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Denise Paquette Boots and Kathleen M. Heide
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Parricides in the Media

A Content Analysis of Available Reports Across Cultures

Denise Paquette Boots

The University of Texas at Dallas

Kathleen M. Heide

University of South Florida, Tampa

This article is a content analysis of news reports of parricide cases occurring worldwide. An extensive search of online databases found coverage of more than 200 cases of children killing parents reported in the news media. Data pertaining to incidents, case-related variables (e.g., weapons used, other charges), and the processing of offenders from the initial charge through conviction and sentencing are examined. To the extent possible, media accounts are used to classify cases according to motive and Heide’s three types of parricide offenders. Twelve significant differences are discussed between U.S. and non-U.S. cases of parricide with respect to characteristics of parricide incidents, motives and other areas of clinical interest in reported parricide offenders, and Heide’s typology. The article concludes with a discussion of media representations of the phenomenon versus the actual occurrence, several observations that emerged from these news accounts, and directions for future research.

Keywords: parricide; patricide; matricide; content analysis; media reports; cross-cultural comparison

Children killing parents has generated enormous interest in the United States and internationally throughout the past 20 years. Evidence of this phenomenon can be discerned from media accounts of individuals killing parents that are often sensationalized. For example, the trials of Lyle and Eric Menendez for the 1989 murders of Jose and Kitty Menendez in Beverly Hills, California, were covered extensively on Court TV and dominated mainstream television and print media headlines for several years. The case of Jeremy Bamber who was convicted of the 1985 murders of his adopted parents, his stepsister, and her two 6-year-old twin sons in Essex, Eng-
land, is still capturing widespread interest as Bamber seeks a third appeal, continuing to protest his innocence, 20 years after the mass murders (BBC News, 2005; Milmo, 2005; Pukas, 2005; Sky News, 2005). Media trials with their attendant hearings and appeals, such as those seen in the Menendez and Bamber cases, have been argued by some scholars to be a “final step in a long process of merging the news and entertainment components of the mass media” (Surette, 1989, p. 295; see also Newman, 1990; Sacco, 2002).

A growing body of empirical literature has examined the role of the media in shaping people’s perceptions of crime, with varying opinions as to the significance and impact of such coverage (Ditton, Chadee, Farrall, Gilchrist, & Bannister, 2004; Dreier, 2005; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). One theory posits that there is a cultivation effect, whereby disproportionate media exposure to violent crime influences people’s perceptions of the real world to more resemble media accounts (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). Some researchers have reported that frequent exposure to crime in the media may provoke fear in the public (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Haghighi & Sorensen, 1996). Critics of this position have suggested that the randomness of the crime (Koomen, Visser, & Stapel, 2000), audience characteristics (Eschholz, 1997; Heath & Gilbert, 1996), personal attributions (Sotirovic, 2003), and victimization experiences (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000) greatly determine the impact that media reports have on public perceptions. Other researchers have found that newspaper reports of crimes in locations other than where a person resides actually make people feel reassured or safer in their own communities (Liska & Baccaglini, 1990). Although the complex relationship between media coverage and perceptions of crime continues to be explored on a number of levels both in the United States and in other countries (Amerio & Roccato, 2005; Buckingham, 2004; Sacco, 2002), this literature virtually ignores the issue of variance across media accounts for particular types of violence across countries. This article is the first to focus on the media’s portrayal of parricides in the electronic print media from a cross-cultural perspective.

The term parricide refers to the killing of a close relative (Heide, 1992). Increasingly, however, the term parricide is often used synonymously with the killing of one’s parents (Heide, 1992) and encompasses the acts of matricide (killing of a mother) and patricide (killing of a father). We use the term parricide herein to refer to the killing of a parent by a “child” regardless of the child’s age. These murders are very rare events (Heide, 1989). In the United States, during the 27-year-period 1976 through 2002, for example, the relationship of the victim to the offender was known in 346,924 of the 518,748 homicides recorded. In less than 2% of these cases, mothers (0.9) and fathers (1.0) were identified as the victims. The killing of stepparents was more rare than the murder of parents, constituting approximately 0.5% of all victims in which the victim-offender relationships were known. On the average, 249 biological parents (114 mothers and 135 fathers) and 54 stepparents (7 stepmothers and 47 stepfathers) were identified as killed by their offspring or stepchildren each year during this time frame.

The few studies that have addressed this phenomenon outside the United States have also concluded that parricide is a rare event in other countries (Marleau, Millaud, & Auclair, 2003; Millaud, Auclair, & Meunier, 1996). It is estimated that only 3.7% of
all homicides in Canada from 1991 to 1997 were patricide related (Fedorowycz, 1999). In France, it appears that 2% to 3% of all voluntary and attempted homicides are patricide cases (Stoessel & Bornstein, 1988).

Clinical reports and studies in the United States have found serious mental illness to be common among adults who kill their parents (e.g., Campion et al., 1985; Cravens, Campion, Rotholc, Covar, & Cravens, 1985; Maas, Prakash, Hollender, & Regan, 1984). The average age of these adult offenders typically far exceeds the age of majority, which is usually viewed as 18 years (late adolescence) or 21 years (early adulthood). Studies examining juvenile and adolescent patricide offenders in the United States have found that the majority of these cases appear to be abuse related (Ewing, 2001; Heide, 1992, 1995, 1999; Wolff & Smith, 2001). Cases of youths who have reportedly suffered years of abuse and who have subsequently murdered their mothers and fathers to end the abuse have generated great national interest in the media and public and academic arenas. A growing body of the literature on U.S. patricide cases has examined the psychosocial, legal, and etiological issues and dynamics of these murders (Cornell, Staresina, & Benedek, 1989; Ewing, 1990, 1997; Fritzon & Garbutt, 2001; Heide, 1992, 1994, 1999; Heide, Boots, Alldredge, Donerly, & White, 2005; Mones, 1991; Shumaker & Prinz, 2000; Smith, 1992), as well as the differences between juvenile and adult offenders (Ewing, 2001; Heide, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c; Heide & Boots, 2003; Hillbrand, Alexandre, Young, & Spitz, 1999).

Much of the extant literature on international patricide has also focused on the role of mental illness in these killings (Baxter, Duggan, Larkin, Cordess, & Page, 2001; Marleau et al., 2003; McCarthy et al., 2001). For instance, almost one fourth of all intrafamilial homicides in Canada in 1987 involved the killing of a parent; paranoid schizophrenia and drug and/or alcohol abuse disorders were reported as the most common diagnoses among 12 offenders who were mentally ill who murdered or attempted to murder their parents (Millaud et al., 1996). In a French study of patricides, Devaux, Petit, Perol, and Porot (1974) reported that 60% of these offenders were reported to have psychosis (Millaud et al., 1996). Other studies in Canada (McKnight, Mohr, Quinsey, & Erochko, 1966) and England (Green, 1981) looked more specifically at matricide offenders, finding that these individuals were typically the youngest children or only male children, were overly violent, and suffered from schizophrenia. Sons have also been identified as the primary offender in European patricides in a few studies (Gillies, 1976). One Canadian study also reported a direct positive correlation between rates of patricide and rates of criminal violence between 1962 and 1985 (Marleau & Webanck, 1997). The only study that took a more cross-cultural approach across multiple continents and countries, including Canada, Great Britain, Japan, and the United States, looked exclusively at siblicide (killing of a brother or sister) and birth seniority, rather than patricide (Daly, Wilson, Salmon, Hiraiwa-Hasegawa, & Hasegawa, 2001).

