

Running head: THE FEMALE FAMILY ANNIHILATOR

The Female Family Annihilator, Restructuring Traditional Typologies: An Exploratory Study

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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**Certificate of Approval**

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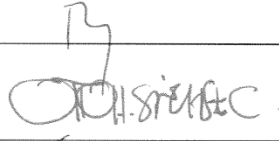
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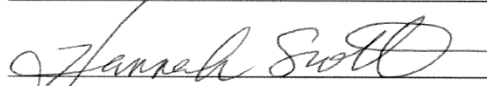
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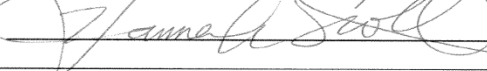
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**Abstract**

Although both female and male mass murderers have been studied, less attention has been paid to women who commit mass murder. Current literature suggests mass murders committed by women, regardless of offender choice, are well planned, predisposing factors and precipitating events prior to the offence have been noted. This study explored the patterns among the crimes of female family annihilators. This study focuses on an exploratory sample of North American cases, occurring between 1970 and 2010, where females were identified as killing four or more family members during what has been described as a single homicidal event. Using a North American database of newspaper accounts, patterns are uncovered by comparing variables including, but not limited to: motive, number of victims, method of murder, age of offender and victim age. The findings suggest that a clearer profile and set of definitions need to be adopted in discussions of female family annihilators. Practical and theoretical implications will be discussed.

*Key words:* Multiple murders, gender, mass murder, female offenders, family annihilators.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Women and Crime

#### Introduction

Within the social and cultural context of North America, women have fought for equal rights and recognition since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Chesney-Lind, 2006). For instance, feminist criminologists (Chesney-Lind, 2006; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Naffine, 1987) have called attention to the repeated omission and misrepresentation of criminal women within the fields of criminological theory and research. Women have challenged the predominate masculine nature of theories of crime, deviance, and social control (Chesney-Lind, 2006; Naffine, 1987). When general theories of crime were formulated, women were overlooked; thus offering little insight into the nature and motivations of the female criminal (see Lombroso & Ferrero, 1895). Even in the present, the female criminal, especially the female mass murderer, continues to receive little theoretical attention in academia. Yet, when women commit such rare and violent crimes (i.e., multiple murders), the offender tends to occupy a prominent spot under the public's gaze (Scott, 2005). This gaze is intensified when a woman kills her family. Perhaps this is because such violent female crimes are rare and thus considered a novelty (Adelbery & Currie 1987). However, regardless of the public's fascination with female violent offenders, there appears to be a lack of theories or typologies available to understand women who kill their families on a mass scale.

#### Women and criminology

Traditionally, criminology has been a male dominated discipline. Accordingly, the idea that women are of less interest and unworthy of a researcher's attention has been a long time

concern within the field of criminology (Flowers, 1987). Theory and research have traditionally focused on explaining male criminal behaviour, meaning that, traditional explanations for female criminal behaviour have typically been adapted from male-oriented findings (Naffine, 1987; Laberge, 1991; Leonard, 1982; Smart, 1979).

For instance, biological theorist Cesar Lombroso created a “born criminal” typology, which was originally developed maybe to explain male criminal behaviour. This biological theory of crime tended towards seeing crime as a form of illness caused by pathological factors specific to certain classes of individuals. Lombroso believed that criminals were physically different from other citizens. This criminal typology was later applied to female criminals in Lombroso and Ferrero’s (1895) study *The Female Offender*. When this theory was created, women were thought to be less evolved than men. Due to their lack of evolution, Lombroso and Ferrero (1985) believed women were naturally vengeful and jealous, as their moral sensibilities were deficient. Such theories heavily relied on what is referred to as biological determinism. In other words, the belief that individuals can develop physical or psychological characteristics to enable them to function more efficiently in their predetermined roles. Lombroso and Ferrero studied female criminality in isolation from all other social, economic, cultural, and historical phenomena, which ignores the variations in crime over time, which are believed to be caused by environmental and social factors (Naffine, 1987).

Feminist researchers argue that females were overlooked and simply ‘added into the mix and stirred,’ when such biological theories were developed, without considering the possible theoretical implications (Naffine, 1987). The reason it is important for macro theories of crime to address the differences among genders is best explained using the work of Steffensmeier and Allan (1996). They argued that if biological theories were not gender specific, then variations in

crime among genders would not exist. Furthermore, since genes change very slowly, there should be a steady rate of crime over time, which is not the case, crime rates have varied since Lombroso and Ferrero's (1895) study. In other words, men and women would commit crimes for the same reasons. However this is not the case. When studying criminal activity, different social conditions and situations among genders are also important to consider. Chesney-Lind (2006) argues that crime variations among genders can be justified by the differences in gender equality and social groups. Naffine (1987) put forward a similar argument in her analysis of Lombroso's (1895) work, concluding that it was an example of the patriarchy of academia and how an entire discipline could exert male dominance over females, in particular with respect to foci of studies.

It is also common for theories to be largely influenced by the social setting in which they are written. Naffine (1987) observed that during the time Lombroso and Ferrero's study was published women were considered subordinate to men. They were often viewed as property and largely economically dependent on men. In their study, women who broke the law were considered abnormal, non-traditional and "masculine." Naffine (1987) maintained that traditional biological theories disregarded the female offender because at the time they only represented a minor concern within criminology. It was not until women started moving towards a more liberated status (e.g., employment status), that the rate of reported female crime increased (Smart, 1979). Smart (1979) suggested that it was the evolving position of women, both socioeconomically and politically, that had granted women the opportunity to commit crimes that were previously perceived as very masculine. This is not to say that before the women's liberation movement in the 1970's females were not committing crimes. It just appears that traditional socialization techniques limited the perception of women in criminal roles. This perception is best explained through a socialization lens.

**The socialization of gender**

How “masculinity” and “femininity” are defined within a given cultural system may influence gender stereotypes. This is not to suggest that stereotypes are universal, however many individuals living within the same cultural system may share the same beliefs (Jensen, 2012). Often systems that support gender inequality focus on cultural stereotypes that heavily rely upon essentialist assumptions, when differences are due to biological traits, which are inherent to males and females (Jensen, 2012). For instance, traditional conceptions of the female role have portrayed women as nurturing caregivers as well as passive “gentle” souls. As a result they are often tasked with associated gendered norms (Cleeton, 2001). In addition, men are typically seen as “naturally” aggressive and rough, while women are perceived as “naturally” nurturing and passive, thus both are socialized in such ways (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Jensen, 2012).

Further, boys are more likely than girls to have their acts of aggression positively reinforced as it would typically be seen as unmasculine for a male to restrain himself, in times of anger or frustration (Gilbert, 2002). Conversely, young girls receive positive reinforcement when they exert self-control with regards to aggression, thus female aggression is often seen as the failure of self-control (Kruttschnitt, 2001). Ultimately, these gender stereotypes perpetuate the perception that when men are aggressive they are powerful and that when women are aggressive they are often acting out of desperation (Gilbert, 2002).

According to various studies (Krittschnitt, 2001; Steffensmeier, 2001), the gendered socialization of aggression has social implications. Women are socialized in a way which increases their vulnerability to victimization. In addition, men are socialized to dominate women, which places women in a susceptible position to victimization (Krittschnitt, 2001). For example, women often have the physical inability to defend themselves against physical violence, which is

frequently related to how they were socialized at a young age. Young girls are regularly taught that physical aggression is “un-lady like,” thus, they are not encouraged to amass physical strength (Doerner & Lab, 2005). Further, before the late-1960’s womens’ movement, female victims of sexual assault and rape were repeatedly judged based on how well their lifestyle measured up against social expectations of women (Chunn, Boyd, & Lessard, 2007). Stereotypes associated with female sexual assault victims frequently stem from the sexual double standard often applied to boys and girls: sex ruins girls’ lives and enhances boys’ lives (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2003). In addition, girls may use sexuality as a proxy of independence, which ultimately leads to seeking male approval, thereby reinforcing their status as sexual objects (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2003). Ultimately, gender stereotypes that permeate our social context serve to regulate female sexual behaviour which significantly impacts women’s lives.

Typically, women who commit intimate partner homicides are most often acting in response to fear for their safety (Kruttschnitt, Gartner & Feeraro, 2002; Websdale, 1999). It can be argued that domestic abuse stems from age-old stereotypes and the traditional expectation that women will play a subordinate role to men (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2003). Domestic violence is argued to be patterned on a hierarchy of roles conscripted and condoned in the social organization of gender (Websdale, 1999).

The terms offered to explain these cultural ideologies are hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Hegemonic masculinity is a theory that is often used to describe how “real” men are defined (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This term refers to how a man (or boy) is measured in terms of his masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is seen in every society where men are favoured. Four foci are commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity: (1) dominance over children, women, and masculinities; (2) work in the paid labor force, (3)

heterosexism, and (4) uncontrolled, driven sexuality (Jensen, 2012). In some cultures when men do not meet these expectations or when their masculinity is challenged they may need to reassert themselves in order to demonstrate that they are in fact men. Crime has been a common method used to reassert masculinity, which is particularly seen in crimes against women and children, and may demonstrate dominance (Jensen, 2012). Perhaps hegemonic masculinity offers some explanation as to why some cultures can more often envision males rather than females as violent offenders, which in turn could explain the abundance of theories targeted towards male perpetrators.

In contrast, emphasized femininity represents the idealized cultural form for women. For instance, common foci are: domestic unpaid labor, passivity and submissiveness, heterosexuality, and a controlled, man-centered sexuality (Jensen, 2012). Within unequal gender systems, to be a “good woman” is to abide by this male-centered system without challenging the gender dominance system (Messerchmidt, 1986). Although both types of idealized culture forms exist not everyone within a given culture abides by them or believes in them. The severity of each system varies among cultures and over time. It should be noted that the power represented by a gender ideology creates those gender norms within a given society, which impact all behaviour, including crime (Jensen, 2012). Thus many criminal women appear to face a form of “double deviance,” not only is she committing a crime, but also deviating from what is gender-acceptable (Jensen, 2012). It appears that in the past, many theorists could not envision women as violent offenders likely due to pervasive cultural ideologies pertaining to gender, thus explanations for female violent offenders were not created nor offered.

When a crime is committed, it is common for the media to focus on the gender of the perpetrator (Cleeton, 2001). Ultimately, this influences the way the public views the seriousness,

and severity of the crime (Haapasalo & Petaja, 1999). Along with gender, the literature also indicates that stereotypes may become more apparent when the crime is more unusual or serious, for example mass murder (e.g., Eaton, 1983; Wilczynski, 1997). Traditionally, violent female offenders were seen as stepping outside of the socially constructed role of femininity, which ultimately influenced the way these women were defined, classified and studied.

### **Defining violent women**

Violent female offences are often attributed to psychiatric illness, temporary or otherwise, resulting in the offender being classified as “mad” (Wilczynski, 1991). This classification stems from the fact that women commit fewer violent crimes than men and thus appear “out of place” in the criminal justice system (Wilczynski, 1991). Ultimately, violent behaviour by females is seen as abnormal and in need of special explanation; a concept that has led to a higher incidence of suspected mental illness in women than in men (Wilczynski, 1997). Violent behaviours in men is more often classified as aggressive and callous rather than the result of a psychiatric illness, even if a male might be suffering from a mental illness. The contrast is best explained by the different cultural ideologies associated with men and women. In comparison to women, men have not traditionally been scrutinized as carefully for behaving in a violent manner; they were simply men, being manly, breaking the law along the way (Farrell, Keppel & Titterington, 2011). This is not to suggest that society is more accepting of violent male offences over violent female offences, but that male violent offences do not elicit the same “shock value” as female violent offences. Women who commit violent homicides in general are subject to greater social scrutiny (see Farrell, et al., 2001; Messing & Heeren, 2008). It is apparent that cultural ideologies such as hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity influence the way criminological theories are developed, which could explain the gender gap

associated with research directed at violent offenders.

In addition to influencing criminological theories, cultural ideologies also influence the way the public view female offenders. Women who deviate from gender expectations have traditionally been dichotomized as mad or bad (Wilczynski, 1997). This is often seen in the infanticide and filicide literature (the killing of babies and children). It appears that, society has difficulty imagining a woman killing her children. In order to comprehend such a scenario, the public must classify her as mentally unstable. The very idea that a mother is capable of killing her child(ren) works against the emphasized feminine assumption that women are passive and nurturing (Jensen, 2012). When an illness-based explanation cannot be found to justify how a woman could defy her “nature” and kill her children, she is considered to be bad or evil (Wilczynski, 1991). Women who kill their children are generally seen to be deviant, stepping outside of the realm of behavioural expectations for women, which may affect how she is treated within the criminal system.

In addition, when a woman commits a crime in a “womanly” fashion (i.e. self defence) she is often dealt with in a less severe manner than a woman who kills in a more “manly” way (i.e. violent homicide) (Gilbert, 2002). This criminality debate, which is associated with sentencing, is referred to as the “chivalry” verse “brutalization” or “evil woman” argument (Wilczynski, 1991). Chivalry is the term applied to women who are said to be protected by the justice system and brutalization is the term used to describe women who are sentenced more harshly. Often women receive less severe sentences, when compared to men, because they are not seen as a threat to the public (Wilczynski, 1991). Violent male offenders are not often subjected to the “chivalry” debate. The criminal justice system will often sentence males in a manner that protects the public from further harm. Male violent offenders are seen as more



dangerous and blameworthy, and are punished accordingly (Godfrey, Farrall & Karstendt, 2005). Ultimately the treatment of the violent female offender is dependent upon how well she fits the emphasized femininity standards. For instance, if the female offender was perceived as a “good” woman by her community she might receive a less severe sentence than the “bad” woman who committed a similar crimes. In addition, males are almost always dealt with in accordance with the hegemonic masculinity criteria. Overall, it appears that there is difficulty in not only accepting the possibility of violent female offenders, but also in defining and explaining them. A better understanding of the criminal patterns among female offenders is needed in order to assist in identifying possible early precursors and indicators, which could lead to a better understanding of violent female offenders.

