about familicide and familicide offenders, there are several stark differences visible. In some ways, Coleman does fit the typical offender- he is a white male in his 30s with a reported history of domestic violence but no prior arrests (Liem and Koenraadt 2008; Karlsson et al. 2021; Liem et al. 2013; Mailloux 2014; Oathout 2020). He and his wife had discussed plans of separating or divorce, and Coleman was seemingly upset by this, despite the fact he had been the one to propose the idea of divorce. It was 2009, at the height of the housing bubble bursting in the United States, which caused financial struggles for many. It would have been an extremely inconvenient time to lose his job, which was a possibility he was scared of if he divorced his wife (People v. Coleman 2014). All of this aligns with what may be the perfect scenario for a familicide offender based on the prior review of the literature.

However, for as much follows the typical plan, so much more entirely deviates from what was claimed to be the norm. Coleman did not commit suicide following the act of the crime, mostly because of his claims that he did not do it. Nowhere in any of the literature did it mention the possibility that a familicide perpetrator could create such an elaborate premeditated plan that lasted for months on end, only to later claim he had no part in it. In fact, in all of the works cited in this paper, the only mention of such a scenario was once in the Wilson, Daly, and Daniele (1995:285) which stated “Some familicidal men attempt to disguise the killings as the deeds of strangers, occasionally with evident premeditation,” without any further explanation. Least of all, none of these papers mentioned a scenario in which the perpetrator was engaged in infidelity. Coleman did not use a firearm to kill his family, despite the fact that there was access to loaded handguns within his own bedroom (Safarik 2010:11). While there may have been possible financial issues on the horizon, there was no imminent financial threat that he needed to save his family from.

Therefore, we enter into uncharted territory. This is not to say this is the first case of this type to exist, yet these cases live on an island alone, far removed from what the literature has established about the typical familicide offender. In this scenario, it only makes sense to refute what has been established as the absolute two categories of familicidal offenders.

Knowing what we know now, it is easy to try to conveniently forget some facts about Christopher Coleman’s case in order to make him fit in as either a hostile or pseudo-altruistic perpetrator. For instance, you could point to his impending separation from his wife Sheri, saying that he felt he was losing control over her and his children. You could look at his previous violence towards Sheri, very common in hostile offenders. Her leaving and taking his sons could be the very embodiment of the phrase “If I can’t have you, no one can.” But then, you have to

wonder why he would particularly care about Sheri and his sons leaving if he had other plans lined up. Coleman had another woman planning to marry him and give him more children, and he was in fact supposedly planning to serve the divorce papers to Sheri himself. Therefore, it doesn't entirely make sense that he would be enraged over her leaving.

Well, then, he must fit into the category of the pseudo-altruistic perpetrator! There was a possibility he could lose his job if he and Sheri were divorced, and if he moved in with his mistress he would not be located near enough to maintain his position with Joyce Meyer Ministries. If he truly cared about his sons, he could possibly feel the need to protect them from the stigma of divorced parents, especially due to the fact that he worked for a Catholic ministry. Therefore, if they were killed, they would not be subjected to their parents breaking Catholic rules, and Sheri could as well go to Heaven because she would not be disobeying Catholic doctrine. However, Coleman did not commit suicide, which means he did not care about his own afterlife, which would surely be tarnished by him committing a homicide. On top of this, he did feel active hostility towards Sheri when he had previously committed domestic violence, which does not align with the profile of the pseudo-altruistic offender. Furthermore still, neither of these perspectives address the level of premeditation that Coleman went through to frame someone else for the crime.

Therefore, we must turn to a previously undiscovered classification- anomic familicide. When mentioned briefly by other authors, their points do not construct nearly the same clear image as the profiles of the hostile and pseudo-altruistic perpetrators. Even their discussion of anomic familicide in their view implies that they do not fully understand Durkheim's theories of suicide or anomie, and are rather looking at things from an angle of toxicity of capitalism that pushes a person overboard when they lose their job. It leads back to the previously cited Aucter

(2010:11) quote which states “Anomic suicide is not suicide because you’ve lost all your money but suicide because the rules of the game have changed.” This applies not only to anomic suicide, but to anomic familicide as well. Both hostile and pseudo-altruistic familicide are based on the idea that one major factor of an offender’s life is changing, whether that be romantic or financial. However, this paper posits that anomic familicide represents compounding issues from all avenues, not a singular stressor.

