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To kill out of love ...?

Introduction

A recurrent theme in previous chapters is the difficulty experienced by the bereaved and society at large in responding to filicide killings. They are too shocking, always painful to read about, and devastating to anyone related or close to the family involved. For the vast majority of people, the motivation behind filicide killings is inexplicable. One of the earliest categories of motivation which researchers identified is that of love: parents kill their children out of altruism or love. This chapter will critically explore the origins and development of this explanation. It is frequently advanced today by psychiatrists and commentators, by coroners and not least by clergy conducting funeral services for the victims. The language used is often confusing and contradictory, but few listeners or readers would deny its alleviating effects for a grateful public who have no alternative explanation, and particularly for those who are caught up in the terrible consequences of the tragedy. Apart from the ambiguity with which it is expressed, this explanation that love is the principal motivating force may have adverse effects which the pioneers who advanced it did not anticipate. It is time to reaffirm the meaning of love, even in the context of filicide killings.

Origins

The concept of love as a motivating force in filicide originated in Resnick's (1969) categorization, often repeated in subsequent
collaborative efforts with his colleagues (Friedman, Hrouda et al., 2005; Friedman, McCue-Horowitz et al., 2005; Friedman et al., 2008). No subsequent filicide research has failed to acknowledge this categorization, nor has anyone ever questioned it.

There are three significant features in Resnick’s (1969) lengthy section on love as a motivator. First, he uses the words ‘love’ and ‘altruism’ synonymously. In Friedman and Resnick, it is stated that: ‘in an altruistic filicide, a mother kills her child out of love’ (2007, p. 137). Second, although the word ‘love’ is used repeatedly, it is never defined. Third, Resnick calculated that 38 per cent of the killings in his study of 131 cases were perpetrated ‘out of love’, convincing him that this motivation is what ‘distinguishes filicide from other homicides’ (1969, p. 329). In later research, Friedman, Hrouda et al. (2005) find that over 70 per cent of the killings were altruistic.

Resnick acknowledges the difficulty readers may have in understanding love as the motivating force:

At first glance it may be difficult to see how the term ‘altruistic’ could be applied to a mother beating her daughter to death. However, the depressive murderer usually picks an ‘overloved’ individual for his victim. The suicidal mother may identify her child with herself and project her own unacceptable symptoms onto the victim. By this mechanism Mrs. A. viewed Betty as a ‘ruined monster’ that had to be destroyed.

( Ibid., p. 331)

Clearly, Mrs A is very seriously mentally ill. The final diagnosis Resnick gave her was ‘schizophrenic reaction, schizo-affective type’.

In Resnick’s typical psychoanalytical interpretation of events, there does not appear to be the slightest manifestation of love in Mrs A’s actions or in the actions of the many more cases he cited. Whatever their thought processes, and whatever the degree of mental illness they are experiencing, they are all perpetrating actions which are the antithesis of ‘love’ as that word is generally understood. The question then arises, why did Resnick and his colleagues interpret and apply their construct, ‘altruistic’ or ‘love’ killings, so liberally? And why have subsequent researchers given Resnick’s altruism-love categorization such uncritical, unquestioning prominence, and still apply it equally assiduously today?