As this brief review shows, it is uncertain whether or not these offenders from abroad are more or less like U.S. patricide offenders. The limited scholarly literature available on non-U.S. patricides, particularly cases involving juvenile and adolescent offenders, indicates that more research is needed. Moreover, despite the public interest
in cases of parricide outside the United States, very little is known about how international governments deal with parricide offenders and how media in these countries portray these murders.

Information on the dispositions of homicide offenders across the United States is not collected at this time and, hence, is not available in any national database. In the United States, two data sets currently exist that can be used to gather data on the characteristics of individuals arrested for matricide or patricide. The Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) data set is a national data set that provides basic demographic data on victims and offenders (age, gender, race) and limited case related data, such as circumstances of the crime and weapons used. The National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) provides more in-depth data on criminal incidents than the SHR database. However, this database is restricted in terms of participating agencies and population covered. As of December 2004, NIBRS data represented 5,271 law enforcement agencies, roughly 20% of the U.S. population, and approximately 16% of crime statistics collected nationally (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). Neither of these data sets addresses the system processing of arrestees.

This article reports information related to the system processing of parricide cases using available newspaper accounts and news release data sources. Following the presentation of descriptive statistics, we then compare these media accounts of parricides in the United States with those in all other countries to determine what differences or similarities may exist in the media presentation of these cases, especially as coverage relates to the legal process and motivational aspects of the case.

**Method**

The current study utilizes an analytic approach called content analysis. In this design, researchers begin with a research idea, create a sampling strategy, define recording units (words, phrases, or ideas to be coded), and then construct categories for analysis (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). This method allows for a systematic overview of the manifest and latent content of data (Robson, 2002), including mass media reports; that is, this technique allows for the coding of information with low subjective inference (e.g., using a manifest content of words present) and/or with high inference (e.g., using latent content to interpret meaning or make judgment) by researchers across a number of categories created for analysis (Holsti, 1969). As the current study is concerned with cross-cultural comparisons of media accounts of parricide, we selected this method versus all others because it is “excellent for comparative and historical studies or for discerning trends in existing phenomena” (Hagan, 2003, p. 248).

Although content analysis has the advantage of being nonintrusive, the data in the current study are limited by the amount of information available via the electronic Internet databases. Moreover, the use of a manifest and a more-latent or high-inference approach within the current study makes it appropriate to demonstrate reliability using independent coders (Robson, 2002), as described within the Data Analysis Plan section of this article. Another limitation of content analysis that must be acknowledged here is the
fact that these articles were written for a purpose other than those of the current study (Maguire, Sandage, & Weatherby, 1999). Inasmuch as they come from a multitude of different countries, media sources, and state and public news sources, this fact makes it particularly difficult to determine what cultural, political, or social biases may exist within these reports (Hagan, 2003). Despite these possible shortcomings, there is a need to look at media accounts of parricide cross-culturally. With this first step, we may begin a more meaningful discussion of similarities and differences in these events across cultures and societies and in how media report these events from an international perspective.

**Operationalization of Parricide**

_Parricide_ is defined as homicides or attempted homicides involving mothers, fathers, and stepparents as victims. Attempted homicides were included because whether a homicidal incident results in death to the intended victim is often the result of factors such as the physical stamina of the victim, the immediate availability of medical care, or the marksmanship of the offender. Multiple victim offenses in which other family members are killed in addition to at least one parent are included. Multiple victim offenses in which nonfamily members are slain are also included as long as a mother, father, or stepparent is identified as a victim in the incident. In short, the defining element for inclusion in this sample is a parent or stepparent must have been among the victims killed or attempted to be killed by a son (or stepson) or daughter (or stepdaughter).

**Sample Generation**

An extensive search of numerous large databases that house local, regional, national, and international publications written in the English language and conducted during 2003 found coverage of 226 separate cases available online. The cases represented 226 unique incidents of one or more children killing, or in four cases at the time of the report attempting to kill, one or more parents. In 2 of the attempted parricide cases, the parents subsequently died. In a 3rd, the victim was paralyzed for life as a result of the homicidal attack. In the 4th case, the victim survived in spite of three serious attempts by his son to kill him.

These databases were accessible through university academic subscriptions and also through public access via the World Wide Web. The database that solely provided the most information per case was LexisNexis (56%), which allowed for multistate and international newspaper comparisons. This source was followed by multiple database and/or news sources combined (27%), whereby one case was located in more than one media database. Direct newspaper links provided information for an additional 8% of the cases; Yahoo and Google individually each led to information on 3% of cases. Information on the remaining 3% of cases was gathered from a combination of newspaper abstracts, specifically *The New York Times*, MSN News, and ABYZ News.
These 226 cases were incidents covered in the electronic media and available from online sources. Each of these cases represents one parricidal event involving one or more victims and/or offenders. To ensure that cases were indeed unique, all news reports were coded according to the last names for the offenders and victims in each case. These names were then cross-referenced each time a new media account of parricide was documented to ensure that the incident was new. By using this technique, each recorded event was ensured to be unique.

These accounts certainly do not represent all occurrences of parricides, but rather media accounts of known parricide cases making headlines. The exact number of parricide cases is unknown because not all parricides are detected, and hence, not all parricide offenders are apprehended. In addition, even when parents are involved as victims, not all cases result in an arrest. Given these constraints, we expect that the parricide cases that are covered in the media are few in relation to their actual occurrence. We expect, based on the literature, that the cases covered are more likely to include cases involving offenders who are younger or that are extraordinarily unusual or bizarre. Cases such as these are more likely to be considered newsworthy (see Surette, 1989).

Of the 219 cases where dates of occurrence were reported, 208 (96%) occurred from the 1980s to October 2003. The concentrated nature of the reporting post-1980 is not surprising. The growing public interest in parricidal incidents in the United States can be traced directly to cases in the early 1980s involving adolescents who killed their parents who were allegedly abusive (Heide, 1992).

The remaining 4% comprised three cases that occurred during the period 1870 to 1899, two from 1920 to 1939, three from 1950 to 1969, and three from 1970 to 1979. The decision was made to retain these cases in the sample because our analysis is based on news coverage of parricide cases online. The coverage of these cases suggests that these incidents were newsworthy events at the time of occurrence and have remained so. Accordingly, impressions reached by readers on parricide may be at least partly affected by the significant coverage given to some of these cases. Of equal importance, the inclusion of these 11 pre-1980 cases did not affect the outcome of statistical analyses, that is, when we repeated the analyses with these cases removed, there were no differences in terms of statistical results.

Data were available on the country in which the parricide occurred in 222 cases. Of these cases, 68% ($n = 150$) occurred in the United States. Classification of these 222 incidents by continents indicated that nearly 88% occurred in North America (71% in the United States and Canada) and Asia (17%). The remaining 12% of the cases came largely from Europe (9%) and Australia (2%), South America and Africa each had one reported case, and together made up the final 1%. State-level data were also available on 131 of the 150 parricide cases that occurred in the United States. When examined regionally in terms of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) categorization, 31% occurred in southern states, 29% in western states, 21% in midwestern states, and 19% in northeastern states.