### **Patterns of gendered offending**

As previously mentioned, gender gaps in our understanding of patterns of crime are particularly evident when examining the literature on violent offences (e.g., Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). This gender gap is not as apparent among theories offering explanations for minor crimes such as robbery and theft (see Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996) as it is among explanations for more serious violent offences such as mass murder (see Messing & Heere, 2004). Thus, the topic of gender differences in patterns of mass murders is of particular interest in this study.

Overall, women disproportionately commit violent offenses in the context of domestic relationships (Jensen, 2001; Peterson, 1999; Silverman & Kennedy, 1988). It has been noted that women are more likely to kill their family members (i.e., children and intimate partners) than strangers (Jensen, 2001). Multiple theories have addressed female perpetrated homicides in the domestic context, concluding that women often kill intimate partners as a result of abuse (e.g., Fox & Zawitz, 2001; Peterson, 1999). In addition, women kill their intimate partners more

frequently than their children (e.g., Fox & Zawitz, 2001). Theories explaining why women kill their children (Alder & Polk, 2001; Crimmins et al., 1997) suggest that social isolation (e.g., lack of social engagement) and limited resources (e.g., lack of social support) are contributing factors. Furthermore, it has been suggested that due to differing motivations within male and female homicides, there is a need for gender-specific theoretical explanations (Ogle et al., 1995).

Looking at men, they are often dominating actors in violent situations as offenders (Fox & Levin, 1998). Thus, male offenders have been researched more often and have received much more theoretical attention (e.g., Fox & Levin, 2005). In the present, as in the past, males have committed and continue to commit more crimes than women in North America (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2011). For example, according to the *Bureau of Justice Statistics* (2008) in the United States, males were seven times more likely than females to commit murder. In addition, males were more likely to be involved in drug (90.5%) and gang-related homicides (94.6%). Furthermore, women are more likely to be the victims of male offenders (21.0%) than female offenders (2.2%). Additionally, an intimate partner killed two out of five (40%) female murder victims (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2011). Overall, women in North America are more often victims of violent crimes rather than the offenders, which may be a partial explanation of the lack of theories associated with violent female offenders.

Homicidal women account for a small percentage of violent offenders and an even smaller percentage of mass murderers, especially in the domestic context (Messing & Heeren, 2004). Traditionally, the occurrence of female mass murderers was considered to be non-existent. Women were simply overlooked in criminological research as possible perpetrators (see Dietz, 1986; Levin & Fox, 1985). Feminist criminologists argue that since women's offenses

only comprise of a small portion of all offences, they have not been given priority (Adelbery & Currie, 1987). Although women who commit mass murder in the domestic context are infrequent, they still exist and require academic attention. Ultimately, it is important for theories of criminal behaviour take into account these gender differences, otherwise they fail to acknowledge what sets female offenders apart from their male counterparts.

### **The homicidal female**

Like most offenders, homicidal women come under the public's gaze and are subject to the broad theories that are offered to explain criminal behaviour (Ogle, Maier-Katkin, & Bernard, 1995). A review of the literature associated with homicidal women has indicated that although useful, these theories appear to be too general in some respects (e.g., Alder & Polk, 2001; Crimmins et al., 1997; Peterson, 1999). For example, child homicide theories suggest women who kill their children are often subject to environments in which they are under both physical and psychological stress (Alder & Polk, 2001; Crimmins et al., 1997). Although these factors can be used to identify patterns among women who kill their children, they do not account for the small number of women who mass murder their families. For instance, social inequality, patriarchy, stress, and low self-esteem, have proven to be factors present in the lives of homicidal women (e.g., Alder & Polk, 2001; Crimmins et al., 1997; Peterson, 1999). However, it is difficult to state that these factors are the sole contributors in motivating women to kill. In other words, many women who also face the aforementioned barriers do not kill their families (Messing & Heeren, 2004). Theories should further distinguish the differences among homicidal women. Due to the small number and diversity of female murderers, it is difficult to understand what motivates the *typical* homicidal woman, since motives among homicidal women vary greatly (e.g., filicidal, mass, intimate partner violence).

Researchers such as Ogle et al., (1995) have suggested that homicidal women within the domestic context tend to be socially conforming and passive and, as such, often find themselves subjected to oppressive situations. As a result these women seem to erupt erratically into violence when stress becomes too overwhelming. Data shows that women who participate in the social world (e.g., gain full time employment) while maintaining the primary caregiver role at home, are more often subject to the possibility of internal tensions (Weisheit, 1986). This is not to say that all women who are primary caregivers will kill; rather the suggestion is that patterns of violence have emerged among those women who give primary care. Although such theories may point out the commonalities among certain homicidal women, they fail to encompass the underlying causes of female homicides. Additional difficulties arise when attempting to distinguish between homicidal theories based on victim type.

Looking more generally at gendered patterns of homicide, women kill most commonly in the domestic arena and intimate partners are killed more frequently than children by women (Messing & Heeren , 2004). A review of the Messing and Heeren's (2004) study on gendered homicide indicated a lack of theories associated with females who kill multiple family members at once. Although there is a paucity of research in the area on female mass murders who target their family, parallels may be drawn from what is known about female homicide offenders.

Earlier literature concerning child homicide has suggested children are both sources of frustration and easy targets for the alleviation of frustration (e.g., Totman, 1978) and that their deaths are often the result of excessive physical punishment (Ward et al., 1969). Due to the relatively small number of cases, the limitation with these theories lies in the narrow focus on single rather than multiple homicides of children. Messing and Heeren's (2004), study on female multiple murderers found conflicting evidence about women who kill their children. For

instance, previous child homicide studies (Alder & Polk, 2001; Wilczynski, 1997) suggested child abuse to be a contributing factor to murder. However, Messing and Heeren (2004) did not find child abuse to be a precipitating event to the multiple homicides of children. Perhaps the limitation of previous theories concerning child homicides (Alder & Polk, 2001) is that episodes of child abuse were often characterized as accidents and were unlikely to include a second victim. Evidentially, general child homicide theories do not offer explanations for the multiple murders of children.

In addition, theories of female violence against intimate partners also focus on single victim homicides responding to violent victimization (e.g., Peterson, 1999). Thus, there appears to be a lack of theories offered to explain the multiple murders of family members by a female. Society has a better understanding of male, rather than female, multiple murderers (Messing & Heeren, 2004). This is not to suggest that society welcomes or encourages such male behaviour, however, violent criminal men seem to be more socially expected (Ogle, Maier-Katkin, & Bernard, 1995). Thus, multiple murder theories have traditionally focused on male perpetrators. Perhaps this exclusion is the result of traditional stereotypes based on socialization techniques: women are too feminine to commit violent crimes. Understanding this gap requires an overview of the multiple homicide literature which will be the focus below.

## **Multiple Homicides**

### **Introduction**

The majority of multiple homicides are committed by male perpetrators (Dietz, 1986; Levin & Fox, 1985; Leyton, 1986; Hickey, 1997). In fact, in one of the first articles written in this area, Steven Egger (1984) argued that serial murder was as a crime solely committed by men. In addition, because mass murders are most frequently committed by men (Levin & Fox,

1985) and women are often the victims, researchers (e.g., Hickey, 1997) generally overlook the possibility of female perpetrators (Messing & Heeren, 2004).

Researchers and the public are fascinated with the motivations of the ‘criminal mind’ (Fox & Levin, 2005). The public is often more intrigued when rare and violent crimes, such as multiple homicides, are committed by women. Researchers have suggested that perhaps this is because women traditionally have been viewed as incapable of such violence (Ogle, et al., 1995). As stories of female multiple murderers have surfaced, researchers (e.g., Messing & Heeren, 2004; Scott, 2005), noted the lack of gender inclusive multiple homicide theories, suggesting a less gendered theory of multiple murders that included the different patterns of women offenders. Although, female multiple murderers are not a new phenomenon (see Segrave, 1992) there is a lack of corresponding research and literature focused on understanding their motivations.

### **Defining multiple homicides**

In the early 1980s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) launched a training initiative to document and study repeat killers. It was here that the trichotomy of multiple murders was established: mass, spree, and serial murders. Mass murder, as defined by the FBI’s Behavioural Sciences Unit (BSU), involves the murder of four or more victims during a single event, in a single location, with no emotional cooling off period (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2005; Levin & Fox, 1985). Spree murders happen over a short period of time, can involve multiple locations, and require multiple victims. Serial murders occur over an extended period of time, with an emotional cooling off period, and require more than two victims (Fox & Levin, 2005). There are specific elements that distinguish mass murders from spree and serial murders. According to Holmes and Holmes (1994) these elements include the following: “the number of victims, the location of the murders, the time of the killings, and the possibility of distance

between the murders” (p. 53). Differentiating between serial, spree and mass murder is important for understanding the character of the perpetrator (Holmes & Holmes, 1994)

The terms ‘mass murder’ and ‘serial murder’ are often confused and used interchangeably. Although both are types of multiple homicides, the term mass murder has been used as a blanket term to describe all multiple homicide situations. To better distinguish between the two, and to avoid further confusion, this study will use multiple murders/homicides as opposed to mass murder to describe serial, spree, and mass murders collectively. Individually speaking, serial murder will refer to sequential multiple homicides with a “cool down” period (Fox & Levin, 2005) while mass murder will refer to multiple homicides that occur within a 24-hour time frame (Duwe, 2004). Although researchers such as Fox and Levin (1998) study mass, spree, and serial murder separately, there is some overlap in the study of multiple murderers as a homogenous group. A unified typology is used to study multiple murderers based on their motivation rather than timing. In addition, Fox and Levin noted there are common factors among multiple murderers, for example, biological and environmental aspects such as childhood abuse. Researchers of both serial and mass murderers share the inability to predict and prevent this behavior. Multiple murderers wreak havoc on their victims and on anxious communities while the number of perpetrators is relatively few in comparison to single homicide offenders (Fox & Levin, 1998).

Although time is a major distinguishing factor between serial and mass murders there are other commonalities. For instance, mass murderers are often identified as “loners” (Hempel, et al., 1999), dealing with feelings of depression, anger and frustration (Fox & Levin, 2005) whereas, serial murderers are often characterized as killing for symbolic value based on ritualistic behaviour (Scott, 2005). Fox and Levin (1992) reported that many mass murders end

with the murderers turning themselves in, being killed by police officials, or killing themselves. When compared to serial murderers, it was found that mass murderers have no interest in staying alive or escaping the authorities (Fox & Levin, 2005). Further, mass murderers will most likely kill those they feel are responsible for their frustrations (Levin & Fox, 1992).

### **Defining mass murder**

Homicide experts have studied mass murders using a variety of methods and definitions each having a distinct set of strengths and weaknesses (Duwe, 2004; Dietz, 1986), Fox & Levin, 1998; Holmes & Holmes, 2010; Messing & Heeren, 2004). Indeed, research has argued that using one definition of mass murder is difficult due to conflicting opinions (e.g., Duwe, 2004; Holmes & Holmes, 2010) and thus many criminologists have created different definitions, typologies, and classifications for mass murder(ers) (Dietz, 1986; Holmes & Holmes, 1992; 1994; 2001; Levin & Fox, 1985; 1998). Currently, there are debates surrounding the number of victims used to define mass murder (Fox & Levin, 1998; Holmes & Holmes, 2010; Lester, 1995). Some researchers use a victim count of two (e.g., Messing & Herren, 2004) or three as the baseline (e.g., Hickey, 1997; Holmes and DeBurger, 1988; Holmes and Holmes, 1992), while others use four (e.g., Duwe, 2007; Fox and Levin, 1998). To ensure the analysis of the current study is consistent with (arguably) the most widely accepted (among law enforcement) mass murder definition, the current study will base its analysis on the FBI's definition, which is the killing of four or more persons at one time (FBI, 2005). This quantitative requirement distinguishes mass murders from a "single homicide," the killing of one victim, a "double homicide," the killing of two victims and a "triple homicide," the killing of three victims. It should also be noted that Levin and Fox (1985), who are among the authorities of multiple homicide research, use the same victim count as the FBI in their definition with similar



justification. This number helps to distinguish mass killings from homicides in general (Fox & Levin, 1998). Although this definition is not universally accepted, it is the most popular.

There is some consensus regarding what to exclude from a working definition, such as, highly organized and/or institutional killings (Duwe, 2004; Fox & Levin, 1998). Examples of institutional killings include war crimes like the murders committed by Hitler's Third Reich as well as political terrorism. According to the literature two basic elements define mass murder: (1) the number of victims, and (2) the time elapsed during the murders (Duwe, 2004; Holmes & Holmes, 2001) Consensus in the literature shows that a mass murderer involves an individual who is most often acting alone and murders their victims all at once (Hickey, 1997; Levin & Fox, 1985; Leyton, 1986). Generally, the time between murders can last either a few minutes or as long as several hours (Fox & Levin, 1998). Some researchers have limited the time frame to a 24-hour period in order to distinguish mass murder from spree, and serial murder (e.g., Dietz, 1986; Duwe, 2000, 2004). Mass murderers are further distinguished by type, based on: victim relationship (Dietz, 1986), weapon type, offender motive, and offender age which are discussed below (Hempel, Meloy & Richards, 1999). Nevertheless, there are still disagreements when it comes to a universal definition of mass murder.