Thus, this project believes the only true way to classify Coleman’s familicide and familicides of this type is to rework how anomic familicide is defined to truly capture the essence of Durkheim’s theories of anomie and suicide. First, we must address how we make the leap from suicide to homicide, specifically familicide. Suicide is inherently a personal death, of killing yourself because that seems to be the best outcome. In the way that other theorists called familicide a suicide by proxy, anomic suicide can also be forced onto another person. However, a proxy is more of a conduit than a forceful hand in the way that familicide is, and therefore implies more complicity than there is in this scenario. In the same way that Munchausen by proxy syndrome was renamed to factitious disorder imposed on another, I think it is more fitting to adjust the name from suicide by proxy to “suicide imposed on another”- thus, suicide becomes familicide.

Durkheim’s theory of anomic suicide claims to be a mismatch between personal ethics and what beliefs at large are. Anomic suicide is related to sudden change and the inability to cope with it, and this is no different from anomic familicide. Whereas in anomic suicide, a person may face these sudden changes and choose to commit suicide because of their inability to handle them, in anomic familicide, a person faces these changes and determines that *they* could handle them, but their family cannot. A man may determine that he could manage losing his job,

but his wife and children would not be able to live without his income. In a pseudo-altruistic familicide, he would commit a complete family annihilation, so no one is forced to handle the financial struggle. However, in an anomic familicide, the perpetrator determines that the struggle would be too much for his family, so he imposes the suicide upon them. Now, the situation is much more manageable for him, because with premeditation, he can face no blame for the deaths of his family and face the struggles himself.

Or, say this man wants a divorce because he has a new girlfriend that he likes more than his wife. The transition will already be difficult enough to this new life, especially while his wife and kids don't understand where this is coming from. He would be better able to cope with this change if they were out of the picture entirely, and his wife and children wouldn't need to struggle with understanding why this change was occurring at all if they weren't there to experience it.

This idea of anomic familicide combines aspects of both hostile and pseudo-altruistic familicide, maintaining some level of aggression and control that is present in the hostile type and combining the well-meaning but ultimately harmful decision-making of the pseudo-altruistic. This also explains some of the narcissistic aspects reported by researchers when looking at psychological profiles of offenders. Auchter's idea of overenmeshment is retained here, as the father still views the family as a singular unit, but is rather looking to pare down the size of the unit in order to maximize his own livelihood. Ultimately, this form of anomic familicide is the most selfish option, because the perpetrator commits a heinous act with significant premeditation and does not feel the need to commit suicide afterwards.

When comparing this to the features mentioned in other profiles, it is necessary to set guidelines that separate anomic familicide from other types. In order for anomic familicide to

follow these established points, it must first begin with some sort of major change or issue being presented in the perpetrator's life. It does not have to be a financial or romantic change, but must cause a shift that cannot be ignored and must be addressed sometime in the near future. While Durkheim claims these shifts exist at a societal level, in this case the family unit is its own society. These smaller communities of families hold their own rules and customs, and thus can face a substantial breakdown as strongly as an entire society can. Because of this change, the familicide is then planned, which requires some aspect of premeditation. Assumedly, the perpetrator believes that he can get away with this crime, so that involves some amount of forethought on how he would be able to continue with normal life afterward. As well as this, in order to maintain this now-corrected life they will lead, they cannot commit suicide afterward. Therefore, the perpetrator cannot commit suicide following the event for it to be classified as anomic familicide. Finally, while it is not a necessary feature, it is likely that an offender of anomic familicide is probably facing some significant psychological issues that would allow them to behave in this way without feeling extreme remorse.

Now, we can compare Christopher Coleman's case to the definition of anomic familicide that has been created. Christopher Coleman was being faced with multiple problems that were going to lead to a multitude of changes very shortly in his life. He had a girlfriend that he had been cheating on his wife with for several months, and had begun to make promises to her that he would leave Sheri shortly (People v. Coleman 2014). He also was aware of his own Catholic faith and the faith of his workplace, and knew that getting a divorce may put his well-paying job in jeopardy (Safarik 2010; People v. Coleman 2014). As well as this, he would have to manage co-parenting with his sons if he chose to keep them as part of his life, which would involve explaining the divorce to them and managing their emotions. It is also highly possible that he

may have still had romantic feelings for Sheri, even if he was also having an affair with Tara. All of these changes were mounting, and if they all collapsed in at once as they likely would, Coleman would be left with a mountain of stress and anomie.

