

# Forgiveness, and Other Themes, in Women Whose Fathers Killed Their Mothers

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The purpose of this article is to describe the experiences of adult women who, when they were children, experienced the homicide of their mother by their father. Two qualitative interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 31 women survivors of uxoricide to create a qualitative description of the phenomenon. A number of themes have emerged including descriptions of the daughter “seeking understanding,” “forgiving the father” (or not), and descriptions of the father in terms of his being her father or in terms of his behavior and the homicide. **Key words:** *father-daughter relationships, parental homicide, uxoricide, violence*

**U**XORICIDE, the death of one parent at the hands of the other, is one of the most devastating things that can happen to a child. Nurse researchers have long been concerned with traumatized children and with the effects of intimate partner abuse. The children of interparental homicide may represent the apotheosis of these 2 areas of interest. As we have documented in previous articles,<sup>1,2</sup> the incidence of uxoricide (approximately 4000 annually) occurs more often than other conditions that receive far more attention. It is more common, for example, than childhood leukemia (2700 in 2001)<sup>3</sup> or sudden infant death syndrome (3000 annually).<sup>4</sup>

The immediate and catastrophic effect of the loss of both parents, one to homicide and

the other to jail, suicide, or evading the police, had been imagined but not investigated.<sup>5</sup> The children left behind are likely to be relegated to relatives, adoption, or foster care, and moved away from their neighbors, friends, and schools. These children are often caught in the workings of the criminal justice system and may be asked to testify about the homicide and relive it in their imaginations.<sup>6</sup> Because the children are not the primary crime victims, they are not tracked by any agency and are subsequently an invisible group.<sup>1,2</sup>

Prior research on interparental homicide or uxoricide is not extensive and consists primarily of case studies and clinical reports.<sup>7–16</sup> There are some larger studies, however. Hendricks and colleagues<sup>17</sup> and Kaplan and colleagues<sup>18</sup> interviewed 95 children who had experienced uxoricide. After the death, more than half of the children immediately went to live with a relative, and 75% of the children moved from one relative to another. Thirteen of the children moved 3 or more times. The children exhibited significant psychologic sequelae, such as posttraumatic stress disorder and identity problems. Only 15% of the children were described as

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doing as well in school after the killing as before. Twenty five percent of the children were described as having severe problems with attachment to the adults who were caring for them. Overall, children living with the victim's family (all were with the mother's family in this study) were described as doing better behaviorally and in peer relationships than children in foster care, and both groups were doing better than children with the perpetrator's family. The children's behavior was described by their caregivers.

Eth and Pynoos<sup>19</sup> interviewed 55 children aged 3 to 17 who had witnessed the killing of a parent. Twenty of the deaths were by strangers, and the remainder was by the intimate partner of the parent, though not necessarily the parent of the child. The interviews were conducted usually within days or weeks of the killing but some were 1 to 12 years later. As in the studies by Hendriks<sup>17</sup> and colleagues and Kaplan and colleagues,<sup>18</sup> the authors reported that all of the children experienced posttraumatic stress disorder to some degree. They also reported numerous behavioral problems but did not describe how these labels were determined. They reported that the homicide made the child feel helpless, anxious, and overwhelmed. Previous violence in the house did not seem to lessen the effect of the murder but it may have provided the child with some defenses to lessen the impact. The authors also added the notion that ambivalence is a problem when the killer is a parent; it is difficult to blame and be angry with a loved one, and some children felt guilt or self-blame at failing to intervene or prevent the murder.

Clements and Burgess<sup>20</sup> and Clements and colleagues<sup>21</sup> interviewed children aged 9 to 11 years who had experienced a family member homicide. They reported that sources of pain and suffering included (a) the way families were notified of the death (most often by the police), (b) extensive police investigation and interrogation, (c) lack of confidentiality, (d) exposure to chaotic events, (e) feelings of grief confounded by guilt and blame, (f) stigma, and (g) difficulties in returning to

school. Research on the children affected by uxoricide is not extensive but is growing.

## CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

Because all the fathers of children in the study, which is being presented, were prosecuted and sent to prison, it is important to consider the literature on children of incarcerated parents. Similar to the children of uxoricide, children of incarcerated parents are vulnerable and experience depression, anger, guilt, abandonment, and academic problems.<sup>22-25</sup> The literature on the relationships between an incarcerated parent and child(ren) is primarily focused on the mother-child relationship with few studies available on the incarcerated father. The numbers of incarcerated men who are fathers range from 54% to 84%, and the children report difficult relationships with the incarcerated father.<sup>26,27</sup>

Incarcerated people are generally allowed 3 types of contact with children: letters, visits, and phone calls. These methods are restrictive but are part of the corrective institutions' "deep break" policy for offenders.<sup>24,25,28</sup> Barriers to developing and maintaining relationships between parents and children include inmate placement far from the family, visiting restrictions, and entrance requirements for visitors and transportation problems.<sup>23,28,29</sup> Additional issues that hindered imprisoned fathers' relationships with their child(ren) were the shame of imprisonment and lack of knowledge on how to relate to a child at different developmental stages.<sup>24</sup> When a child did visit, inappropriate expectations of the child's behavior often resulted in a negative perception of the interaction.<sup>28</sup> Fathers were also unaware of gender differences in communication and emotions of boys and girls.<sup>29</sup>

The stigma associated with incarceration promoted distancing in the father-child relationship and communication.<sup>23</sup> Fathers frequently did not want the children to know the reason for incarceration. Some preferred a total disassociation from the outside world.<sup>28</sup>

Children of incarcerated fathers may be dependent on family members to provide transportation, some of whom may decide that the child does not deserve to see him.<sup>29,30</sup> Thus, an incarcerated father may lose all contact with his child throughout his confinement and be unable to locate the child on release.<sup>28,30,31</sup>

In addition, the length of sentence and the type of relationship the father had with the child prior to imprisonment influenced the nature of the relationship when the father is imprisoned.<sup>24,29</sup> The ambiguity of a father who is "there but not there" adds to the difficulty in the emotional ties.<sup>25,30</sup> Honesty about the perpetrated crime may increase the anxiety in the child and be detrimental to the child concept of how the father will be treated in prison.<sup>29</sup> Fathers who were financially responsible for child support experience guilt at not being able to maintain support of the child.<sup>31</sup>

For some fathers, having a relationship with their children was a great motivator for change.<sup>23,30</sup> The children gave hope to the inmates, and focusing on children helped time to pass.<sup>25</sup> Some fathers reassessed their identity and role in relation to their children that may have been absent before incarceration. The fathers wanted to be able to teach their children to avoid the choices and mistakes they had made.<sup>23,24</sup>

Group support and parenting classes increased the quality of the contact and facilitated greater understanding of how to relate to a child at specific developmental stages.<sup>27</sup> As a father learned age and gender appropriate behavior, the child benefited by visiting and maintaining a relationship with the father that relieved anxiety regarding the treatment of the father in prison and established communication to deal with anger and abandonment issues.

## **METHODS**

This report is based on a sample taken from a larger descriptive retrospective, qualitative

study ( $n = 87$ ) aimed at understanding the lives of people from families in which 1 parent killed the other.

## **Sample**

For this article, we analyzed the stories of 31 women whose biological fathers killed their mothers and did not subsequently commit suicide. We selected this subgroup because it was apparent through our analysis of the stories in the larger study that the perpetrator of the homicide was the object of a great deal of emotion. If ways to help child survivors of uxoricide are to be developed, approaches to an ongoing relationship with the parent who committed the homicide needed to be explored. This subset of children talked about the problem of ongoing relationships with more urgency than others in the study. The average age at the time of the interview was 39 years. Five of the women were 5 years old or younger when the homicide took place, 12 were between 6 and 12 years old, and 14 were children older than 12 years. Nine women were African American, one was Hispanic, and the rest were Caucasian. Inclusion criteria were that the participant was 19 years or younger at the time of the homicide and 18 years or older at the time of the interview.