Levin and Fox (1985) conducted one of the first studies on multiple murders, developing a profile for the *typical* multiple murderer. This profile did not consider the possibility of women as potential perpetrators. Since then, multiple murder theories and typologies have been developed with a focus on male perpetrators (e.g., Dietz, 1986; Leyton, 1986). Although, in more recent years researchers have broadened their approach to include women (e.g., Messing & Heeren, 2004), there is still a lack of significant studies that focus on female perpetrators.

Typically, mass murder research has been concerned with the correlations of the crime

rather than the prevalence (Duwe, 2004). From the 1950s through to the early 1980s, mass murder research focused primarily on the psychological and psychiatric nature of perpetrators (e.g., Westermeyer, 1982) and relied heavily on clinical interviews with offenders, which mainly focused on extreme and atypical mass killings (Duwe, 2004). Levin and Fox (1985) moved beyond the case study approach; using FBI data on simultaneous homicides they studied 42 cases of mass and serial murders and developed profiles of multiple homicides based on different motivations.

Since the publication of Levin and Fox's (1985) study, researchers have broadened their approach by developing various descriptive typologies of mass murderers. Although multiple killings still perplex criminologists and not all mass murderers fit into a classification, typologies are created in an attempt to describe the common elements of these crimes, with specific attention to victim selection and overall patterns (Duwe, 2004). For example, in 1986 Dietz developed a three-type classification of mass murder: the family annihilator (i.e., depressed, paranoid and often suicidal individual who murders their entire family), the pseudocommandos (i.e., persons who are fascinated with weapons and carry out military style assaults in public), and set and run killers (i.e., those who set fires out of revenge). Other researchers like Holmes & Holmes (1992; 1994) retained the above categories in their typologies, but added additional classifications such as the disciple (i.e., a young person following the orders of a charismatic leader) and the disgruntled employee (i.e., someone who is fired and seeks revenge on former employer). Holmes and Holmes (2001) later added the disgruntled citizen (i.e., kills out of revenge, believing society has wronged them), and the psychotic killer (i.e., suffering from a break with reality who kills with a lack of feeling and may hear voices or see visions).

In 1996, Levin and Fox created an additional typology of multiple murderers solely based

on motive. The typology resulted in the following categories: power, revenge, loyalty, profit and terror. The motive of power is seen in cases where the murderer wishes to gain control and dominance over their victims. The theme of loyalty is best described as an instrumental motive, the murderers are often inspired to kill by a warped sense of love and loyalty. This is commonly seen in cases where the murderer has a desire to save their loved ones from misery and hardship. Some multiple murderers kill to gain a profit, which could be to eliminate witnesses or victims to a crime. Multiple murderers who kill to “send a message” are often categorized as terrorists acts (Fox & Levin, 1998). Revenge is the most common motive among mass murderers (Duwe, 2004). Cases of revenge are further divided into three subcategories based on victim selection: individual-specific, category-specific, and nonspecific. Other researchers who have followed Levin and Fox’s (1996) motive-based typologies include Petee, Padgett, and York (1997), however their typology is limited to mass killings that occurred in public.

Overall, mass murderers tend to have several differentiating characteristics from ordinary homicidal offenders (e.g., Fox & Levin, 1998). Generally speaking, mass murderers are slightly older than the average homicidal offender (Duwe, 2000; Fox & Levin, 1998; Levin & Fox, 1996). In addition, mass murderers are more likely to be described as loners whose murders are well planned and motivated by revenge (see Fox & Levin, 1998). A handgun or rifle is the most frequent weapon choice. In addition, the majority of mass murderers have clear-cut motives; their victims are often specifically chosen because of who they are or what they represent (Fox & Levin, 1998).

Levin and Fox (1985) have suggested that there are a range of factors that contribute to the event of mass murder. Based on an analysis of numerous case studies, the following categories were developed: predisposed (i.e., long-term preconditions that are internalized which

contribute to the personality of the killer), precipitants (i.e., short-term triggers) and facilitators (i.e., conditions that influence the likelihood of a violent outburst). Although useful, Fox and Levin's (1998) theoretical explanations ultimately focus on male perpetrators, failing to explain the contributions of female mass murderers within the domestic context. The closest proposed profile to this group of females is the family annihilator, discussed in the next section (Fox & Levin, 2005).

### **The family annihilator: A profile**

Patterns and trends that apply to the crimes and profiles of male mass murderers have been generally well established (e.g., Dietz, 1986; Levin & Fox, 1985). The subsequent profile of the family annihilator has been compiled based on the literature to date. Since the focus of this study will be on mass murders committed against the family, the family annihilator typology will be used. The family annihilator is the most common type of mass killer,

Usually the senior man of the house, who is depressed, paranoid, intoxicated or a combination of these. He kills each member of the family who is present, sometimes including pets. He may commit suicide after killing the others, or may force the police to kill him (Dietz, 1986, p. 482).

Dietz (1986) coined the term family annihilator. Although this classification is still used, there are problems with his associated definition of mass murder. According to Dietz's definition, five or more victims need to be involved, where three or more are killed. While this definition of mass murder may make sense in some contexts, when it comes to family annihilation Dietz's definition is problematic with specific reference to the number of required victims. Dietz's definition limits family annihilator cases to only large families and would not include families of only one to two children. Further, Dietz's typology is heavily targeted towards male perpetrators who kill themselves. Dietz's definition and his associated family annihilator profile exclude

cases that could very well be considered family annihilation, but have been overlooked due to the sex of the perpetrator and the number of victims. Researchers such as Fox and Levin (2005) and Holmes and Holmes (2000) have made significant contributions to the profile of the family annihilator which will be discussed below.

Holmes and Holmes (2000) describe the family annihilator as operating based on intrinsic motivations, meaning the motivations are unknown. They are assumed to be internal to the killer. The family annihilator's anticipated gain is often psychological, intrinsic in nature. Although not every murderer will share the same motivation, like Holmes and Holmes, Fox and Levin (2005) have noted some commonalities among family annihilators. When it comes to victim selection all family annihilators have chosen their family on a non-random basis. In addition, the family annihilator usually has no need to travel to kill their victims since they often murder their family members inside their home. Fox and Levin (2008) describe the typical family annihilator in the following way: "...a head of the household who perceived that he has total say over his clan, in life and in death. He feels entitled by his position to determine his family's destiny" (p. 76). They go on to say that often the husband/father will kill his children in what is termed, "murder by proxy", linking the innocent victims (children) with the primary victim (mother/wife).

The problem with Fox and Levin's profile is that there is no required number of victims, meaning the number of included cases will vary based on the definition of mass murder chosen. For example, using the same sample, one study could use a definition of mass murder that requires two victims, while another may require five. Ultimately the two studies may show different numbers of family annihilator cases based on the required number of victims. In addition, this profile does not attempt to explain female family annihilators. Although Fox and Levin (2005) did mention a subcategory of family annihilators: *murdering moms*, they never

provided a separate profile. Further, they did not apply the family annihilator profile to that group of women. In fact, their lack of attention to these women simply added to the exclusion problem.

### **The female mass murderer**

With the majority of female homicide perpetrators choosing their victims within the domestic context, it is interesting to note the lack of gender specific theories of family multiple murderers. Despite the common myth that multiple murderers kill strangers, Duwe (2007) noted that multiple murderers, (both male and female) are much more likely to kill someone they know, most commonly family members. Messing and Heeren (2004) found the majority of female multiple murderers were most likely to dispatch their biological children. Messing and Heeren also found that many women killed their children as a result of a loss of domestic status (i.e., no longer the primary caregiver). Instead of trying to recreate their lives creating new roles for themselves women chose to escape their distress through violence against their children. Furthermore, it was found that these multiple child murders seemed to be carefully calculated and very rarely committed in the spur of the moment (Messing & Heeren, 2004). Thus, when considered in a domestic context, women mass murder their biological children more frequently than any other member of their family. They also do so in a way that suggests forethought and preparation. For instance Messing and Heeren (2004) found that the female multiple murderers in their study were highly efficient, calculated and controlled killers, characteristics suggested by the lack of personal injuries and the infrequency of stranger victims killed. In addition, many researchers have suggested that some women kill their families as a method of exercising what they perceive to be care and protection (Alder & Polk, 2001; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Messing & Heeren, 2004), whereas many men who kill in the domestic context are motivated by revenge

and/or loyalty (Fox & Levin, 1998). Revenge murders occur when the perpetrator seeks to get even with people they know. Otherwise known as “murder by proxy,” this expressive murderer sees certain victims (i.e. their children) as an extension of another victim (i.e. their spouse). On the other hand, “suicide by proxy” is when the killer takes not only their life but also the lives of their family to protect them from some sort of anticipated pain and suffering.

Some multiple homicide literature does discuss female mass murderers (e.g., Cleeton, 2001; Heberle, 1999; Messing & Heeren, 2004), however, in comparison to the number of studies about male mass murderers the focus on women is extremely limited, thus biasing the overall literature in favour of men (e.g., Dietz, 1986; Fox & Levin, 1998). Because female murderers tend to commonly kill close intimates, such as, children, and spouses (Messing & Heeren, 2004) the category of family annihilator appears to be the closest classification that could be used to describe female mass murderers within the domestic context, however the terms’ inclusivity is yet unknown.

Researchers who focus on child homicide (e.g., Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Palmero, 1997) have found differing motives for why women kill their child(ren). For instance, some women kill their young children because they were unplanned or they did not want to endure the burdens of raising a child (Resnick, 1969). In addition, child homicide research (e.g., Daly & Wilson 2001; Resnick, 1969; Wilczynski, 1997) has also suggested that men and women kill their children for different reasons. Notably, there are sex-specific theories for child homicides, but not for family annihilations.

Traditional mass typologies that target the family annihilator do not explain the motivational differences among genders (Messing and Heeren, 2004). Although mothers who annihilate their families are rare, they differ from other homicidal women and thus warrant

academic attention (Messing & Heeren, 2004). The women outlined in this study have various motives for killing their children, ranging from mental disorders to spousal revenge. Although there is limited theory and research addressing maternal mass filicides, there is considerable attention given to child homicide (e.g., McKee, 2006; Palermo, 2002; Resnick, 1969). Child homicide research provides gender specific theories recognizing the motivational differences among sexes (e.g., Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Scott, 1973a). The following section specifically outlines theory and research that recognizes the motivational differences among genders.

### **The female family annihilator**

Cases of female multiple murderers seem to capture the public's attention with a substantial amount of fascination (Cleeton, 2001; Scott, 2005). For example, significant media attention was given to Susan Smith, a mother who drowned her two children by driving her car into a river in 1994 (Cleeton, 2001). Although these types of female perpetrated multiple homicides are rare, the exaggerated media attention gives the impression that these types of incidents occur frequently (Cleeton, 2001). The lives and mothering skills of the offenders are scrutinized by the media and judged by the public (Cleeton, 2001). A common public response to these types of crimes is astonishment followed by the question: "how could a mother kill her own children?" Often, the public will focus on whether or not the woman was acting in accordance with her role as a mother (see Cleeton, 2001). If the offender is characterized as having typically been a good mother and having adhered to her "natural" role as homemaker prior to killing her family, she is viewed differently than an offender who is a poor mother, who neglects and then kills her children (see Isser & Schwartz, 2008). Ultimately, women who kill members of their family, especially children, are viewed differently by society depending upon media portrayal and public views (Cleeton, 2001; Wilczynski, 1997).



Similarly, filicidal (parents who kill their children) females are characterized different in the public sphere when compared to filicidal males (e.g., Stanton, Simpson & Wouldes, 2000). It was also found that the criminal justice system responds very differently to men and women who kill their children. This difference was found in all stages of the legal process, which reflected the view that men who commit crimes are bad and normal and women are mad and abnormal. For example, women were more likely than men to receive psychiatric pleas and non-custodial sentences. Conversely, men tended to use 'normal' pleas and receive more custodial sentences (Wilczynski, 1997).

### **Summary**

Until recently, multiple murders have been considered only a male perpetrated crime, especially in the domestic context. Such extreme acts of violence were thought to only occur *against* women, not *by* women. After reviewing the literature it is clear that a gender bias exists in the traditional literature and analysis of this type of crime and that female multiple murderers have been overlooked in the research on this topic. Some recent literature (e.g., Messing & Herren, 2004) has acknowledged this omission, and further studies should follow suit. This category of homicidal women has hereunto been disregarded, and current theories and definitions are not sufficient to explain criminal patterns of female multiple murderers.

This chapter has introduced the reader to the literature surrounding multiple homicides as it pertains to the main focus of this study which is on mass murders that are committed by females within a domestic context. Distinctions are made between the various definitions and theories with regard to serial, spree, and mass murders. Traditional theories of crime coupled with multiple murder theories have been examined through a feminist lens to show how women have been overlooked in the literature on mass murderers. Ultimately, female multiple murderers

are an understudied group. As mentioned earlier, female multiple murderers in the domestic context (see Messing and Heeren, 2004) rarely commit crimes in the spur of the moment. Thus, there is the possibility of identifying common predisposing factors. If this is the case, preventive measures could possibly be identified.