Ostensibly, many of these scenarios would be easily solved if there were fewer people involved in the scenario. If Sheri weren't present, he wouldn't have to worry about divorcing her or the possible feelings that would come with ending their relationship if he wasn't prepared for that. If he didn't have to divorce her, then he wouldn't lose his job for breaching his Catholic faith. Then, of course, he would have even more to explain to his children, and then he would be their sole caretaker, which it seems Tara didn't want according to a note in Coleman's phone with the planned name of their theoretical future daughter, Zoey Lynn (People v. Coleman 2014:10). So, it would probably be easier if the children weren't in the picture either. Then, there was no issue with being with Tara, and he maintained steady employment, since Tara claimed she was looking into homes in St. Louis for them to move to (People v. Coleman 2014:3). All it required was the premeditation to make it seem as if another person was targeting his family, and when it all blew over, he could be with Tara and continue his work.

For the kind of person who originally got himself into this scenario, this outcome seems like a perfectly reasonable outcome. It follows almost none of the factors pre-established by the previous literature, but follows all the conventions of Durkheim's theories and what has been learned about familicide throughout years of research. Ultimately, it is clear that familicide requires much more study from sociologists and criminologists, because the current explanations leave room for speculation.

Reflection

In writing this thesis, I hope that I have made it clear the implications that my work has on the fields of criminal justice and sociology. I am conscious of my limitations, whether that be through the material I did not have access to or the information that I unwittingly may not have found, but I believe that my thesis may be one of the first works to truly examine the depth of the connection that Durkheim's theories of suicide and anomie could have on the study of familicide. Familicide is already a field that does not receive much study due to the fact that it is such a rare occurrence, but I think that only makes the point greater that it should be studied. Durkheim is one of the founders of modern sociology, so his work has been examined ad nauseum, but oftentimes I think his theories are treated as very surface level. The point of Durkheim's theories of suicide was to give a broader commentary on society, not on the individual level of suicide, and I feel this can often be lost when viewing his work. I hope that in my deeper exploration of his theories of suicide in addition to the familicidal concepts of suicide and murder by proxy, it has broadened the way the fields of criminal justice and sociology can connect on these subjects.

I am a person with many criticisms for anything I am involved in, and the more I have read about familicide, the more critiques I have of the ways we speak about it. So much discussion of criminology has been reduced to morbid fascination even in academic literature, and it feels as if we lose so much when we only focus on the sensationalized aspects of a case. With this thesis, I wanted to remove this concept of individuality and sensationalization that permeates every single familicide case and study. Every new author has to come up with a title for a certain "type" of offender, and to nitpick every detail down to the bone about whether more victims were killed on a Saturday versus a Tuesday, and at the end of the day, they extrapolate until there is nothing left to comment on. As previously established in the methods section, case

studies can face the issue of missing the broader picture while trying to hunt in the weeds. When broaching a relatively untouched subject, it feels like every writer is trying to plant their flag on the moon to say they got there first. It seems to me that criminology and sociology forget each other in this process, forgetting the *social* aspect of the work we intend to do and instead want to be revolutionary. To me, the whole point of the social sciences is that nothing is revolutionary- we are meant to examine the wheel, not reinvent it.

I hope I did justice to that tenant through my work by establishing that all of these fancy terms cannot replace the heart of what makes up the study of people, culture, and crime. Jeff Ferrell (2009:1) calls this the “fetishization of methodologies”, this idea that true analysis is lost in trying to create perfect data sets. Not every perpetrator fits in a neat little box, and to focus so strongly on twisting the facts to fit a typology is doing a disservice to the truth. When sociologists and criminologists try to track abnormal behavior with a spreadsheet, we lose the thread of what these disciplines are truly trying to study. Human behavior is strange and complex, and no amount of data and numbers will get to the root of why a person might do something as heinous as commit familicide. Christopher Coleman was not a typical case by the standards of the writers of the academic papers analyzing familicide, but his story is not original by any means. These stories happen every day, and the greatest work any sociologist can do is to understand what makes a case exceedingly normal and average.

I only hope my furthering of the anomic familicide perspective can help those who come after me to understand that these seemingly complex issues are standing on the basic blocks of society that we see every day- all strife lies at the intersections of race, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, age, and any other identity. There is still so much work to be done in this field for a person who had the decades to gather cases, information, and personal interviews with any

people involved in familicide cases. My understanding of the Coleman case relies heavily on a few very thorough documents, but could always be improved with more time and resources. As is true with all examinations of any phenomena, more data is helpful to better understand anything, but we can only work with what we have in the current moment.

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