## **Procedures**

Following human investigation committee approval of the study, participants in the main study were recruited through advertisements, newspaper articles in several major cities, word of mouth, and through our Internet site. In addition, many participants referred their siblings. Potential participants called a toll-free phone number or responded to the study's Internet site. One of the researchers called potential participants and explained the study, obtained more information about the homicide, and an address to which the consent documents could be mailed if the interview would be over the telephone. Homicides were verified by death certificates or newspaper articles. Each participant was

interviewed twice. The interviews were open-ended but were structured chronologically so that participants were asked to tell what happened from earliest memories about living in their family to the present. The interview data were narratives that, although sometimes discursive, generally followed the chronological events.

### Data analysis

In this stepwise analysis of the narratives, first the interviews of the narratives were read carefully as complete texts.<sup>32</sup> Then specific pieces of the text (lines, paragraphs, small stories, metaphors, and the like) were identified as meaningful in terms of describing the experiences of the participant. These small pieces of meaning-carrying text were then grouped according to observed similarities. These groupings were referred to as categories. The categories were tested to see whether they held up across a number of different participants or whether they were unique experiences. Those categories that hold up across participants were then grouped into larger units or themes to create a qualitative description of the experiences. The investigators analyzed data using the N\*Vivo software program (Version 7, 2006; QSR International Pty. Ltd.) to manage the analysis and maintain an audit trail. At first, 3 investigators analyzed the same text and discussed differences in their identification of meaningful pieces of text and categories. When consensus was reached, the investigators worked separately but met weekly to discuss individual findings and hunches. One member of the research team acted as auditor and reviewed the analytic decisions that were made.

### FINDINGS

We identified 2 themes, "Seeking Understanding" and "Forgiving Dad," both of which fit loosely under the broad idea of resolution. The participants used the word, resolution, and related terms such as *peace, justice, heal-*

*ing, and moving on.* Under the theme, Forgive Dad, there were 2 subthemes. One concerned admission of guilt. We anticipated that an admission of guilt by the father would facilitate forgiveness and eventually a resolution. This was not always, or even often, so. The second subtheme had to do with 2 different ways the participants described and explained their relationship with their fathers. For some women, the father in the role of the father was paramount whereas for others, the relationship was based on the crime and what he had done. We called this theme "Father as Dad or Monster."

### Seeking understanding

Most, but not all of the women in this study, wanted to understand why their fathers killed their mothers. As one woman explained it, understanding her father was a matter of "understanding myself."

In many cases, the attempt to understand their fathers and thus to understand why they did what they did was frustrated. In one compelling example that could serve as a metaphor for others, a woman decided to become reacquainted with her father to understand why he stalked her mother, sister, and her and then killed her mother. Following his imprisonment, her father had remarried and had several small children. At their first meeting, he brought his small children, and she did not want to raise the issue in front of them. So, she asked her father if the next time they could meet alone. Before the second meeting during which she planned to ask him these questions, he had a stroke and became aphasic.

More typically, the quest for understanding was fruitless because the father would not talk about it. It was not clear if the fathers were not capable of that kind of insight or just unwilling to talk. Some fathers said that they could not explain because they did not remember; they had blacked out and had no memory of the event—a status participants often attributed to alcohol.

When explanations came, they were often in the form of labels or diagnoses supplied by

the daughter or the family. One woman said, "My father is a pathological liar. . . . He wasn't a nice man. He could be, but he wasn't." Another said, "he [father] was sick. He had a disease. He was an alcoholic." The labels "sick" and "alcoholic" appeared in a number of the stories. Other women used the terms "sociopath," "psychopath," and "narcissistic."