The main focus of this study is on mass murder and the subcategory of family annihilator. The importance surrounding women's presence in the literature was discussed using recent research from the last decade (e.g., Cleeton, 2001; Messing & Heeren, 2004; 2008; Ferrell, et al., 2011) to set the theoretical foundation. Traditional profiles of family annihilators were examined to determine how female mass murderers compare to the traditional profile and definition set out by Levin and Fox (1985) and the FBI (2005). The next chapter introduces the reader to six women and provides an overview of how these cases will be examined. These women have killed, and have been convicted of killing, four or more of their family members, fitting the numerical requirements of a mass murderer as set out by Levin and Fox (1985) and the FBI (2005). The reason this definition will be used is because it clearly distinguishes mass murderers from other homicidal offenders, there is no doubt that the offenders who fit this definition are indeed mass murderers. In addition, this definition is used by the most recognized authorities on the subject matter, both in research and law enforcement. A review of the literature has indicated a gender gap among family annihilators; this study will attempt to reduce that gap.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Method and Case Studies

#### Current study

Using a variety of cases, the current study will touch on identifying gender bias that underlies theoretical perceptions of female criminal behaviour, using the extreme example of female mass murderers. It has been suggested (e.g., Scott, 2005) that in studying extreme examples of homicide, such as, multiple murders, clarity of cultural biases arise. Perhaps this is because multiple murders are rare and societal reactions can be addressed more clearly using rare events because of the amount of attention they receive.

This study will show how the homicidal patterns of female family annihilators differ from other forms of mass murderer patterns. This study will illustrate the homicidal patterns of women who kill four or more of their family members all at once. It will concentrate primarily on illustrating their motivations and methods of killing. Furthermore, generally accepted definitions of multiple murders used in traditional theories fail to encapsulate this group of homicidal women. This study will develop another possible profile of female family annihilators using descriptive statistics to develop a profile. Alternative theoretical approaches to the study of female family annihilators will also be explored, such as; expanding traditional definitions and profiles to include this group of women.

The women highlighted in this study are examples of extreme and rare cases of violence against their families. They have deviated from their ascribed roles as nurturing passive beings and have been recognized as dangerous murderers. Women have been socialized to nurture their families, providing a caring environment for their children. Ultimately, traditional gender roles encourage women to be at home nurturing their children and families. Studies have shown that

women often kill in the domestic context (Jensen, 2001; Messing & Heeren, 2004) and most frequently in their homes (Goetting, 1987; Mann, 1990; Wolfgang, 1958).

This study will report and examine cases of women who fit Levin and Fox's (1985) and the FBI's (2005) widely accepted definition of a mass murderer, which clearly distinguishes mass murderers from other homicidal offenders. The current study was designed to determine to what extent females fit the traditional mass murderer definition and profile of the family annihilator. Based on the literature (Dietz, 1986; Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 1994; 2000), both specific and general findings related to behaviour, background, and demographic characteristics of mass murderers were investigated with respect to female family annihilators, such as precipitating events (e.g., sudden loss i.e. separation from a loved one), facilitators (e.g., isolated from social support), and predisposers (e.g., history of frustration and/or failure).

Information from press reports and cases were analyzed. Data was collected and where possible, early predisposing factors were recorded. This was done in an attempt to establish some commonalities between these women both before, and after they killed. The results and profiles of these women were then compared to the traditional family annihilator profile and the definition provided by the FBI (2005) and used by founding fathers of multiple murders: Levin and Fox (1985).

Earlier literature presented by researchers such as Dietz (1986), Fox and Levin (1998; 2005), and Holmes and Holmes (2000) was analyzed in order to link mass murder theory to past news reports presented by various newspapers (via online databases: ProQuest, Lexis-Nexis, etc.). Online databases have increased the accessibility of newspaper archives. In addition, using the internet as a research tool aided information gathering as well as increasing access to a

limited amount of data. In particular, having multiple newspaper archives available electronically allowed for a narrow topic search of North American cases between 1970 and 2010.

The chosen geographical location and time frame were selected because cases tended to have more accurate information, and North American databases were largely available. This is perhaps due to an increase in media outlets and attention to multiple homicides over the past 40 years. As a result, the use of multiple online library databases allowed for a comprehensive review of various newspapers. For example, ProQuest provides full-text access to over 200 major U.S newspapers and the Lexis-Nexis database covers over 140 newspapers, the majority of which are Canadian. Further, subjects in North America were the focus of this exploratory study as the profile being tested was created based on North American data (see Dietz, 1986; Fox & Levin, 1985; 1998; 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 1992; 1994). Thus, in order to stay consistent with previous literature and studies, the current study too focused on North America.

Messing, Heeren (2004) and Boyd (2011) have noted that women who commit mass murder in the domestic context rarely commit their crimes spontaneously. Rather their actions are often calculated and well planned. Furthermore, it is noted that men and women who commit mass murder do so for different reasons (Boyd, 2011; Messing & Heeren, 2004). Mass murders by males often stem from frustration or anger. Females typically kill out of compassion and care for their families (Boyd, 2011). The profile of the family annihilator created by Dietz (1986), and frequently used by Fox and Levin (1998; 2005) as well as by Holmes and Holmes (1994; 2000), overlooks the female who commits domestic mass murder.

A review of the previous literature identified a gap associated with research directed at female family annihilators. As a result it was probable that: the traditional family annihilator profile and associated theories would fail to explain female family annihilators, as men and

women commit crimes for different reasons and in different ways. This was hypothesized based on previous studies that focused on the gender differences among multiple murderers (e.g., Farrell, et al., 2011; Keeney & Heide, 1994; Messing & Heeren, 2004).

A deductive content analysis was the method used for gathering data for this thesis project. This method was chosen for the following reasons. First, the researcher used a structured analysis that was operationalized on the basis of previous mass murder literature (e.g., Dietz, 1986, Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005, Holmes & Holmes, 1994; 2000). Second, the purpose of the study was to test the effect of gender on the existing definitions and typologies associated with the focal sub category.

Six cases were chosen based on availability and access of information from the period 1970 to 2010. From this list, six female mass murderers, who acted alone, were identified and selected. The researcher selected cases using Newton's (1993) non-scholarly work and newspaper archives via online databases. Cases were analyzed using a structured categorization matrix developed from previous theories and literature associated with the family annihilator (Dietz, 1986, Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005, Holmes & Holmes, 1994; 2000).

## **Method**

**Preparation.** During the preparation phase of the deductive content analysis, the researcher started with selecting the unit of analysis. For this study, the unit of analysis was female mass murderers within the domestic context. Using Levin and Fox's (1985) frequently cited definition as the point of reference, which clearly helps distinguish mass murder from homicide generally. Cases were required to fit the following criteria: a criminal homicide claiming four or more family victims (not including the perpetrator), a female perpetrator acting alone, the incidents had to occur within a 24 hour time period, and occurred in North America

during the time frame of 1970 to 2010. After the units of analyses were chosen and the term female family annihilator was operationalized, the researcher searched for relevant cases via online databases. This search would supplement Dr. Scott's (2003) female multiple murderer databases, which she had collected over several years.

Specifically, Scott used non-scholarly resources such as Newton (1993) to generate a list of female multiple murderers. Although Newton's (1993) work is not considered to be an academic source, it acted as a starting point to approach the overall topic of female mass murderers. Offenders who met the definitional criteria were then searched by name using online databases in order to gather as much information (in numerous formats) as possible (news reports, interviews, etc.).

After the perusal of various indexes for identification purposes, articles were analyzed and used to gather information. To build upon preliminary data collection, female family annihilators were identified using Newton's (1993) work, along with the work of Jenson (2012). Lexis-Nexis and ProQuest databases were used to search additional cases. The search terms "murder," "female," and "mass" were entered to generate the widest possible search for locating the sampling frame. Search results were then carefully examined for female perpetrators fitting the criteria established for this thesis study (see Table 1 for a list of variables). Throughout this procedure, screen captures and articles were printed from the newspaper databases, collected in files, and summarized in cover sheets. A total of six female family annihilators were ultimately identified and non-randomly selected for analysis based on high amounts of press coverage.

**Organization.** As discussed, the researcher wanted to test the existing family annihilator typology as established by Dietz (1986), Fox and Levin (1998; 2005) and Holmes and Holmes (2000). Using previous research a structured matrix of analysis was developed using variables

previously identified (see appendix for a full list of measures). Each case was assigned a folder and included a cover sheet, which identified various variables that were used in the reporting phase.

**Reporting.** After the categorization matrix was developed, all the data that was collected was reviewed for content and coded according to the identified categories, which will be seen extensively in the results section. The women selected for the analysis were chosen because they had sufficient documentation to build an adequate case description. This description was then compared to the traditional family annihilator profile established by research (Dietz, 1986; Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 2000).

### **Case summaries**

In this section, the lives of Stella Delores Almarex, Patricia Bolin, Harjit Kaur Brar, Susan Eubanks, Khoua Her, and Jeanna Anne Wright will be discussed. All of these women killed, or attempted to kill, four or more family members, fitting the conservative definition of a *mass murderer* (see Levin & Fox, 1985). In this study, the all-inclusive term *family annihilator* represents the mass murderer who kills members of their family. While this profile is useful for explaining male perpetrators, it falls short in the explanation of female murderers. The language used to understand this group of mass murderers echoes male domination, as Dietz (1986) has shown. Even though male mass murderers are more common, this explanation ignores the possibility of a female murderer. Although many of the women discussed in the following section share similar characteristics to their male counterparts, they also differ in many ways. For example, many of the women ended their own lives, leaving motive for their crime unknown. Furthermore, many did not kill their spouses, which is a common trait among males.

Additionally, females who exclusively kill members of their family have not been looked



at as a collective entity to determine if and how they fit the traditional family annihilator profile. Limited research has addressed this concern, providing an incomplete analysis of a few pages within a chapter (see Ramsland, 2005). Thus, previous literature regarding family annihilators appears to be too exclusive and male focused.

The next section has documented women who acted alone to kill members of their family on a mass scale. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these particular women were selected because sufficient documentation was available to build an adequate description of their crimes. All information was collected after each case was brought to the public's attention through newspapers. The women are discussed in alphabetical order and viewed as a whole.

#### **The six women:**

##### **Alvarez, Stella Delores (Date of murders: June 18, 1980)**

Stella Delores Alvarez was 29 years old, an American citizen and resident of Norfolk, Nebraska when she murdered her children. She was recently separated from her husband and living in their family home. The couple was preparing to divorce despite accounts from neighbours claiming to have “never heard a cross word in any shape or form” (Accuse mother, 1980). Source material did not mention whether or not Mr. Anthony Alvarez was residing with Stella and their children at the time of the incident. However, it was known that Anthony Alvarez, was the breadwinner of the family, employed at a steel company in Norfolk. The family had recently moved to the neighbourhood, where they were described as “a very loving couple” (Accuse mother, 1980). Source material did not list Stella's occupation however, neighbours described their children to be “so clean all the time” (Accuse mother, 1980), which could suggest that she was a stay at home mother. Stella was described by neighbours as “loving” (Accuse mother, 1980), “a beautiful woman” (Mother held, 1980), and “awfully nice”

(Accuse mother, 1980). Prior to June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1980 the couple was thought to be living in “peace and harmony” (Accuse mother, 1980).

On June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1980, Stella used a .32 calibre revolver and knife to kill her four daughters: twins Stella Loriane (age 2) and Gloria Irene (age 2), Odelia (age 10) and Antoinette (age 7). Odelia and Gloria Irene died of gunshot wounds, while Stella Loriane and Antoinette died of knife wounds (Accuse mother, 1980). Authorities found the children in the family home, in their beds, and in separate rooms (Mother held, 1989; Woman kills, 1980; 4 Daughters, 1989). Mr. Almarez was not present during the murders. After killing her daughters Stella turned the gun on herself. She was taken to Norfolk hospital with a gunshot wound to her head, where she was arrested the next day.

The motivation for Stella’s crimes was never reported, however, it would later be discovered that she was mentally unstable by the courts. She was found not guilty by reason of insanity (Mother held, 1980). There was no mention of Stella’s childhood history in the reports analyzed, however, the fact that she was in the midst of a separation is an important precipitating incident. Stella killed all those members of her family who were present at the time of the offence and attempted suicide. It can be argued that her anticipated gain was psychological since no significant gains of the murders were reported (e.g., monetary).

Stella was charged with four counts of murder and tried November, 1980. She was found ‘not guilty’ by reason of insanity and was committed to the Lincoln Regional Center for treatment. Psychiatrists at Lincoln Center released Stella in October 1985. Source material did not mention her exact diagnosis or current whereabouts (Woman kills, 1980).

**Bolin, Patricia (Date of murders: December 8, 1976)**

Patricia Bolin was 40 years old, an American citizen and resident of Arlington, Ohio when she annihilated her family. She was married to Ronald Bolin, a successful businessman, and founder of his own mechanical-design company. The couple lived together with their three children in the family home, which was located in a wealthy Columbus suburb (Ohio mother, 1976). Friends of the family described the Bolin's life as "ideal" (Ohio mother, 1976). Patricia's occupation was unlisted in source material, however it appeared that Mr. Bolin was the breadwinner for the family and the couple was financially settled.