It is important to note that although our representation of case coverage appears thorough, we are not suggesting that our cases are representative of the phenomenon.
of parricide across the world. Our analyses focus on reported cases, that is, media coverage, not actual incidence. Once again, the current study investigates media accounts of parricides reported cross-culturally. Our analyses are clearly affected by the accessibility of cases to the media and by their coverage coming online. In the United States, for example, we can estimate that approximately 6,000 biological parents and stepparents were killed since the 1980s. Yet our sample of media reports includes 150 incidents or about 3% of these cases. In some non-U.S. countries, information on parricide cases may not be disseminated to media outlets or may be severely limited by government authorities. Accordingly, we can speak with some authority about what is available to the public through the media. The public is more likely to gather their impressions from media coverage than by scientific studies (e.g., Bailey & Hale, 1998; Surette, 1998). The extent to which reported cases are truly representative of the universe of parricide cases worldwide is an empirical question, which cannot presently be answered using existing databases.

**Instrument**

The instrument constructed to extract information from news accounts of parricide focused on six main areas: incident-based data, victim and offender data, system-processing data, postdisposition data, data pertaining to motives and other areas of clinical concern, and data measuring types of parricide offenders.

- **Incident-based data** included date and location of incident, total number of victims, total number of offenders, parricide offender type, and weapons used.
- Specific information was recorded for each *offender* (name, gender, race), *accomplice* when applicable (name, gender, race, relationship to primary offender), and *victim* (name, gender, race, relationship to offender).
- **System-processing data** included initial homicide-related charge, non-homicide-related charges, whether juvenile when applicable was charged as adult, whether prosecutor was seeking death penalty when applicable, progress through the system (date charged, trial date, conviction date, disposition date), conviction status regarding homicide and non-homicide-related charges, and sentencing information (type of sentence, was treatment or time in mental health facility ordered, was mandatory minimum imposed).
- **Postdisposition data** included amended sentences and information pertinent to recidivism.
- **Motives and other items of clinical interest** included any suggestion that the killing was propelled by motives found in the literature (abuse, money and/or insurance policy, fight and/or anger, psychosis and/or mental illness, alcohol or drug induced, business dispute, mercy killing, or other motives) and offense characteristics of interest to mental health professionals as well as criminal justice practitioners (overkill, dismemberment, and decapitation).
- Heide’s (1992) typology consisted of a variable classifying the parricide offender into one of the three types of parricide offenders according to the primary motivation for the crime: (a) *severely abused children* kill their parents because they are terrified and/or desperate, seeing no other way to end the abuse; (b) *severely mentally ill children* kill their parents because of an underlying serious mental illness that compromises their contact with reality; and (c) *dangerously antisocial children* kill their parents to serve a selfish
instrumental reason, such as getting more freedom or access to an inheritance. When sufficient information was available, raters classified a case into one of the three types based on a clinical judgment of available facts. In some cases, media accounts presented varying portraits of parricide offenders or competing explanations for their crime. In cases wherein the data reported had elements associated with two types, raters could select three additional codes: competing severely abused and/or dangerously antisocial combination, competing severely abused and/or mentally ill combination, or competing mentally ill and/or dangerously antisocial combination. In addition to these global ratings, components associated with each type were individually rated: four pertaining to children who were severely abused (killed out of terror or desperation, killed to protect self or others, long-standing history of abuse, and homicide victim alleged to be a heavy drinker or substance abuse); three pertaining to children who were severely mentally ill (severe mental illness, delusions/hallucinations/other bizarre behavior, and killing as the result of mental illness); and four pertaining to children who were dangerously antisocial (killed to serve a selfish and/or instrumental purpose, history of antisocial behavior, serious effort to avoid detection, and defendant went on a buying spree after the killings).

Data Analysis Plan

This article reports on preliminary analyses of 73 variables of interest in the homicide-parricide literature for which data were available (see the appendix). These variables included a number of incident-based data and system-processing variables. Postdisposition data are limited to release and recidivism data, given the scant information found on amended sentences. Data pertaining to motives and other areas of clinical concern and data measuring Heide’s typology of parricide offenders are presented.

Information on victims and offenders is described at the incident level for the most part. Approximately 40% of the incidents involved multiple victims, making it necessary to link victim data across several variables. The linking of victim cases was not undertaken in this article. In 16% of the reported cases, multiple offenders were involved. In this article, we report age, race, and gender information for the primary offender. We did not attempt to link offender data across several variables in multiple offender cases at this time. Accordingly, specific data on accomplices are not reported in this article. Thus, the specific offender data provided herewith must be viewed with caution and treated as preliminary, pending further analyses.

To ensure the reliability of these data, a research assistant who had not been part of the original data collection or coding was asked to code a random sample of the cases. This researcher coded every ninth case across all 73 variables specifically investigated in the current study. After this coding was completed, these data were compared with the original coding completed by the senior author. The interrater reliability of these 73 variables was very high. For 65 of these variables, raters agreed 25 of 25 times (100% interrater reliability). For 8 of these variables, raters agreed 24 of 25 times (96% reliability). Of 1,825 matched pairs (73 variables multiplied by 25 cases), there were only eight items that had any substantive interrater coding errors. These eight errors involved one coding error each for (a) type of weapon used in the crime, (b)
whether it was a mercy killing, and the presence of (c) abuse, (d) overkill, (e) dismemberment, (f) the year of offense, (g) the initial charge, and (h) whether a juvenile was charged as an adult offender. This resulted in an overall reliability rate of 99.6%, with raters agreeing in 1,817 out of 1,825 possible variable matches.

Following the presentation of descriptive data, differences found between U.S. and non-U.S. parricide offenders on an incident-based level are reported. Cross-tabular analyses were undertaken using chi-square. Significance was set at the .05 probability level.

**Findings**

Preliminary findings are presented in five areas investigated in the 226 parricide incidents available. These consisted of incident characteristics, primary offender characteristics, system processing of offenders, motives and other areas of clinical interest, and Heide’s typology of parricide offenders. Descriptive statistics are based on the total number of valid cases available for each variable as noted below. The percentages of valid versus missing cases are reported per variable in the appendix.

**Characteristics of Reported Parricide Incidents**

In the current sample of 226 cases, 282 offenders were reportedly involved. In 82% of these incidents, only one offender participated. In the remaining 18% of the incidents, two offenders were involved in 12% of the incidents, and three offenders were involved in 6%. One incident involved five offenders (4%). These 282 offenders were responsible for the deaths of 379 victims. In 59% of these incidents, 1 victim was killed; in 26%, 2 victims; in 8%, 3 victims; in 4%, 4 victims; in 3%, 5 victims; and in the remaining case (4%), 10 victims.

**Victim data.** In these 226 incidents, mothers were reported killed in 141 incidents (62%), fathers in 138 incidents (61%). Stepmothers and stepfathers were identified as slain in only 1% and 4%, respectively, of the incidents covered by the electronic media. In 29% of these incidents, more than one parent was slain. In 25% of these parricidal events \( n = 56 \), mothers and fathers were both slain, in 4% \( n = 8 \) mothers and stepfathers were killed, and in 1% \( n = 2 \), fathers and stepmothers were killed together. No cases were found where stepfathers and stepmothers were slain in one incident.