Sometimes the woman who offered the diagnosis went on to resolution and sometimes she did not. Having a satisfactory understanding of why their father behaved the way he did appeared neither to be necessary nor sufficient for forgiveness or resolution. For some women, however, it was an important step along the way. As one woman said:

I told him "I care about you in my own way. I forgive you for what you done. You can't change it, but I want you to know I am trying to understand why it happened." It was something he never really discussed with us kids.

In trying to understand why their fathers had killed their mothers, many of the women wanted to hear their fathers confess their guilt. This happened in some cases and did not in others. The participants used a variety of words to talk about it. Some said he "dealt with it" or did not. Others used the word "apology" and still others talked about their father "taking responsibility."

Strong feelings often came up when he did not admit guilt. For instance, one father, at the time he killed his wife, had shot and wounded a detective who had come to protect her. His daughter wanted him to apologize but

He said he should have shot the man that he paralyzed for life . . . again. I heard in his voice that there wasn't any emotions there, any empathy, any compassion. I told him, Daddy, that's not good, I said, you need to make amends with that in your heart, but I saw that there was nothing. . .

This woman has not achieved any kind of resolution with her father.

In the same vein, another participant explains that her father's lack of admission has prevented her from finding peace:

He has never admitted it. That's what makes our story still a little more complicated, whereas I

guess maybe I'm sitting here today in turmoil all the time over this because we have had no closure really. . . . Openly, he openly denies it.

But for many of the daughters, the lack of the admission of guilt was not a hindrance to forgiveness:

As I was growing up my main goal with my dad was that when I buried him I would be at peace, and I would forgive him, and I did. It was genuine. We didn't reconcile, because forgiveness without repentance wouldn't bring much peace.

For a number of daughters, the presence of an admission of guilt was a positive part of their process of what one daughter called "coming to peace" with their fathers. One participant said:

He really talked to me, and he opened up to me, and he told me how sorry he was. . . . even though I forgave him, I was really glad that he was able to admit it. Coming from him it meant a lot to me, because then I know that he had a chance to think about what he actually did.

Sometimes the admission of guilt was something the daughter wanted for her father's own good:

The year before he died, finally I was moved so that I should write him . . . My intent was to plead with him to make his peace with God. The response I got back was written on a napkin and said "I did not murder your mother."

For some of the daughters, the admission and apology were meaningless.

The first time when we went [to see him], he was saying that he was sorry. He wasn't going to do it again. He apologized, but what's the point now. I mean, there's no more turning back. He's already done what he's done. He's nearly destroyed all of our lives.

This woman remains angry and would not say she has reached a resolution.

### **Forgiving dad**

Participants often spoke of forgiveness spontaneously, but it seemed to mean different things for different women. For some, it was understood that they should forgive

their fathers, whatever else they may feel. Other women felt that they ought to forgive but could not. Some women did not want to forgive their fathers. For some women, forgiveness was something they did, regardless of how they understood the situation. Other women, although, required something else—an understanding of what happened or some response from their fathers—in order to forgive.

For some women, forgiveness was a religious imperative. These women did not question the need to forgive. “[people ask] Why do you love your dad? Because the Lord says you must forgive. . . . And the Lord says vengeance is mine.”

For some participants, the idea that she had to forgive her father just because he was her father was just understood:

I never had a grudge or dissed him about it. All I knew is that was my father. And I forgive people. If somebody does something to me, I always say, you did me wrong, but I can forgive you, ‘cause I feel like you can’t go away from this world holding grudges against people.

In this case, not forgiving would reflect negatively on her. For these women, forgiveness has very little to do with what was done or how they felt about it.

Sometimes the injunction or model of forgiveness came from family members:

My grandmother . . . did not push us to see him, but always left the door open, like it is your father if you want to see him . . . you only have one father and this is your father. Try and forgive him for what he did.