On December 8<sup>th</sup> 1976 Patricia Bolin shot and killed her husband Ron (age 43), daughter Tamela (age 12) , and son Todd (age 9) . She attempted to kill daughter Alicia (age 15), but her gun misfired (Mom kills, 1976). According to news reports, police who arrived at the scene said, "the place looked like a slaughter house" (Mom kills, 1976). The triggering events remains unknown to police, however, they believe that Ron was the first to be killed, running for his life when he was hit by several bullets (head, neck, and chest) (Exec's wife, 1976). Ron was found inside the front door of his home, while his daughter Tamela and son Todd were found in the kitchen and family room (Exec's wife, 1976).

Source material stated that Tamela came home from school, when Patricia met her in the garage. Patricia fatally shot Tamela, dragging her lifeless body in the house, leaving Tamela between the house and the garage (Mom kills, 1976). Afterwards, Todd was called into the house by Patricia, and shot in the head. His body was found wearing a winter coat and hat (Mom kills, 1976). Later, reports would state that he had called out for help: "She's shooting everyone!" (Mom kills, 1976). Patricia's eldest daughter, Alicia, was the last to come home, entering through the garage like her sister Tamela, Alicia followed the trail of her sister's blood. Calling out for her mother, Patricia met Alicia in the kitchen with her pistol pointed at her. Pulling the

trigger Patricia discovered that her gun was empty. Despite her mother's orders to wait in her room, Alicia ran to a neighbour's house and called the police (Mom kills, 1976).

Officer Thomas French was first to arrive on scene. Trying to enter through the front door, French was blocked out by Ron's body. As he circled the house with his flashlight, he saw Patricia standing with her pistol aimed at him (Mom kills, 1976). French ducked out of sight, and when he surfaced again he saw Patricia with her gun pointed at her temple. Officers were forcing down the door when they heard Patricia's last shot. When officers entered into the house they found four bodies—Ron, Tamela, Todd and Patricia (Mom kills, 1976).

Following the incident, police and news officials would explain Patricia's actions as her simply going "berserk" (Exec's wife, 1976). However, the gun was purchased on October 25<sup>th</sup> and hidden in her sewing box at home (Exec's wife, 1976). The purchase of the gun was viewed as a sign of premeditation among detectives (Exec's wife, 1976). Moreover, Patricia fired 17 shots, yet only 10 were accounted for. The motive for her crimes was unknown and there was no criminal trial because Patricia killed herself (Mother kills, 1976).

### **Brar, Harjit Kaur (Date of murders: May 1, 1979)**

Harjit was a 32 year old immigrant to Canada when she murdered her children. First settling in Montreal, Harjit met and married Santokh Brar, an Indian businessman. After exchanging vows, the couple would move to Calgary, Alberta (Woman throws, 1979). Harjit and Santokh were living together with their four daughters at the time of the murders. Harjit's occupation was unlisted in source material, but it appeared that Santokh was the breadwinner of the family.

Shortly after moving to Alberta, Harjit gave birth to a son, who died of cancer at five years old. After mourning their son's death for two years, Harjit went on to give birth to four

daughters: Ravinder (age 6), Savinder (age 4), Amrit (age 2), and Sukhjit (age 1) (Woman throws, 1979). Harjit was described as a pleasant and happy woman by friends: “She was always laughing. We never noticed anything” (Woman throws, 1979). On the outside, her life seemed well-ordered, however, friends would later state that she never stopped grieving over the loss of her son (Woman throws, 1979). No one can say for certain what caused Harjit to do what happened next. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1979 Harjit took her children swimming, and returned home to her husband (Woman throws, 1979). When Santokh went to bed at his usual time of nine o’clock, Harjit stayed up claiming to aid to her sick daughter (Woman throws, 1979). Harjit removed her children from the family home on the night of the murders and brought them to Bow River.

At approximately 10:00 P.M., witnesses watched as Harjit threw her children into the Bow River from a bridge above (Woman throws, 1979). She tossed her three oldest children in first, and then jumped in after them with her youngest in her arms (Woman throws, 1979). Witnesses said that the children offered no resistance, and all five had drowned before help could arrive (Loss of son, 1979). Harjit’s motive was unknown and there was no criminal trial since she committed suicide.

### **Eubanks, Susan (Date of murders: October 26, 1997)**

Susan Eubanks was 35 years old, an American citizen and resident of San Marcos, California when she shot her four sons. She was filing for divorce from her second marriage, and was living alone with her four sons in their San Marcos home. Susan had a boyfriend, but according to source material they broke up on the day of the murders. Eubanks was unemployed, receiving workers’ compensation and Social Security benefits from a work-related injury. She was in financial trouble, owing \$40,000 in credit card bills (Charges prepared, 1997).

On October 26, 1997, Susan Eubanks of San Marcos, California shot and killed her four

sons: Brandon (age 14), Brigham (age 6), Austin (age 7), and Matthew (age 4). Brigham died from multiple gun shot wounds to the head at close range. Austin was shot once in the head and Brandon suffered two wounds, one in the head and another in the neck (Charges prepared, 1997). Matthew died the following day in the Children's Hospital in San Diego after being in critical condition and on life support from a gun shot wound to the head (Mother allegedly, 1997). According to the Medical Examiner's office, at least two of the boys had been shot more than once (Mother on, 1999). After shooting her sons, Susan shot herself in the stomach. According to source material, Susan shot herself as a result of an attempted suicide. Additionally, Ms. Eubanks' nephew was home during the killing and was found physically unharmed (San Diego, 1999).

Susan was a victim of domestic abuse at the hands of Eric Eubanks, her estranged husband who had been charged with misdemeanor battery (Mother allegedly, 1997). In addition, Susan had two restraining orders against her husband. According to reports Susan's eldest son, Brandon, wanted to live with his father, John Armstrong (Susan's first husband). Brandon had reached out to his paternal grandmother hours before the killings took place. Susan also spoke to the boy's grandmother a hour before the shootings, but was said to be incoherent (Closing arguments, 1999).

On the day the killings took place Susan's boyfriend, who she had recently broken up with, went to the house with two Sheriff's deputies to collect his belongings. Several hours later, Susan's estranged husband, Eric, called deputies to the house. Eric had received a threatening message on his pager and was concerned about his children's welfare (Mother on, 1999).

Susan's trial began in August of 1999, where prosecutors alleged that she killed her sons as a result of rage. According to prosecutors, this rage stemmed from the anger she felt towards

their fathers, as well as, her boyfriend who chose to leave her. Susan's defence lawyers claimed that the murders took place as a result of "blacking" out (Charges prepared, 1999). Her lawyers claimed that she had spent the day drinking and using prescription drugs and as a result, she became "robot-like" (Charges prepared, 1999). After two hours of deliberation, the jury found Susan guilty on all four counts of first-degree murder. Susan was sentenced to death in October of 1999 (Charges prepared, 1999).

### **Her, Khoua (Date of murders: September 3, 1998)**

Khousa Her was a 24-year-old Hmong refugee living in St. Paul, Minnesota with her six children when she ended their lives. She was recently separated from her husband and living in a housing project on her own with her children. Khousa held various translator and production jobs and was reported to be in financial stress and living in poverty. Khousa was often ridiculed by her former husband for working late, neglecting her motherly duties (Huckerby, 2003). Having immigrated to the United States six years prior to committing her crimes, Khousa had little extended family she could turn to after her separation.

On September 3, 1998, Her dialled 911 and reported that she had attempted suicide. When emergency officials responded to the call, they found Her lying semi-conscious with an extension cord around her neck (Woman pleads, 1998). Throughout the apartment, Her's six children: Kouaeai Hang, (age 11), Samson Hang (age 9), Nali Hang (age 9), Tang Lung Hang (age 7), Aee Hang (age 6), and Tang Ke Hang (age 5), lay dead. The children had been strangled to death using pieces of cloth (6 Children, 1998).

Looking back, Her was arranged to wed in Laos, at the age of 13. However, the couple had separated in the recent months leading up to the murders. The police had been called to the couple's home a number of times due to domestic violence. It was reported that Her was dealing

with feelings of depression and felt overwhelmed with the amount of responsibilities she had (Woman pleads, 1999). At Khoua's sentencing she stated: "There was too much I can't handle ... I had six kids. I was a single mom with no one to turn to ... I am not a bad person" (Huckerby, 2003, p.161).

Ms. Her had called her children in from outside one by one into their home, where she strangled each one (Woman pleads, 1999). In court, Her said that she tried to kill herself because she wanted to be with her children (Woman pleads, 1999). Khoua claimed to have killed out of love; she had recently been considering suicide and was worried about the fate of her children "If I died, then nobody would love my children" (Women pleads, 1998). Her was arrested and charged with six counts of homicide (6 Children, 1998). Her pled guilty to six counts of homicide and was sentenced to 33 years in prison (Woman pleads, 1999).

### **Wright, Jeanne Anne (Date of murders: November 10, 1983)**

Jeanne Anne Wright was an American citizen, born in New Jersey when she killed her children. She was also a 25 year old single mother of four. She dropped out of high school when she became pregnant with her first child. Jeanne would later go on to have three more children. The children belonged to two different men, however the identity of the fathers was unknown in source material (Jersey mother, 1983). Jeanne was pregnant with her fifth child, she did not have a permanent address and was living between her parents and friends' homes. She was forced to leave her parents' home when neighbours complained that the Wrights were violating their lease (Jersey drownings, 1983).

Unemployed and living on social assistance, Jeanne was in financial stress (Jersey mother, 1983). In October 1983, the State cut off Jeanne's food stamps and her welfare cheque arrived two weeks late (Jersey drowning, 1983). About a month later, on November 10<sup>th</sup>, Jeanne



took her children to the Cooper River. She had told her mother that she was going to stay at a friend's apartment with the children so they could help prepare for a birthday party (Jersey mother, 1983). Later, Grandmother Wright would call to check on the family and found out that no party had been planned. Over the next few days, Mrs. Wright repeatedly got in touch with her daughter to ask where the children were, but Jeanne would not answer. It was later mentioned in court that Jeanne was diagnosed and suffering from chronic depression and a borderline personality disorder. In addition, she was diagnosed as an epileptic and suffered grand mal seizures. She also displayed "bursts of temper" as described by family members (Jersey mother, 1983). Family members said at the time Jeanne believed that the father of the three oldest children planned to kidnap them. In addition, she was distraught over her inability to care for the children (Jersey woman, 1984).

When Jeanne arrived at the river she found a spot and stopped-- She was "trying the think" (Jersey mother, 1983). She drowned her children by placing them into the river one at a time. Jeanne said that her children were asleep when she "did away with them." Reports indicated that the water was six to eight feet deep (Jersey mother, 1983). There was no mention of the children being drugged. Investigators said that there appeared to be some gasping, as the children had water coming out of their mouths. Moreover, source material stated that "she (Jeanne) fished one of the children out by its heel, then put him back" (Jersey mother, 1983).

According to source material, Jeanne reported the children missing on November 12, 1983 saying she believed they had been kidnapped (Jersey mother, 1983). On November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1983 the body of two year old Jonathan was found on a river bank by a gasoline station attendant. Rescue workers began dragging the river and found the body of 11 month old, Juan (Jersey mother, 1983). On February 4<sup>th</sup> the body of five year old Emilio was found. On February

21<sup>st</sup>, 1984. The search for the fourth body, Janah was abandoned after Jeanne admitted to killing her children (Jersey woman, 1984). During sentencing, Judge Rossetti said that Jeanne killed her children “because they were better off dead than with their father” (Jersey mother, 1983), however Jeanne never commented on the statement. Jeanne was sentenced to four concurrent life terms in prison on April 19<sup>th</sup> 1984 (Jersey woman, 1984).

### **Summary**

This chapter has described the lives of six women, selected for analysis due to the availability of information and the fact that they had mass-killed at least four members of their family. These women acted on their own accord and committed mass murder within the domestic context. Collectively, these women are referred to as female family annihilators. Table 1 provides an overview of the murders and some characteristics of their perpetrators.