**Offender data.** In 84% of these 226 incidents, sons (74%) and daughters (10%) acted alone. In 6% of these cases, two or more siblings committed the parricides with or without others. In the remaining 11%, sons (6%) and daughters (5%) killed parents with nonfamily members. In 5% of the 226 cases, one of the offspring was reportedly adopted.

Sons killed or attempted to kill parents in 85% of the 226 incidents. Mothers were victims in 23% of these incidents, fathers in 28%, stepfathers in 1%, stepmothers in
0.4%, parents in any combination in 18%, and parents, siblings, and other family members in the remaining 16%. Daughters killed or attempted to kill parents in 15% of the 226 cases. Mothers were victims in 6% of these incidents, fathers in 5%, parents in any combination in 2%, and parents, siblings, and other family members in the remaining 1%.

**Weapons used.** Weapon data were available in 219 parricide incidents. Firearms were used in 39% of the incidents, followed by knives or cutting instruments (20%), blunt objects (12%), and multiple weapons (12%). In the remaining 17% of the incidents, parricide offenders used other weapons (6%), strangulation (3%), weapon not specified (3%), asphyxiation (3%), personal weapons (2%), and fire (0.4%).

Specific information on the type of firearms used was available in 59 of the 85 firearm-related incidents. In 88% of the cases involving firearms, one firearm was used. Long guns (52%) were more frequently used than handguns (36%) in these incidents. Specifically, rifles were used in 25% of the incidents, shotguns in 22%, and assault rifles and/or military issue weapons in 5%. In the remaining 12% of the incidents involving guns, multiple types of firearms were used.

**Characteristics of the Primary Offender in Reported Parricide Incidents**

Demographic information is reported on the offender designated as the primary parricide offender. As discussed above, 18% of the cases involved multiple offender cases.

**Age.** Age of the primary offender could be discerned in 199 cases. Parricide offenders ranged in age from 6 to 59 years. Close to three fifths were adolescents: 46% were age 17 years or younger, and another 12% were age 18 or 19 years. Of the remaining 41% of offenders, 22 were in their 20s, another 8% were in their 30s, 10% were in their 40s, and the remaining 1% was in their 50s. The mean and median ages of the primary offender were 22 and 18 years, respectively. The modal category was 17, with 30 reported cases.

**Juvenile offender status.** In 217 cases, it was possible to determine whether the primary offender was younger than age 18 years. In 43% (n = 94) of these cases, the primary offender was reportedly younger than age 18 years. In 78 of these cases, it was possible to determine whether the youth was charged as an adult. Sixty-eight percent were charged as adults.

**Gender and race.** Gender could be determined in 225 cases. Sons were identified as the primary offender in 78% of the cases, daughters in the remaining 22%. Race could be determined in 107 cases. The primary parricide offenders were identified as White in 65% of the cases covered in the news. The remaining 35% were identified as Asian (28%) and Black (7%).
System Processing of Offenders in Reported Parricide Incidents

Available data on charging decisions, convictions obtained, and dispositions are reported below. Thirty-one offenders were known to have been released. Known recidivism data are also summarized in this section.

Charging decision data. Although news coverage reported some information on case processing in 224 of the 226 cases, specific data on the initial charge were hard to obtain. Moreover, given jurisdictional differences, charging information was not necessarily reported or even accurately understood by the reporting source. With these caveats in mind, limited information about the charging decisions was recorded when found in media accounts. In 56% of the 224 cases for which data were available, news reported indicated that the offender was charged simply with murder. When information was adequate to ascertain the offender’s charge, first-degree murder (34%) was the most common charge followed by second-degree murder (3%), manslaughter (2%), attempted murder (2%), and conspiracy to commit murder (less than 1%). In the remaining 3% of cases, defendants were deceased (2%) or the case was in progress (1%).

Information was available to determine the number of homicide-related charges for 219 incidents. In 54% of these incidents, parricide offenders were charged with one charge. In approximately 45% of the incidents, offenders were charged with two charges (26%), three charges (10%), four charges (6%), and five charges (3%). The remaining 2% comprised four cases involving 6, 10, 11, and 30 charges. In 95 cases, it appeared that the State had the statutory authority to seek the death penalty. The death penalty was sought in 21% of these cases.

Conviction-related data. Homicide conviction data were available for 138 of the incidents. Convictions were obtained in 128 (93%) of these cases. The breakdown is as follows: first-degree murder (26%), second-degree murder (13%), manslaughter (14%), murder of some degree unspecified (33%), attempted murder (1%), delinquent plea as a juvenile (4%), and conspiracy to commit murder (1%). In the remaining 9 (7%) incidents, 6 offenders were found not guilty by reason of insanity (4%), and 4 were found not guilty (3%). In the remaining case (1%), prosecutors dropped the charges.

News accounts revealed that 1 of 7 convicted parricide offenders (n = 128) had also been convicted of one or more crimes in addition to the homicide (n = 18). Convictions were obtained for arson in five incidents and robbery in four incidents. In addition, convictions were obtained for sex crimes in three incidents, auto theft in two incidents, burglary in two incidents, other crimes in two incidents, rape in one incident, and larceny in one incident.

Disposition-related data. Dispositions were known for 119 incidents. Eight offenders (7%) were sentenced to death. Thirty-seven offenders (31%) were sentenced to life without parole (10%), life with opportunity for parole (4%), or a life sentence unspeci-
fied (17%). Forty offenders (34%) were sentenced to serve prison time in an adult facility; 9 additional offenders (8%) were sentenced to incarceration in a youthful offender facility (5%) or a juvenile justice facility (3%). Nine offenders (8%) were given suspended sentences (2%) or probation (6%). Only five offenders (4%) were found not guilty or had their charges dropped. Eleven offenders (9%), including the six who were found not guilty by reason of insanity, were ordered to go to a mental health facility. Treatment was reported as mandated in 22 of the 119 cases (19%).

**Release and recidivism data.** Limited postdisposition information was available on some parricide offenders. Searches were conducted for all identified parricide offender names using the databases previously discussed. These searches revealed that 31 offenders were released from a facility. Four offenders reoffended. Of these four, three offenders reportedly committed homicides, and one illegally possessed a firearm.

**Motives and Other Areas of Clinical Interest in Reported Parricide Incidents**

Motive is not a legal requirement of a crime. It is, however, typically of interest to judges and juries, as well as to the public. Areas of clinical interest often provide some insight into the offender’s mental state at the time of the crime and his or her risk to the community.

**Motives.** Newspaper coverage was screened to ascertain if there was any evidence of eight particular motives or circumstances suggested in the 226 incidents. Many reported incidents were brief, and facts were sketchy. Five circumstances were suggested with some frequency in reported accounts: fight and/or anger in 51% of the incidents, abuse in 33%, money and/or insurance in 24%, mental illness in 17%, and alcohol and/or drugs in the killing in 11%. Killings as a result of a business dispute or mercy killings were each suggested in 1% of incidents; other motives were suggested in 3%.