From the literature, the profile by Fox and Levin (1998; 2005) clearly states that the following characteristics of the case and offender should more than likely be present: the offender is male, probably the husband and/or father of the victims, is the principle wage earner for the family, often middle-aged, kills inside the family home, more often has obvious motives of revenge or loyalty, and is probably will attempt and succeed at suicide after the event. The profile created by Dietz (1986) adds that the following characteristics: the offender is the senior man of the house who kills all those present, sometimes including the family pet. Multiple homicide researchers Holmes and Holmes’ (2000), profile expand on these trends of the family annihilator: The offender kills based on intrinsic motivation, commonly uses firearms, anticipates a psychological gain, and victims are family members. The literature on the less rare female homicide offender suggests that children are the most common victims (Messing & Heeren, 2004). From these various profiles, variables were identified and data collected and are

illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

*List of Variables Associated With Offender and Offence Characteristics*

Variable name	Variable measurement	N	Mean	Range
Offender name	--	6		
Offender age at crime	--	6	30.5 years	24 to 40 years
Offender country of birth	United States	4		
	Canada	0		
	Other	2		
Household composition	Offender living alone	4		
	Offender living with spouse	2		
Offender Marital status	Single	1		
	Separated / divorced	3		
	Married	2		
Offender Occupation	Unlisted	3		
	Unemployed	2		
	Other	1		
Number of victims		26		11 months to 43 years
Victim-offender relationship	Family, child	25	6.2	11 months to 15 years
	Family, spouse	1	43	
Motivation	Intrinsic	6		
	Extrinsic	0		
Anticipated gain	Psychological	6		
	Expressive	0		
Family pet	Questioned in press	0		
	Not questioned in press	6		
Modus operandi	Gun	3		
	Strangulation	1		

	Knife	1		
	Drowning	2		
	Combination	1		
Location	Family home	4		
	Outside of family home	2		
Offender mental state at time of offence	Questioned in press	0		
	Not questioned in press	6		
Domestic violence	Mentioned in press	1		
	Not mentioned in press	5		
Victim age- numeric		26	7.6 years	
Victim age – categorical	Infant (0-11 months)	1	11 months	0-11 months
	Child (1-12 years)	22	6.1 years	1 -12 years
	Teen (13-19 years)	2	14.5	14-15 years
	Adult (20-54 years)	1	43	
Attempted suicide	Yes, successful	2		
	Yes, unsuccessful	3		
	No	1		
Charged with offences	Yes	3		
	No, offender committed suicide	2		
	No, committed to a treatment facility	1		

Cases compiled here also have suggested that female family annihilators may favor child over adult victims. These patterns are interesting as they contrast the traditional profile, which has a principle focus on the perpetrator killing their spouse. In addition, although the women highlighted above commonly used guns, drowning was also a frequent method of murder. Further, it was interesting that some women brought their children away from their homes to kill them, which deviates from the traditional profile. The remainder of the findings will be discussed in the next chapter, which will compare the cases discussed above in order to determine to what extent female patterns of offending are explained by the traditional measures of the family annihilator profile.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Findings

#### Introduction

All of the women discussed in the previous chapter are clear examples of mass murderers; each woman having her own motive. The next chapter attempts to draw comparisons among the female family annihilators discussed previously. Any patterns and/or similarities are identified and compared to those documented by Dietz (1986), Fox and Levin (2005), Holmes and Holmes (2000), and Messing and Heeren (2004).

#### Emerging patterns of female family annihilators

A comparison of the case summaries cited in the previous chapter resulted in the identification of several overall patterns. The women in the cases studied ranged in age from their early twenties to early forties. Victim selection was not random. The lack of spousal selection is an important factor. Some women killed themselves, others were convicted of their crimes, and one was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Each woman had her own motive and each crime is difficult to understand. In many respects these women are as difficult to understand as their male counterparts.

The data regarding offender background was inconclusive as little information was available on these women's lives prior to their criminal activities. For three of the six women, there were no reports on their childhood, only information about their criminal activities was documented. However, for the majority of the women discussed in the previous chapter, basic information about their lives prior to committing mass murder was available including their marital status, where they were currently living, and if they had immigrated to North America.

Raw numbers rather than percentages have been reported due to the small number of

subjects (n=6). Using raw numbers over percentages in samples less than 50 tends to give more stable and less leading results (see Keeney & Heide, 1994). Variables for which data was available in at least 50% of the cases (n=3) were included in the study with some exceptions. For instance, because the killing of the family pet, childhood history, and state of mind at time of offence was identified important by the literature (Dietz, 1986; Fox & Levin, 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 2000), they were included in the analysis when data was available.

Table 2

*Characteristics of a Non-Random Sample of Female Family Annihilators, 1970-2010*

Name of offender	Country of origin	Offender's age at discovery	Number of victims	Country murders took place in
Alvarez	United States	29	4	United States
Bolin	United States	40	Attempted: 4 Killed: 3	United States
Brar	India	32	4	Canada
Eubanks	United States	33	4	United States
Her	Laos	24	6	United States
Wright	United States	25	4	United States

*Note:* n = 6 offenders.

**Characteristics of the sample**

Table 2 illustrates the characteristics of the sample used in this study. The mean age at time of offence was 30.5 years, with a range of 16 years (24 to 40). Of the six women studied, two were immigrants to North America: one from India and one from Laos. Five of the six women committed their crimes in the United States, while the other woman committed her crimes in Canada. The six women were collectively responsible for the murders of twenty-six victims. One woman attempted to kill four victims, but was only successful in the homicide of

three. Notably, four of the six women killed four family members each, while one woman was successful in murdering six victims.

Of the six women, four killed their victims within their family homes. The other two women drowned their children in a river. Overall, it appears that the location of the killings was often inside the family home. Of the twenty-six victims, twenty-five were children and one was a spouse. The one spousal victim was aged 43. The mean age of the twenty-five child victims was 6.2 years, with a range of 15 years (1 to 15). Three of the six women used a gun as their weapon of choice with one of those three women using a knife as well, the significance of this finding is discussed in detail in the following chapter. Out of the remaining three women, one used the method of strangulation and the other two drowned their victims (See Table 3).

Table 3

*Case Characteristics of a Non-Random Sample of Female Family Annihilators, 1970-2010*

Name of offender	Victim-offender relationship	Modus operandi	Location of offences	Victim's age range
Alvarez	Children	Knife and gun	Family home: Norfolk, Nebraska	2 to 10 years
Bolin	Children and husband	Gun	Family home: Arlington, Ohio	9 to 43 years
Brar	Children	Drowning: were thrown over bridge into river	Bow River, Calgary	1 to 6 years
Eubanks	Children	Gun	Family home: San Marcos, San Diego	4 to 14 years
Her	Children	Strangulation with cloth	Family home: St. Paul Minnesota	5 to 11 years



Wright	Children	Drowning: children were placed in river	Cooper River, New Jersey	11 months to 7 years
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*Note:* n = 6 offenders.

### **Life experiences**

According to researchers Dietz (1986) and Fox and Levin (1998; 2005), the life experiences of the mass murderer are an important measure for the profile. It is common for precipitating incidents of the offence, for instance, the separation from a loved one to leave the killer feeling alone or lost. These incidents may cause the offender to feel disrupted with regards to the status of their family. Thus the status of the family unit at the time of the murders is important to examine. Table 4 gives a visual illustration of marital status of the women in this study at the time their offences were committed.

Table 4  
*Marital Status of Offenders*

Offender's name	Marital status at time of offence
Alvarez	Separated
Bolin	Married
Brar	Married
Eubanks	Single
Her	Separated
Wright	Single

*Note:* n = 6 offenders.

Two of the six women were married, but only Bolin killed her spouse. Three of the six women studied were separated from their spouses. In the case of Eubanks, she was divorced once and separated from her second husband. On the day Eubanks killed her children, she was

reported to have just broken up with her most recent boyfriend (Charges prepared, 1997). Wright was never married and was six months pregnant when she killed her four children. Her relationship status was not mentioned in the analyzed newspapers.

In the case of Eubanks, domestic violence was present in her second marriage, and her husband was charged with misdemeanor battery. Domestic violence was also suspected in the case of Brar, but charges were never laid. Intimate partner violence was never documented in the other four cases.

### **Occupation**

Only three out of the six offenders' occupations were listed in the newspapers analyzed. One woman held various production and translation jobs while the other two were listed as unemployed. Of the two unemployed women, one was receiving welfare and the other was receiving workers compensation and Social Security benefits due to a work related injury. Based on the information analyzed, almost half of these women (n=2) were experiencing occupational difficulties.

Eubanks was reported to be in "financial trouble," as she owed \$40,000 in credit card bills (Charges prepared, 1997). Wright was on social assistance, living in poverty without a permanent address. Shortly before the murders occurred she was living with family, but was forced to leave due to a violation in the lease. Khoua Her was a single mother living in a housing project at the time of the murders. A trend of poor or unstable living conditions was observed among these women, who were often the primary provider and caregiver for their families. It should be noted that it is unknown if these women were receiving any financial support from the fathers of their children or any third parties. Most of the offenders were unemployed or underemployed at the time of their crimes.

**Offence characteristics**

It is interesting to note the differences between the traditional profile and female family annihilators when it comes to victim selection. The traditional profile of the family annihilator dictates that he typically kills his spouse along with the children. However, the researcher has observed that the female family annihilator is different. In most cases, she does not kill the male counterpart associated with her children (n=5). Interestingly, only in the cases of Bolin and Brar was the female living with her spouse at the time of the killings. It should be noted that in the case of Brar, who was still married, she removed her children from the household out of the presence of their father to commit the murders. The only case in which the father was present at the time of the murders was that of Bolin and he was murdered along with the children. The researcher has determined that victim selection among female family annihilators differs from that of the traditional family annihilator profile, as she typically targets the children specifically. The female family annihilators' perception of "family" will be explored in subsequent sections, as this may be an indicating factor in victim selection. In addition, in all cases but Eubanks, all present at the time of the killings were murdered. Eubanks' nephew was home during the killing and was found physically unharmed (San Diego, 1999). This finding is similar with the perception that the female family annihilator may not have perceived certain people as members of her family.

After killing their victims, five of the six women attempted suicide—two were successful, one shot herself in the head and the other threw herself off a bridge. With respect to the three women who were unsuccessful: one shot herself in the stomach, one in the head and, the other tried to strangle herself with a cord. None of the women who successfully committed suicide left a suicide note, although one unsuccessful woman did. This pattern appears to differ

from when men kill their families. According to the traditional profile, male family annihilators will either kill themselves or be killed by the police (Fox & Levin, 1998). It appears that since men are often motivated by loyalty, they kill their loved ones to save them from the pain and suffering caused by the perpetrator's loss (Holmes & Holmes, 2004). The traditional profile does not distinguish between successful and unsuccessful suicide attempts, it simply states he kills "his entire family and then kills himself" (Fox & Levin, 2005, p.57). Thus the patterns among the current study's sample differs from the traditional profile targeted towards men.

In addition, it is assumed that the motives among the deceased offenders in the current study were intrinsic, only known to the offender. The motives of the offenders were difficult to establish in all six cases. When analyzed reports did not comment on an expressive motive an internal motivation was assumed. Out of three *unsuccessful* suicide attempts, one left a note that gave the impression she was motivated by revenge. However, she later denied this motive, claiming she was intoxicated at the time of the offence. The other offender, who attempted suicide but was unsuccessful, stated she killed her victims out of love. Since she was suicidal, she was worried that no one would have looked after her children after her death. While on trial, the judge for the sixth woman, Wright, said that she "determined her children were better off dead" (Jersey mother, 1984), since family members had commented on the possibility of the children's father kidnapping them (Jersey woman, 1984). However, this woman never stated her motive, which gave the researcher the impression she chose to keep it internal, or intrinsic. Overall, the motives of these crimes are only truly known by the perpetrators - the researcher can only make observations.

Furthermore, since none of the cases were reported to have significant or meaningful external value, as previously discussed, all six were classified as psychological under anticipated

gain, meaning the murders were not expressive (i.e. for monetary gain). With that being said, the state of mind of the women at the time of the killings was also analyzed. Two of the six women were reported by friends to have been suffering from depression. For instance, in the case of Her it was reported that she was “depressed over the amount of responsibility she had” (Johnson, 1998). In addition friends of Brar said she “still harboured grief for her five-year-old son, who died of cancer several years ago” (Loss of son, 1979). One woman, Eubanks, was intoxicated at the time of offences after “spending the day drinking and arguing with her boyfriend” (Relatives, friends, 1999). The state of mind of Bolin, one of the successful suicidal women, was unlisted, thus no conclusion was drawn there. It may be reasonable to state that depression may have been a factor in her death. Additionally, the mental state of Almarez at the time of the killings was not mentioned in analyzed reports. Finally, the sixth woman Wright was diagnosed with chronic depression and a borderline personality disorder. Notably, one woman was reported to have had an altered state of mind at the time of the offence (see Table 5). Further, only one of the six women was reported to have had a history of mental illness. It should be noted that this is the most accurate portrayal of these women given the information provided.

The four women who did not kill themselves went to trial. As mentioned, one woman was found not guilty by reason of insanity and sentenced to a treatment facility. Another woman pled guilty and was sentenced to four concurrent life terms. The third woman was found guilty, even though she was intoxicated at the time of the offence and was convicted of four counts of first-degree murder. She was sentenced to death. The fourth woman was found guilty and convicted of six counts of second-degree murder and sentenced to 50 years in prison.

Table 5

*Offender Characteristics of a Non-Random Sample of Female Family Annihilators, 1970-2010*

Offender's name	Offender's occupation	Offender's motivation	Offender's anticipated gain	Offender's mental state	Offender attempted suicide (post incident)
Alvarez	Unlisted	Intrinsic	Psychological	Unlisted	Yes: unsuccessful, shot herself in the head
Bolin	Unlisted	Intrinsic	Psychological	Unlisted	Yes: successful
Brar	Unlisted	Intrinsic	Psychological	Depressed according to friends	Yes: successful
Eubanks	Unemployed	Intrinsic	Psychological	Intoxicated at the time of shootings	Yes: unsuccessful shot herself in the stomach
Her	Held various production and translator jobs	Perpetrator claimed love	Psychological	Depressed according to friends	Yes: unsuccessful was found with cord around her neck
Wright	Unemployed	Intrinsic – Judge claimed she killed because she believed her children were better off dead	Psychological	Was diagnosed with chronic depression and a borderline personality disorder	No

*Note:* n = 6 offenders.

### **Summary**

Of these six women, the occupations of three were unlisted, two were unemployed, and one (Her) was employed. Wright was the only woman reported to be on social assistance. The modus operandi varied among the group: two of the women used a gun, one used strangulation, two drowned their victims, and one woman used a knife and gun. The motivations for the crimes were intrinsic to the individual. As mentioned above, many women were described by friends and family to be dealing with feelings of depression. For instance, Susan Eubanks left a suicide note for her estranged husband, even though she was unsuccessful in killing herself and later claimed her motivation differed from that stated in the note, which was to seek revenge on her estranged husband (Mother on, 1999). Khoua Her declared that she was suicidal and killed her children because if she died, her children would have been left uncared for. However, Her's suicide attempt did not result in death (Woman pleads, 1998). Individually, the women all chose their children as victims and only one killed her spouse. Four of the women killed at home, while the other two chose an outside location. Although four of the women attempted suicide, only two were successful. As a group these women appear to have a victim preference of children, see Table 5.