**Alcohol and/or drug status of offender.** Three variables were constructed to measure whether the parricide offenders were on drugs or alcohol during the 226 incidents examined. News accounts specifically reported that the offender was on drugs in 10% of the incidents and under the influence of alcohol in 7% of the cases. Reports indicated that the offender was under the influence of alcohol and drugs in 4% of the incidents.

**Offense characteristics of clinical concern.** Three variables measured atypical results to the homicide victim. Evidence of *overkill* (defined as using more force or weaponry than needed to kill, such as stabbing a victim 200 times or shooting a person 10 or more times, etc.) was present in 20% of the 226 reported incidents. Dismemberment and decapitation were rarely encountered in reported incidents; they were found in 3% and 1% of the cases, respectively.
Heide’s Typology of Parricide Offenders Examined in Reported Parricide Incidents

In two thirds ($n = 149$) of the 226 incidents reported, cases were found to clearly fit into one of Heide’s three types of parricide offenders: dangerously antisocial (33%), severely abused (20%), and severely mentally ill (13%). Newspaper coverage suggested a combination of types in another 11% of cases: severely abused and/or dangerously antisocial (8%), severely abused and/or mentally ill (2%), and mentally ill and/or dangerously antisocial (1%). In the remaining 24% of the incidents, it was unclear from the report whether the cases fit into any of the categories.

Case reports were rated in terms of specific components of Heide’s three types. Four components pertained to the severely abused child. Perusal of the 226 incidents suggested that there was a long-standing history of abuse in 29% of the cases, that the parricide offender killed out of desperation or killed to protect self or others in 27% and 25% of the cases, respectively, and that the homicide victim was a heavy drinker or substance abuser in 12% of the cases.

A variable was also constructed to code type of abuse when possible. In 73 reported incidents, abuse was alleged. In at least 48 of these 73 cases (66%), multiple types of abuse were alleged. In one third of the multiple abuse cases, sexual abuse was reportedly involved. Sexual abuse was reported as the type of abuse or among the types of abuse in 29% of the 73 cases.

Three components pertained to the severely mentally ill child. Examination of the 226 incidents suggested that the parricidal killing was a result of mental illness in 19% of these cases. In 14% of these cases, the available data indicated that the offender had a history of mental illness. News accounts specifically mentioned that the offender had delusions, experienced hallucinations, and/or manifested bizarre behavior in 7% of the cases.

Four components frequently associated with the dangerously antisocial child were evaluated. In 44% of the 226 reports, it appeared the killings were done to serve a selfish, instrumental purpose. The offender had a history of antisocial behavior in 28% of the incidents, made a serious effort to avoid detection in 26% of the incidents, and went on a buying spree after the killings in 4% of the cases.

Analysis by United States Versus Other Countries

The number of cases was sufficient to look for differences between the United States and all other countries on 33 variables, as discussed below. In 12 of these analyses, significant differences were found between U.S. and non-U.S. parricide cases and are highlighted in Table 1.

Characteristics of Parricide Incidents

The number of cases and case distribution was sufficient to examine 13 incident variables by country. These variables were gender, mother as victim, father as victim,
total number of offenders, total number of victims, son acted alone, daughter acted alone, son acted with others, daughter acted with others, siblings acted together, offender as adopted, weapon used, and parricide type (offspring and parent victim type). Three of these analyses revealed significant differences between media-reported U.S. and non-U.S. parricide offenders.

Offspring type. Parricide incidents were dichotomized into whether they involved sons or daughters as the primary offender and then examined by United States versus other countries. Significant differences were found in these 219 cases. According to news media reports, daughters were more likely in U.S. cases to be the primary offender when compared to non-U.S. parricides (18% and 7%, respectively, $\chi^2 = 5.054$, $df = 1$, $p = .025$). In non-U.S. parricides, in contrast, 67 of the 72 reported cases had sons identified as the primary offender (93%) compared to 120 of the 147 U.S. parricides (82%).

Son acted alone in parricide incident. Male parricide offenders from non-U.S. countries were significantly more likely to kill parents acting alone than were male parricide offenders from the United States. In 83% of 72 parricide cases in non-U.S. countries, sons acted alone; sons acted alone in 69% of the 150 parricides in the United States ($\chi^2 = 4.940$, $df = 1$, $p = .026$).

Weapons used. The variable called weapons used was recoded into five categories to permit cross-tabular analysis. In the 208 cases in which data were available on weapons, firearms were used in 83 (40%) of the cases, knives in 44 (21%), blunt
objects in 26 (12%), other weapons in 29 (14%), and multiple weapons in 26 cases (12%). Parricide offenders in the United States were significantly more likely than their non-U.S. counterparts to use firearms (49% vs. 21%) and multiple weapons (14% vs. 9%). In contrast, when compared to U.S. parricide offenders, killers from non-U.S. countries were significantly more likely to use knives (27% vs. 18%), blunt objects (19% vs. 9%), and other weapons (including personal weapons, 24% vs. 9%) ($\chi^2 = 22.237$, df = 4, $p < .001$).

### System Processing of Offenders in Reported Parricide Incidents

Analysis was possible in only one system-processing variable given the data available: offender released. The death penalty variable was omitted from analyses because capital punishment is rarely sought in non-U.S. cases. Significant differences in release data were found by country.

**Offender released.** U.S. parricide offenders were significantly more likely than non-U.S. cases to be released from custody. Of the 107 U.S. cases that had release information, 24% were reported as released from custody, and 76% were reported as still incarcerated. In contrast, almost all 42 parricide offenders from non-U.S. countries were reported as still in custody (91%) versus being released (9% released) ($\chi^2 = 4.095$, df = 1, $p = .043$).

### Motives and Other Areas of Clinical Interest in Reported Parricide Incidents

Data were sufficient to permit cross-tabular analysis of six variables pertaining to motive for the killing (abuse, money, fight, offender as mentally ill, alcohol or drug induced) and items of clinical concern (overkill). Three significant differences were found.

**Abuse as motive.** Of the 222 cases for which data were available, reports suggested abuse as a likely motive in 74 cases. Within the United States, abuse was found to be a statistically significant motive for more than 61 of the 150 U.S. cases (40%). In contrast, abuse was found to be a motive in substantially fewer non-U.S. parricide cases, with only 13 of the 72 (18%) murders appearing to be abuse related ($\chi^2 = 11.193$, df = 1, $p = .001$).

**Fight-related parricide.** Non-U.S. parricide cases were significantly more likely to be preceded by a fight than were U.S. cases. Of the 222 cases where data were reported, media accounts suggest that the parricide event was preceded by some type of fight between the victim and the offender in a total of 113 cases (51%). Of these reports, 62% of the 72 parricides in non-U.S. countries versus 45% of the 150 U.S. parricide cases had some type of fight prior to the homicide ($\chi^2 = 5.736$, df = 1, $p = .017$).
Parricide as alcohol and/or drug induced. Of the 222 cases for which data were available, relatively few reports suggested that the parricide was alcohol and/or drug induced \((n = 22)\). Even though the number of cases was small, however, statistically significant differences were found. In reports of parricide cases from non-U.S. countries, offenders were more likely to be depicted as intoxicated or high on drugs than their U.S. counterparts during the killings. Non-U.S. offenders were reported as drunk or high in 18\% versus 6\% of U.S. parricide cases \(\chi^2 = 7.920, df = 1, p = .005\).

Heide’s Typology of Parricide Offenders Examined in Reported Parricide Incidents

Thirteen variables were used to test Heide’s typology (2 variables) or components related to it (11 variables). The 11 components were specified per offender type and discussed above. Five of these 13 analyses were significant.

Heide’s typology was tested by recoding values into two variables. The first variable called TYPE 3 consisted of the Heide’s three types, all other cases were defined as missing. The second variable called TYPE5 consisted of five values, one each for the three types (severely abused child, severely mentally ill child, dangerously antisocial child), a fourth value for competing types (competing severely abused and/or dangerously antisocial combination, competing severely abused and/or mentally ill combination, and competing mentally ill and/or dangerously antisocial combination), and the fifth value was coded for cases where information was not sufficient to classify. Cross-tabular analyses of these variables by country were significant. Analyses of TYPE3 used 145 cases, and those involving TYPE5 consisted of 222 cases.

The analysis of TYPE3 by country revealed that on the basis of news accounts, 50\% of the 145 cases that were classifiable into one of Heide’s types were identified as dangerously antisocial \((n = 72)\), 30\% as severely abused \((n = 43)\), and 21\% as seriously mentally ill \((n = 30)\). Looking at the classification into the three types by country of origin shows clear differences between countries. Parricide offenders in the United States, compared to their non-U.S. counterparts, were significantly more likely to be classified as severely abused (36\% vs. 14\%). In contrast, parricide cases outside the United States were more commonly depicted as involving children who were dangerously antisocial than U.S. cases (67\% vs. 42\%). Those diagnosed as severely mentally ill was fairly close in U.S. and non-U.S. countries (22\% vs. 19\%, respectively; \(\chi^2 = 9.105, df = 2, p = .011\)).

The analysis of TYPE 5 by country United States versus other countries naturally produced the same numerical distribution for the three types. The inclusions of mixed cases and unclassifiable cases increased the total number of cases from 145 to 222, affecting the percentage distribution of Heide’s three types. Accordingly, 32\% of the cases were identified as dangerously antisocial, followed by 19\% as severely abused, and 14\% as seriously mentally ill. A clinical determination was not possible in 24\% of the cases \((n = 54)\) based on the facts given; in 10\% of the cases \((n = 23)\) the facts
reported pointed to a mixed classification. Of these cases, U.S. parricide offenders were significantly more likely than non-U.S. offenders to be classified as fitting the severely abused child type (25% vs. 8%) and as being classified as mentally ill (15% vs. 11%). In addition, U.S. parricide offenders were also significantly more likely than offenders from other countries to be classified as mixed types (12% vs. 7%). In contrast, non-U.S. parricide offenders, relative to U.S. parricide offenders, were statistically more likely to be seen as antisocial (40% vs. 29%) or as difficult to classify based on the information provided (33% vs. 20%; \(\chi^2 = 13.934, df = 4, p = .008\)).

**Severely Abused Child—Killed Out of Desperation or Terror**

News accounts suggested that U.S. parricide offenders were significantly more likely than non-U.S. offenders to kill out of desperation or terror. Of the 222 cases for which data were available, 61 reports (27%) suggested that the offender killed for these reasons. Of 150 reports about U.S. parricide offenders, 32% of these killings appeared to be out of desperation or terror. In comparison, only 18% of the 72 non-U.S. murderers were believed to have killed out of desperation or terror (\(\chi^2 = 4.747, df = 1, p = .029\)).

**Severely Abused Child—Killed to Protect Self or Others**

Of the 222 cases for which data were available, 56 reports (25%) suggested that parricide offenders killed to protect themselves or others. Significant differences were found, with 33% of U.S. parricide offenders (49 of 150 cases) found to have killed to protect themselves or others when compared to only 10% of their non-U.S. counterparts (7 of 72 cases; \(\chi^2 = 13.578, df = 1, p < .001\)).

**Severely Abused Child—Long-Standing History of Abuse**

Of the 222 cases for which data were available, 64 reports (29%) suggested that parricide offenders had a history of having been abused. Abuse histories were significantly more likely to be reported for U.S. parricide offenders (35% of 150 cases) than parricide offenders from other countries (17% of 72 cases; \(\chi^2 = 7.682, df = 1, p = .006\)).

**Conclusions and Implications**

This article provides descriptive data on more than 200 reported incidents of parricide found by examining various search engines during the fall of 2003. Although we do not claim that we captured all online accounts of parricide, we believe, based on the extensiveness of our search efforts, that our sample of 226 cases is, indeed, a very good representative of what exists through available databases, Web searches, and online news media outlets. Although our search uncovered cases as far back as the 1870s, 207 (96%) of the 215 cases in which the date of the parricide and the country was known...
occurred from the 1980s to 2003. If we compare the U.S. number of cases we found online since 1980 \((n = 141)\) with the number of parricides that occurred during the period 1980 through 2003 estimated very broadly at 6,000, we see that media coverage of parricide cases is a very small percentage of the universe of known cases in which biological and stepchildren kill their parents, about 3%.

Available data do not allow us to come up with comparisons for our sample of international cases, given the great expanse of countries covered. However, it seems quite likely that our sample of 66 international parricidal incidents since 1980 represents a very small percentage of parricidal events across all non-U.S. countries. Our relatively small sample of international parricide cases may be partly because of our reading of accounts available in online sources published in English. It may also reflect that in some countries, the killing of parents simply does not occur, perhaps, because of religious or cultural reasons. It could also indicate that the behavior is not disseminated to the public because it is taboo and offensive. The government in some countries may exercise rigid control with respect to reporting events that could suggest that the family unit is breaking down, social control is weakening, or the society is becoming more Westernized even to the point of increasingly responding violently to situations.

The Effect of the Media on Public Perception of Parricide Offenders

In light of the low representation of online accounts in relation to the universe of events, one might ask why we should look at media accounts of parricides. The answer lies in the medium and the message. The media is frequently a powerful force in driving public perception and policy. The public draws conclusions from cases about which they become familiar (Bailey & Hale, 1998; Surette, 1998). Legislators, similar to their constituents, often formulate policy on what they know about a phenomenon, particularly when it is one that inflames passion.

In the early 1980s, the media were instrumental in bringing national attention in the United States to the plight of abused children who kill parents out of terror or desperation. The media’s portrayal of the murder of Richard Jahnke Sr., in Wyoming by his children painted a sympathetic portrait of the young killers in what was to become the prototypical case of a “severely abused child.” The facts established that 16-year-old Richie and his 17-year-old sister Deborah took several guns from their father’s arsenal of weapons one evening in November 1982. They then placed these firearms strategically throughout the Jahnke house and laid in wait for their 38-year-old father, an Internal Revenue Service (IRS) investigator, to return home from his 20th anniversary dinner with their mother. As Mr. Jahnke walked toward the garage, Richard fired a shotgun into his father’s body, ending the man’s years of physically abusing his wife and son, sexually abusing his daughter, and verbally abusing the whole family (Heide, 1992). *Time* magazine headlined the case in its December 13, 1982, issue by quoting a family friend who said “It made terrible sense.” The article concluded with the observation that “Despite the coldly premeditated nature of the slaying, public sentiment in Cheyenne began shifting to the alleged killers as details about the Jahnke household emerged” (p. 34).
Two weeks after Richard was convicted of the crime of voluntary manslaughter, a letter-writing campaign was initiated to influence the trial judge in his sentencing decision. Within fewer than 3 weeks, the committee to Help Richard John Jahnke recorded more than 4,000 letters urging leniency for Richard, and only one letter opposed. The committee collected 10,000 signatures on petitions distributed locally and delivered scores of additional petitions that came from around the United States to the presiding jurist. While letters were pouring in to the committee on Richard’s behalf, Deborah was convicted in another court proceeding of aiding and abetting voluntary manslaughter. Following the convictions of both adolescents, defense attorneys for Richard and Deborah were similarly besieged with letters and phone calls urging leniency in sentencing (Prendergast, 1986).