Together these six women are responsible for the murder of twenty-six victims. Three of the four women, who did not kill themselves, were found guilty of their crimes. Wright was sentenced to four concurrent life terms, Her was sentenced to 50 years, and Eubanks was sentenced to death. Almarez was the only woman committed to a treatment centre for reasons of insanity and was released in October of 1985. Five of the women were from the United States and one from Canada. Table 4 gives detailed descriptions of the women individually.

This chapter has examined some of the emerging patterns among female family

annihilators. Overall, it was discovered that the six women were more likely to kill children over adults. Those women who were separated from their spouses were more likely to only kill their children and not their partners. Those women who killed at home were likely to use a weapon found in that environment. The majority of these women were unemployed and in financial trouble. The patterns discovered in this chapter will be compared to what is known in the current literature in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Discussion and Conclusions

#### Introduction

The central goal of this exploratory study was to test the traditional profile of the family annihilator with the intention of developing a more effective means of classifying female family annihilators. The results of the current study have shown that further research is necessary before any comprehensive and empirically valid classification system of family annihilators can emerge. Moreover, there are discrepancies between previously published research in this subject and the offenders described in this study. The generated findings are the focus of this discussion.

#### Limitations

There are several limitations that must be recognized prior to the discussion of the current study. First, the current study examined the cases associated with only six women, although not a large or generalizable sample, the discrepancies discussed below may be the result of the particular cases included. The offenders and homicides included in this research were from known female family annihilators, drawn from a population identified primarily from non-academic sources. This was a small purposive sample, which included rare offenders illustrating significant qualitative differences between the traditional family annihilator profile and the women previously discussed. In addition, this particular group of homicidal women may present similar characteristics to family annihilators. Finally, the offenders in this study may also differ from those who did not receive similar media attention, thus were not examined in the current study.

Access to information on each case was the second major limitation of this study. It was

difficult and in some cases not possible to obtain legal case documents for all the cases analyzed. Therefore, newspaper articles were the most abundant and available sources of information on these murderers and their crimes. These cases are rare, the offenders often kill themselves, thus detection of certain variables can be difficult to determine. For example, the motivation was difficult to determine for those offenders who committed suicide and did not leave a note. In addition, the reliance on media accounts as a data source may result in inaccurate case details and oversampling of highly publicized cases (Farrell, et al., 2011). As with the use of any secondary media data source, there is the possibility that the reporter have been misstated facts or arrived at misleading conclusions, which were subsequently interpreted as factual by the researcher and analyzed for the purpose of this study.

Admittedly, the central goal of the current study was to test the profile of the family annihilator with hope to provide a more effective means of classifying female family annihilators. The results of the current study have shown that further research is necessary before any comprehensive and empirically valid classification system of female family annihilators will emerge. However, discrepancies between previously published research and the offenders described in the previous chapter warrant important results and thus are the focus of this discussion.

In discussing a final limitation of this study, it should be noted that these findings, when compared to other materials published on female mass murderers in the domestic context, might be an artifact of the small sample and the sample frame, as well as the data source utilized. The use of Levin and Fox's (1985) and the FBI's (2005) definition of mass murder may have limited the sample size of the current study, when compared to other mass murder studies due to the requirement of four victims. For instance, in Messing and Heeren's (2004) study a two victim

count was used, which lead to their 32 case sample size between the years 1993 to 2001. They further noted that when they compared their sample using a victim count of three it decreased to only 16 cases. The current study differs from previous studies on female mass murderers (e.g., Messing & Heeren, 2004) in that the definition used is consistent with that used by the FBI and multiple homicide research authorities Fox and Levin. Rather than studying cases using an operationalized definition of two, which could be argued to not fully define mass murderers, to ensure that definitional issues would not be a basis for criticism, this study used the frequently cited definition of the FBI (2005) and Levin and Fox (1985). These distinctions insist the forthcoming comparisons are exploratory and must be considered in light of the various limitations presented. Further, the use of Dietz (1986), Fox and Levin (1998; 2005), and Holmes and Holmes' (2000) research to develop the categorization matrix used may have limited the sample size because of the variables used in traditional family annihilator profile.

## **Discussion**

The current study has identified a gap within the previous family annihilator literature; the traditional profile fails to identify women as possible perpetrators (e.g., Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 2000). In particular, the traditional family annihilator profile assumes that offenders are older, heterosexual, married, more mature males, who are the sole or primary income earners for their households. Although research has indicated that male mass murderers outnumber female mass murderers, which may justify the focus on male perpetrators in the past (e.g. Messing & Heeren, 2004), this traditional profile contains gender bias.

First, the language used in the traditional profile assumes the offender is male. The profile uses words such as "he" and "his" (see for example Dietz, 1986, p. 482 and Fox & Levin, 1985, p. 47-48). Second, this type of mass murder is assumed to only occur in male-headed

households. Finally, the heavy reliance on the motivation of a family annihilator has been based on that of revenge. The slaughter of children are often due to reasons of relational aggression and loyalty (e.g., protecting family from a life of pain and suffering). This has proven to be problematic in explaining cases of female family annihilators. The findings of the current study acknowledges this gender gap, identifies differences, and suggests future research targeting patterns common among female family annihilators.

Table 6  
*Summary of Key Findings in Relation to Previous Literature*

Variable	Confirmed	Partially confirmed	Not confirmed
Motivation		X	
Anticipated gain		X	
Location of killings		X	
Commit suicide		X	
Killed all those present at time of offence		X	
Victim selection		X	
Weapon choice		X	
Modus Operandi		X	
Senior male of household			X
Occupation			X
Offender's age			X
Family pet			X
Killing of spouse			X

The findings of the current study suggest new areas for exploration with regard to the established profile of female family annihilators (see Table 6). Of the variables for which data was available and could be analyzed, differences were found between the traditional profile of family annihilators and the female offenders discussed in the previous chapter. Specifically differences were found with respect to modus operandi, occupation, killing of spouse, offender's age, head of household, and the killing of a family pet.

According to the traditional profile of the family annihilator, the killer will almost always use a gun to kill his victims. Although a gun was used by half (n=3) of the women in this study, it was used as the only weapon of choice in two cases, in the other case a knife was used in conjunction with a gun. It should also be noted that the same number of women (n=2) used the method of drowning. This finding suggests partial confirmation for the weapon of choice variable in the traditional profile. It appears women use different modus operandi than stated in the traditional profile.

Further, the traditional profile states the family annihilator will most likely be the senior male who is the breadwinner of the family. According to Fox and Levin (2003), the family annihilator will often be motivated to kill based on a warped sense of love and loyalty. They found that many family annihilators in their study killed their families as the result of a loss of job and they were despondent over the fate of their family unit due to this loss. Ultimately the family annihilators in their study believed they were protecting their family from misery and hardship. The findings of the current study partially confirm this finding, although the majority (n=4) of the women were unemployed/unlisted, they were still responsible for providing their families with everyday necessities. They may have killed their families for similar reasons, but

the triggering event was possibly not the loss of a job.

Further, Dietz's (1986) profile states that the family annihilator, who is the senior male, will kill his entire family (all who are present), all at once, which may include the family pet. Later research conducted by Fox and Levin (2003), stated that sometimes the family annihilator will kill his estranged spouse and children out of revenge. The findings of the current study are not supported in the literature. Only one of the women in the sample who was married and living with her spouse killed her husband. In addition three women who were separated and not living with their ex-spouses, did not kill their ex-spouses. Furthermore, in the case of Eubanks, she did not kill all those family members present at the time of the killings. In all cases, there was no mention of animal cruelty or premature death.

Some similarities were found between the traditional profile and the women in this study with respect to motivation, anticipated gain, location of killings, and attempted suicide, suggesting some commonalities among the group classification. Ultimately the findings of this study imply a lack of compliance when applying the traditional profile of the family annihilator to the group of women discussed in previous chapters. Therefore, one of the strengths of this study was the focus on variables previously reported on family annihilators.

This finding may suggest that having a larger family at a younger age may be a distinctive characteristic of female family annihilators that was not considered in the traditional profile. For example, Khoua Her had given birth to all six of her children before the age of 24, having her first at age 13. These kinds of childcare demands are extensive and difficult to fulfill by any woman, let alone a recently single woman who was relatively new to the country and was dealing with financial troubles. Overall, the current study suggests that the correlation between the age of the offender and the number of children should be examined in future research.

The characteristics analyzed within this study indicate some contradictory evidence with regards to the offender's age at the time of the offence. Previous literature regarding family annihilators has suggested the offender is often "middle-aged" (Fox & Levin, 2003, p.50). The literature on male family annihilators does not give an exact mean of age, which makes it difficult to determine what "middle-aged" represents. Statistics Canada (2011) reports that the average Canadian is expected to live 80.9 years. The U.S Bureau of the Census (2008), noted the average American is expected to live 78.0 years. Taking these findings into account "middle-aged" is estimated to be around 38 to 40 years. The average age of female in this study is 8 to 10 years less than that estimated.

The small non-generalizable sample, suggests that these women are younger than what the traditional profile indicates. The women profiled in this study appear to have an average age which falls within childbearing years, which may indicate that some of these women could have been enduring stress related to motherhood, as seen in Messing and Heeren's (2004) study. For instance, findings of the current study indicated the mean age at the time of the offences was 30.5 years. When considering the average age of childbearing years in North America and the fact that all of the women within this sample had at least three children, it could be possible that some of the women within this study were dealing with stress associated with childbirth. The average age of childbearing years ranges from 25 to 34 years in Canada and 25 to 29 years in the United States (Statistics Canada, 2011; U.S Bureau of the Census, 2008). In comparison to the general population, the average woman gives birth at age 29.7 in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011) and 25.0 in the United States. Half of the women in this sample already had four children at these ages. Further, two of those women were raising their children on their own. In the U.S the average house size was 2.58 people per house, while in Canada it was 3.0 people per

household (Statistics Canada, 2011; U.S Bureau of the Census, 2008). All of the women in this sample have above average household sizes.

Previous literature did not take family size or gender-specific triggering events into account when the current profile was created by Dietz (1986). Those offenders who did not receive support from their families or surrounding communities may have felt desperate. It is possible that the responsibilities of motherhood may have triggered their actions. For example, those offenders who immigrated to North America without their extended families may have had a difficult time raising their children in a new country without family support. This finding does not suggest that being an immigrant may influence a woman to kill her children; however, it suggests that a lack of family and social support may have isolated the offender, leaving them with feelings of loneliness and frustration. These are possible indicators in the current sample. For example Her and Brar had both immigrated to North America at a young age, starting their families in a new, unfamiliar country. Thus, the traditional profile should not limit triggering events to the loss of a job or separation from a loved one.

Consistent with previous literature (Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005), the family annihilators in this sample killed all those family members present at the time of the incident, except in the case of Eubanks, who did not kill her nephew who was present at the crime scene but physically unharmed. Previous literature on males indicated that the offender would kill their spouse and children or those present at the time of murder. However, in this sample there was a lack of spousal killing. This may be due to the fact that the majority of the women were separated or not currently living with their children's father. It appears the overall household composition is difficult to compare to male forms of this crime among female family annihilators.

The findings suggest that the profile used by Fox and Levin (1998) is too limited with



regards to what is considered *family*. Previous literature has given the impression that the offender kills their entire family, defined as spouse, children, and in some cases the family pet which implies that the offender's are living with their spouses (Dietz, 1986; Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005, Holmes & Holmes, 2000). In addition, Fox and Levin (2003) have noted that the family annihilator will often kill their ex-spouses even if not living with them at the time of the killings. This statement gives the impression that the term family extends to ex-spouses, who do not have to be living with the offender at the time of the killings.

The findings suggest that even if separated or divorced, the female family annihilator still kills her entire family, however she may have a different concept of family. For instance, she may not view the children's estranged father as a member of her current family, whereas the traditional profile suggest that ex-spouses are killed even if not currently living with the offender. Specifically, when a female family annihilator is the head of the household (n=4) she does not kill the children's father. Even when the child's father is present in the family (as seen in the case of Brar) she may not kill him. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that he is either considered an obstacle to her harming children or she is simply not interested in killing him. For instance, Brar brought her children away from her husband and family home to kill them, as her husband was home at the time of the deaths (Murder-suicide, 1979). This is an important indicator because it affects many measures in the traditional profile.

First, this alternative view of family could be a result of the woman's attempt to define herself as an individual. This trend in family composition seems to reflect research that indicates that the retreat from the traditional family might be the result of a widespread rise in individualism (Lichter, McLaughlin & Ribar, 1997). Maybe women are beginning to copy male patterns of homicide because of this increased individualism. Furthermore, this trend supports

research, which shows that there is less stigma surrounding unmarried mothers in today's society (Bumpass, 1990; Thornton, 1995). In addition, since the women in this sample did not typically kill their spouse it goes against Fox and Levin's (1998) unified multiple murder typology (spree, serial, mass) based on revenge motivation and Shervert Frazier's (1975) murder by proxy profile, which emphasized spousal killing. Taking these trends into consideration, the traditional profile should not limit inclusion based on marital status.