The letters did not have their desired effect, however. Richard was sentenced to 5 to 15 years in prison; about 6 weeks later, his sister was sentenced to 3 to 8 years. While appeals were pending and the youths were on bond, a crew from 60 Minutes arrived in Cheyenne, Wyoming, to investigate the story. On January 22, 1984, 14 months after this parricide occurred, the Jahnke case was the lead story on 60 Minutes. An estimated 46 million viewers watched as the details of Richard’s and Deborah’s convictions were discussed. Correspondent Ed Bradley described the abuse that the adolescents had endured, the inability of Mrs. Jahnke to protect her children, and the failure of the state social service agency to investigate the child abuse report filed 6 months before the homicide occurred. Of the more than 1,000 letters written to the studio after the broadcast, only 10 objected to the sympathetic treatment given to the Jahnke children’s situation (Prendergast, 1986).

When the convictions and sentences of the Jahnke teenagers were upheld by the Wyoming Supreme Court in separate appeals later that year, Wyoming Governor Ed Herschler commuted both sentences. Richard was ordered to be sent to a hospital for a few months for psychiatric evaluation and then placed in a juvenile facility until age 21 years. His sentence totaled 3 years, 13 days. Deborah’s sentence was commuted to 1 year of probation to be preceded by 1 month of intensive psychiatric intervention. Thirty days later, Deborah enrolled as a freshman at the University of Wyoming (Prendergast, 1986).

The Jahnke case was not the first case to capture widespread public attention. Parricide cases have been a source of public fascination for hundreds of years, as indicated by the Greek tragedies, such as Oedipus Rex and other classics (Newhill, 1991). We suspect that the interest the public has in reading about parricide cases is partly because of the horror evoked with the thought of “children” killing the very people who have given them life. The taboo against parricide is deeply rooted in two Biblical commandments (“honor thy father and thy mother” and “thou shall not kill”) dating back thousands of years (Heide, 1992). In addition, the biological link would suggest why parricides involving biological parents are more likely to receive media coverage than those involving stepparents. In our sample, the killing of biological parents was the primary focus of news accounts in U.S. and non-U.S. cases, only 5% of reported cases involved known stepparents.
The Accuracy of Media Reports of Parricide

Given the importance of the media in formulating public opinion and influencing public policy, the question becomes to what extent available media accounts accurately portray the phenomenon of parricide or focus on the more unusual cases and risk obscuring the problem? Consistent with the predictions of media experts, the current study provides evidence that media do indeed focus disproportionately on the more unsettling and horrifying events. Examination of parricides using the SHR database for the period 1976 through 1999 (Heide & Petee, 2003) allowed us to do an approximate measure of the accuracy of the 150 cases reported as occurring in the United States. Media reports, relative to SHR data, are far more likely to contain incidents involving multiple victims (41% vs. 14%) and multiple offenders (21% vs. 8%). Media reports are also more likely to exaggerate the involvement of juvenile offenders younger than age 18 years (56% vs. 22%) and female offenders (24% vs. 14%) when compared to U.S. arrest data.

The excessive attention given to these cases is not surprising; they shock the senses of the average person who is likely to read the account wanting to know how such events could occur. It is interesting to note that the discrepancy between the accounts of parricide reported by the media and the actual phenomena of parricide cases, as measured by SHR arrest data, resembles in some respects research comparing media depictions of the nature and extent of serial murder with known serial murder cases (Bailey & Hale, 2004; Epstein, 1995; Hickey, 1991; Jenkins, 1994). The media is likely to focus on the sensational cases because they fascinate at the same time that they horrify their audiences; they simultaneously attract and repel viewers and readers who peak through their fingers as their hands shield their eyes while media accounts flash vividly before them (Lowen, 2004).

Parricide cases involving multiple victims conjure up images of mothers and fathers being slaughtered and scenes of families being butchered alive by a son or daughter acting alone or together. Multiple offender parricides suggest offspring pairing up with siblings and friends to savagely attack the very men and women who gave them life. Cases involving juveniles evoke confusion. The public is tormented by competing images of vulnerable children driven to kill to maintain their lives, their person, and/or their sanity, of vicious children killing to remove obstacles to their immediate gratification, and of children so out of touch with reality that killing their own parents is viewed as acceptable and/or necessary behavior. Cases involving females regardless of age defy convention. Girls and women are expected to give and nurture life, they are not the ones who take life.

Parricide Differences in U.S. and non-U.S. Cases

It is interesting to note, analyses of available media reports revealed 12 significant differences between U.S. and non-U.S. cases of parricide. Four of these pertained to characteristics of parricide incidents (son acted alone, offspring type, weapon used, offender released). Gender differences were particularly noteworthy. When compared to U.S. media accounts of parricide, non-U.S. parricide cases were significantly more
likely than their U.S. counterparts to have sons kill their parents alone or to have had sons identified as the primary offender. In contrast, U.S. cases had significantly more daughters identified as the primary offender than non-U.S. parricides. Extensive analyses of SHR data indicate that the percentage involvement of females in the killing of parents is fairly close to their actual representation in U.S. parricide cases (Heide, 1993b; Heide & Petee, 2003) The differences in gender involvement, if reflective of true incidence, suggest that the killing of parents by females is not only rare but also is likely counternormative in non-U.S. countries, that is, females infrequently resort to violence of this magnitude. There may be several possible explanations for the very low rates of lethal violence by females in countries outside the United States. Girls and women may not see abuse perpetrated against them as wrong and as something that permits defensive action to be taken by them. The rare involvement of females in parricides in non-U.S. countries may also be partly because of the restricted availability of firearms in these countries. There is some evidence that girls and women are more likely to aggress against their abusive parents, particularly fathers, when they perceive that they are capable of prevailing against their tormentors (Heide, 1994).

Media reports indicated that U.S. parricide offenders were statistically more likely than non-U.S. offenders to use firearms and multiple weapons. Non-U.S. parricide offenders were significantly more likely than their U.S. counterparts to use knives, blunt objects, and other weapons, including personal weapons. The differences in weapon usage are likely because of the easy availability of guns in the United States, which is not seen in many countries worldwide. The lack of firearms available in many non-U.S. countries could easily contribute to the lower incidence of female involvement in parricides in these areas relative to the United States. As suggested above, firearm availability can enable a female to overpower a larger and stronger male; the use of guns by females and children against their parents is consistent with a physical strength hypothesis (see Heide, 1993c; Heide & Petee, 2003).