Contradicting older profiles, the majority of the women in this study did not fit the senior male, head of house hold/ breadwinner assertion (Dietz, 1986). The first problem with that typology is the assumption of "senior male," all of the offenders in this sample were female. Although half of the women's occupations in this sample were not listed (n=3), source material implied that many were in financial trouble and some were unemployed. In addition, the majority of the women (n=4) in the sample were the heads of their household and only one (Her) was employed. Even while unemployed many of these women were still the sole providers, or breadwinners for their families. Emerging patterns with regards to financial troubles were found among the current sample. Previous research has noted the loss of a job as a triggering event among family annihilators (Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005). Due to the lack of occupational information it was difficult to conclude this may have been a triggering event based upon this measure. The associated financial means of raising a family may be a better indicator of a triggering issue. Therefore the profile should not specify the senior male breadwinner per say, but instead use the term 'sole family provider'.

The victim selection of a family annihilator is not random. Indeed, there is an identifiable relationship between the offender and the victims (Dietz, 1986; Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 2000). Among the women within this study, children appeared to be most

common victims. This discovery is consistent with Messing and Heeren's (2004) finding, women mass murder their biological children more frequently than any other member of their family. In comparison to the male-centred profile of the family annihilator, these women rarely kill the male counterpart of their children. This was the case in all offences where the father was no longer living with the mother. Based on this finding, it was determined that victim selection among female family annihilators differs from the traditional profile, which suggests that the spouse is often killed alongside the children. Another possible explanation for this could be matriarchal corollary. The women may not have believed they had immediate control over their children's father. As previously mentioned this finding suggests that the female family annihilator's perception of 'family' may differ from the definition used in the traditional profile.

The findings regarding motivation are consistent with previous research, which indicates the family annihilators often kill based on intrinsic or unknown motives. Within the literature proposed motives have been noted, this study lends support for Holmes and Holmes (2000) who proposed that the offenders only know why they killed their victims. The findings among the current sample could also support Fox and Levin's (2005) idea that some "moms" may murder their children to save them from a lifetime of hardships or abuse that the mother's themselves endured. This idea corresponds with maternal filicide literature, which suggests that some women may kill their children for altruistic reasons (Resnick, 1969). In the cases Resnick observed this happened most often within cases where childhood trauma and/or abuse were apparent. Although this study cannot empirically conclude the actual motives of these women, they may support the idea the offenders are killing out of compassion (Fox & Levin, 2005).

Overall, the findings of this study were generally consistent with previous research regarding family annihilators and anticipated gain (Holmes & Holmes, 2000). The findings

suggest that all of the women killed for psychological gain. They had convinced themselves that the murder of their family was their only option to escape whatever it was they might have been battling internally or externally. For example in the case of Brar, she was said to be suffering from depression caused by the loss of her son. Source material suggested that in some cases the women could not deal with the financial stress of raising a family on their own, as seen in the case of Her, who was raising six children and working low-end jobs. Others were mentally unstable, like Almarez who was found not guilty by reason on insanity and/or intoxicated or depressed like Eubanks, who was drinking the day she shot her four boys. There were no cases found among the sample where the offender was assumed to have killed based on expressive gain as seen among other mass murderers (Holmes & Holmes, 2000).

The findings of this study are also consistent with previous findings, which indicate that guns are a favourable weapon choice among family annihilator (Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005). Half of the offenders used a gun to murder their victims in this study; however, it was the sole weapon in only two cases. Considering the above finding, the method of drowning was just as common as gun use among the sample. This discrepancy could be attributed to the idea that guns are not as commonly used among women who kill their children (Messing & Heeren, 2004). In addition, some earlier research (Block & Christakos, 1995; Riedel & Best, 1998), which has focused on women's methods of murder, found guns to be a less common choice among female murderers, especially in cases where children were the primary victims (Silverman & Kennedy, 1998). Thus, this specific weapon of choice is important among female family annihilators, specifically when young children are the majority of the victims because as Fox and Levin (2001) noted, firearms are not needed to kill these defenceless victims. Thus, this characteristics of the traditional profile can be partially confirmed based on the findings of this study.

Consistent with the previous literature (Fox & Levin, 1998; 2000; Holmes & Holmes, 2000), over half of the women committed their crimes within the family home. However, it should be noted that in two cases the victims were removed from their family homes. Most interestingly is the case of Brar, where she brought her children to a nearby river and threw them in one by one and subsequently jumping to her own death while her husband was sleeping. This case reinforces the trend that family female annihilators may dissociate their husbands from their definition of family, which has not been examined in previous research. It may also be possible that this was done in an effort to prevent her spouse from interfering with her plans to kill. One of the most relevant findings was that the women in this sample chose to kill dependents more frequently than their adult counterparts, which again indicates a matriarchal corollary, that she does not have control over her husband/spouse.

Further analysis of source material indicates that the mental state of the offenders was not often assessed post-murder. For instance, many newspapers relied on discussion with neighbours with regards to the possibility of depression among the women but claims were not investigated further by police officials, which was not discussed in source materials. This could suggest that female family annihilators are more likely to be labelled as bad rather than mad, as suggested by the literature, which states that there is a polarized dichotomy applied to women who kill (Alt & Wells, 2000). It was surprising that mental state was not often questioned, with the exception of Almarez who was found not guilty by reason of insanity. It can be argued that dichotomizing women as bad, rather than mad might have influenced the way these types of crimes were investigated, and/or classified.

The traditional profile does not adequately examine the possibility that abuse is a contributing factor to the occurrence of this type of offence (Messing & Heere, 2004). The

prevalence of childhood abuse was not well documented in the source material for this study. However, previous research has identified a history of child abuse among the offender as a perpetrator of violence in their future lives (Messing & Heeren, 2004). However, other forms of abuse, including domestic, were present in the current study and have previously been identified in the literature (Magid & McKelvey, 1987). It is recommended that future research should focus on which types of abuse have been experienced by female family annihilators and explore the possibility of correlation to determine if various forms of abuse act as possible predisposing factors among female family annihilators. Previous research has indicated that family annihilators often kill themselves after committing their crimes (Fox & Levin, 1998; 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 2000). The finding of this study partially confirms this measure of the traditional profile: two women committed suicide.

The current study has provided a better understanding to the contributing and distinguishing factors associated with female family annihilators and the traditional profile generated by Fox and Levin (1998; 2005). First, it can be seen that the women in this study do not match the variable of the senior male head of household. Most of the women in this study were either unemployed or underemployed (n=4), single, and the sole providers for their families. They were estimated on average younger than their male counterparts. There were no reports of the women in this study killing a family pet. Female family annihilators seem to prefer to kill children over adults, differing from the male family annihilators who have a documented history of killing both. As previously discussed, according to the Fox and Levin (1998), male family annihilators' killings are often motivated by revenge and or loyalty; such motivations were not seen among the women in this sample. In addition, the female family annihilators did not appear to be as successful in killing themselves as the male family annihilators. Further,

female family annihilators' modus operandi appeared different from the traditional profile, in which the offender favours guns. While some offenders in this study did use guns, the same number of women drowned their victims showing a variance in the modus operandi amongst female family annihilators. Overall, it can be seen that there are a number of distinguishing factors among female family annihilators and the traditional profile resulting in a request for a more flexible profile, one which includes the possibility of a female perpetrator.

In addition, there are also contributing factors that may explain these variations. For example, women may choose child over adult victims because they feel they have more power and control over children rather than adults, which has been supported in a study conducted by Messing and Heeren (2004). Second, women are often socialized to be passive and control their anger, while men are socialized to be aggressive and lash out (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Jensen, 2012). This could be a possible explanation for the lack of revenge motivated murders amongst female family annihilators. Further, the pattern that female family annihilators were not as successful as their male counterparts in committing suicide may be better explained by looking at gendered patterns of suicide. For instance, in a study conducted by Canetto and Sakinofsky (1998), it was found that suicide was viewed as a masculine behaviour. It was suggested this was due to gender differences in what was culturally acceptable with regards to self-destructive behaviour. Canetto and Sakinofsky found that suicide was often disapproved of in women and tolerated in some circumstances of men. Although attempting suicide was seen as more common among women, men were more successful in completing the act.

### **Conclusions and future research**

One primary theme that has been emphasised in this study is the necessity for research to be conducted in the area of the violent female offenders, specifically with regards to the acts of

mass murder in the domestic context. As previously mentioned little research has focused on the group of homicidal women who mass murder their families. This is especially apparent when the amount of literature on the male mass murderer is taken into account. As it stands, there is little theory to base hypotheses on with regards to female mass murderers in the domestic context. The argument has been posed that female family annihilators, represent a small proportion of homicide offences. It has been assumed that due to their small numbers, they are not worthy of study. However, this does not seem to be evident among the literature associated with male mass murderers even though they represent a small portion of all murderers.

In an effort to understand family annihilators better, it is posited that the factors associated with both male and female family annihilators be studied as a whole. This includes the various forms of family annihilation behaviour that women have adopted. To do so can only lead to a better understanding of family annihilators as a group. More specifically, lead to a better understanding of how and why this type of criminal act occurs, which ultimately could lead to better detection of such individuals. Therefore, more study in the area of the family annihilator is needed, incorporating the female family annihilator, which is the second area of recommended research.

It is difficult to identify early onset triggering events of mass murderers because of the very nature of the crime. Ultimately, the perceptions of the offender are crucial in triggering their homicidal attacks. It is important to begin with this assumption to better understand the acts. Part of this problem lies in the recognition that there is a more serious problem. Although female family annihilators have existed, it has been argued throughout this study that they have been overlooked in previous theory and literature. Many of these women have been labelled “Murdering Moms” or “Wicked Women” but have not been considered part of the larger



homicide group of family annihilators. Therefore, in the future, emphasis on including the female into the family annihilator's profile should be implemented. It is suggested the most effective way this can be done is to incorporate the female family annihilator into a new, more flexible profile of the family annihilator. As demonstrated, there has been a history of female family annihilators within academic studies and more popular media, which have been disregarded or not often referred to as mass murderers.

Therefore, it is suggested that the third area of future research should focus on creating a gender neutral definition of the family annihilator, which does not reflect patriarchy. In reviewing the literature (i.e., Dietz, 1986; Fox & Levin, 1985; 1998; 2005; Holmes & Holmes, 1992; 1994), there appears to be an absence of an actual specific definition of family annihilator. Rather, researchers have developed profiles which have proven to be too narrow, excluding the possibility of female family annihilators. Ultimately, there is no distinction between what defines a family annihilator and the characteristics of the murderer. Thus, the current profile has limited further exploration by reducing understanding, with a lack of definition, to capture only a specific type (male) of family annihilators. Not only does the current profile exclude the possibility of female family annihilators, but it "over-profiles." In other words, some killers who would fit the definition of a family annihilator, if there was one, have thus far been omitted.

Given the empirical knowledge available on female family annihilators, it is premature to equate a gender specific profile and or definition of female family annihilators. Rather, a gender neutral definition of family annihilators is recommended; one which clearly indicates, while not limiting to a specific gender or form of family, that this specific group of mass murderers kills members of their family. In addition, corresponding profiles which speak to the characteristics of the murderers should either specify they are gender specific, or adapt to be more gender flexible.

Ultimately, the Fox and Levin (1998; 2005) profile assumes that families are patriarchal in structure, ignoring other forms of family structure, such as female headed households, whether alone or with a male partner, same sex couple formations, and extended family forms. Certain domestic mass murderers may not have been recognized as family annihilators because they did not meet specific standards outlined in the traditional profile. In other words, the profile does not recognize non-traditional family structures, which are not controlled by a senior heterosexual spouse. Family dynamics are changing and the traditional profile does not give room for variation of form.

Thus, staying consistent with the requirement of four victims and the FBI's (2005) time and place constraints on the mass murder homicide form, a proposed definition of the family annihilator is offered here: an individual who kills at least four of their family members, in a given location, within a 24 hour time frame, with no emotional cooling off period. The definition should not limit inclusion based on the sex of offender or family composition. The proposed definition is intended to initiate future discussion and research, which may expand sample sizes, thus lead to a better understanding of the family annihilator phenomenon as a whole.

### **Summary**

Throughout this study, an argument has been put forth that women have been overlooked in the study of mass murder, specifically when looking at the category of family annihilators. Moreover, the motivations and patterns are qualitatively different from those offered in the traditional family annihilator profile. Six cases of female mass murderers have been documented in this study. Several patterns have emerged with respect to situations surrounding these acts. However, these trends lack strong significance or reliability as they were based on only six case studies.

It appears that when women kill their families on a mass level there is little academic explanation for their crimes. This study has challenged the traditional profile of the family annihilator as well as questioned how women who commit these crimes are viewed. It has been argued that women have been overlooked in the definition and profile of the family annihilator. It has been proposed that a definition be created and the traditional profile of the family annihilator be expanded to include the possibility of a female perpetrator.

By continuing research in the area of female family annihilators, complexities of mass murder, more generally, can be better defined. Identifying the differences between the male and female family annihilators can aid in the understanding of both types of offenders. In addition, studying this group of women further can add to the literature regarding why some women kill. Specifically, what may cause women to kill their children in a multiple context. To date, there is little understanding as to why women kill more than one of their children at once. Understanding and identifying patterns will contribute to current female homicide literature. The examination of these women has turned up features that are different from those that have been found among males. These differences should be the focus of future research.

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