Reports of release and continuing incarceration were infrequent with media accounts across all countries, but particularly abroad. Dispositional and release information were available for only 149 of 226 identified cases. Of 42 non-U.S. cases and 107 U.S. cases with release data, significantly more offenders in other countries were likely to still be incarcerated than were U.S. killers. The differences in sentencing might be time bound. Prior to sentencing reforms in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, offenders, including those sentenced for homicide, often did not serve very long sentences, despite receiving extensive sentences (Heide, Spencer, Thompson, & Solomon, 2001; Sabol, 1999). These differences may disappear or lessen in time with the advent of life sentences without parole becoming increasingly more common in the United States even for juvenile homicide offenders (ACLU of Michigan, 2004).

One half of the six variables measuring motivation and clinical concern (abuse as motive, fight-related parricide, parricide as alcohol and/or drug induced) were found to reach statistical significance. Reported cases suggested that abuse was statistically more likely among U.S. parricide cases, with 40% of U.S. cases abuse related, compared to 18% of non-U.S. cases. Conversely, non-U.S. cases were significantly more likely than U.S. cases to have been associated with fights (62% vs. 45%) and alcohol
and/or drug influence at the time of the killing (18 vs. 6%). The greater reported incidence of abuse as an underlying dynamic in U.S. parricide cases relative to non-U.S. cases is very interesting and may reflect increased sensitivity to the existence of abuse in the United States rather than actual differences in the incidence of abuse cross-culturally. Significant attention has focused on abuse in the United States since the 1960s. Sexual abuse became an issue of concern beginning in the mid-1970s, a time when the United States was starting to focus on battered women who killed their husbands who were abusive (Heide, 1992; Heide et al., 2005).

In spite of the sketchy and limited nature of these media accounts, about two thirds of the cases seemed to clearly fit into one of Heide’s three types of parricide offenders, suggesting the usefulness of the typology in categorizing cases. It is interesting to note, media reports indicated that U.S. parricide offenders were significantly more likely than non-U.S. offenders to be classified as severely abused (25% vs. 8%), mentally ill (15% vs. 11%), and mixed classification types (12% vs. 7%). In contrast, non-U.S. cases were statistically more likely than U.S. cases to be classified as being dangerously antisocial (40% vs. 29%) or as difficult to classify (33% vs. 20%).

Not surprisingly, given the findings related to Heide’s typology, three of the indicators pertaining to the parricide offenders who were severely abused were statistically more common among U.S. parricide offenders than other nationalities. These factors were killed out of desperation or terror (32% vs. 18%), killed to protect self or others (33% vs. 10%), and had a long-standing history of prior abuse (35% vs. 17%). To what extent the greater prevalence of abuse in U.S. cases relative to non-U.S. cases is representative of the actual phenomenon of parricide cases is unknown and worthy of further scientific investigation. The higher incidence of abuse in U.S. parricide cases may reflect greater awareness of abuse by the media and an increased sensitivity to this issue by criminal justice agents and the public in the United States than in other countries.

Limitations of the Current Study and Directions for Future Research

As noted above, several differences emerged regarding media accounts of U.S. and non-U.S. parricide cases from this initial investigation. Notwithstanding these differences, it is interesting that so little information is available from existing media sources on many of these international parricide incidents. The outrage concerning this particular crime appears universal and of widespread interest across cultures and dates back to antiquity (Heide, 1992). Yet the lack of information beyond the report of the crime leaves many unanswered questions from a clinical and psychological standpoint. Although information on the criminal justice processing, disposition, and postconviction of many non-U.S. parricide cases exists, it is unclear if available information is representative of non-U.S. parricide cases as a whole.

This comparative research has four noticeable limitations. First, the current study relied on reported news accounts only available in the English language, the accuracy of which is not known. Accordingly, we were limited by what we can say about the
actual phenomenon of parricide. Reports of killings involving parents are often sketchy, particularly when it comes to providing information on pertinent legal information. The observations that we make are based on often-vague data, and for some variables, on very few cases. Follow-up commonly does not occur, especially on international cases of parricide. As a result, tracking the legal progress of cases is very difficult. The limited access to non-U.S. press and Internet information on these international cases beyond initial reports restricts these analyses further. Especially with respect to non-U.S. parricide offenders, there is clearly much more information that could be gathered to determine what differences may exist on a larger scale when compared with their U.S. counterparts. A study focusing on comparing parricides in the United States with those in Spanish-speaking countries, for example, might be significantly enhanced by reading online reports in Spanish and English.

Second, the relatively small sample size of the media accounts is a limitation of the current study. The number of non-U.S. cases \( n = 76 \) was particularly small, preventing closer examination of the phenomenon of parricide within and across different continents and countries (e.g., South America, Europe, Africa, Australia, and Asia). As news media outlets and Internet information sharing continue to grow, there is great potential for more-thorough and advanced analyses of this phenomenon from a cross-cultural perspective.

Third, our coding decisions with respect to motive and Heide’s typology indicators were made based on whether there was any evidence of a variable, say abuse. We coded yes if the news account mentioned that abuse had been present; we coded no if the news account indicated that the offender had not been abused or if the news account did not address this variable. Although these coding decisions are conventionally used and had very high interrater reliability in the current study, we do not know to what extent the absence of a variable was because of its inapplicability or the nonreporting of such information.

Fourth, the data were coded per incident and allowed for multiple-victim and multiple-offender data entries. However, accessing data on victims and offenders in multiple victims and offender cases was not readily available. In this article, demographic data on victims were not reported; future analyses will link victim data by victim type. Preliminary data were reported for the primary parricide offender in multiple offender incidents. Future analyses will refine these data as well.

This article clearly points to the need for future research to determine if these limited media accounts gathered here are a gauge of international parricide phenomena and how these cases may differ statistically from U.S. parricides. It may also be meaningful to track how media coverage of parricide from an international perspective continues to change over time, especially with respect to the areas of clinical concern and Heide’s typology of parricide offenders. As media outlets continue to grow and merge with international sources, the amount of data available will grow proportionally and offer researchers greater opportunities to explore these questions.

Future analyses will further explore the phenomenon of parricide using only cases from the United States. Observations made from news accounts of covered parricide cases could also be compared with officially reported national crime data on parri-
cides, which is not available in other countries. The SHR data can provide a yardstick by which to evaluate the generalizability of cases covered in the news with the actual incidence and characteristics of parricide offenders, victims, and incidents if the analysis is restricted to cases occurring in the United States. For example, do media accounts concerning demographic and case-related variables in juvenile parricide offender cases mirror patterns observed in national data reported by police departments and analyzed by the FBI? In addition, future analyses will look to see what light media accounts shed on understanding the dynamics involved in juvenile versus adult parricide offenders. This information may have important implications for meaningful and effective intervention before a tragedy occurs.

Appendix
Seventy-Three Variables Coded in 226 Incidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Valid Cases</th>
<th>% Valid</th>
<th>% Missing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year of offense</td>
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<td>96.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State if United States</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of primary offender at offense</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Any offenders younger than age 18 years?</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>96.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of primary offender</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>99.6</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race of primary offender</td>
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<td>47.3</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of victims a mother?</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of victims a father?</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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(continued)
## Appendix (continued)

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<td>Daughter acted alone?</td>
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## References


It made terrible sense. (1982, December 13). *Time*, p. 34.