Sometimes it was the mother herself who had asked the participant to forgive. One woman recounted:

That’s the last words your mom tells you, “he’s a sick man, don’t hate him, forgive him.” What do you do? And it’s a good thing she did, because I think that’s so natural and it’s the human thing; just hate him. It’s easier than dealing with the hurt.

Following prison, his daughters set him up in an apartment and her sister

checks on him all the time. Make sure he’s paying his bills and everything. But we love him. And

she checks on him even though he tried to kill her. He sees his grandchildren and we don’t show hate. Like I said we know that is what our mother would have wanted. She loved that man.

The women for whom understanding was a necessary precursor to forgiveness sometimes provided a diagnosis for their fathers to explain their violent act. Forgiveness appeared to be the opposite of blame here. The illness was to blame and once the blame was removed from her father, she could forgive him. This is a complex notion of forgiveness full of contradictions and inconsistencies but nevertheless appeared quite satisfactory for this woman. These women used words like “he was sick” or “he was an alcoholic.” One woman explained,

Somehow you have to figure a way of having peace around that person . . . [I knew] I would be able to forgive my father on the basis that he was mentally ill and that was a logical reason for me. I could be okay with that, and so that was pretty much the basis for the forgiveness.

For other women, however, forgiveness had to be earned. The first step in earning it was confession,

I just follow my heart . . . I really can’t say that I forgive him because I think if someone asks for forgiveness then you assess that situation and you give your forgiveness. He’s not asked for forgiveness; he’s not said that he did this; so it’s not a situation where there is forgiveness even involved at this point.

On occasion, the motive for forgiveness was ambiguous.

A year before he died, finally I was moved so that I should write him and tell him that I forgave him. See I hadn’t before, because if you talk to this brick wall, he is just going to say I didn’t do anything. What are you forgiving me for? And so I worked on that letter for a couple of weeks and had many people read it because I knew what my intent was. My intent was to plead with him to make his peace with God.

In this case, the forgiveness needed a response. She needed her father to confess to what he was being forgiven for, but he would not.

Some participants talked about forgiveness but it seemed to mean very little to them. One woman tells how her father tried to come back into her life. He would buy her presents and wanted her to call him dad. She would never call him by anything but his first name and throughout the story refers to him as "this man." She had no strong feelings for him one way or the other but ends her story with the following: "my father's dead now and we kind of made our peace with one another. I forgave him for what he did." Forgiveness in this case seems to be little more than a nonmalignant indifference.

Another woman is clear about the limits of forgiveness. In giving advice to others in her situation she says,

He [father] is going to want custody of these kids when he gets out of prison and that is a whole different thing. While you forgive them, [you need to decide] whether they are really capable of providing true parenting skills or whether they are just going to screw up the kid more.

### **Father as dad or monster**

This sample of women could be divided into 2 perspectives on their fathers: Those for whom their fathers' role (understood as position in the family rather than a set of behaviors) as father was a major consideration in the relationship and those for whom their fathers' history and actions were the major consideration. There were no pure cases of each. Attitudes toward dad were a mixture of both, but in most cases, viewing him in terms of either his role or his personality was dominant.

Those for whom his role as dad was dominant were often religious.

In the Bible it also states that you still have to honor thy mother and father. . . . I never want my fathers' blood on my hands. I treat him with the utmost respect even though that incident [the homicide] occurred. I have no hate for my dad. I love him very much.

Some families encouraged this connection with the father as a father. Some were, for example, encouraged by his family to visit him in jail.

His [father's] sisters would [say], y'all need to go visit your dad; it means so much and . . . we'd go and we only hear what a horrible person she [mother] was and she made me do this.

Another woman remembered visiting her father this way.

And so when I went up there to see him, you know, it was like a two hour ride. I'd go with some of my sisters and my aunts. You go through shake down and then you go in and then it's just you sit there, you talk, you eat cake, and then you leave and it's like your brains are scrambled eggs.

For this participant, visiting dad and eating cake, while a normal experience to have with a father, was confusing and upsetting when the location for the visit was jail.

For other women, visiting dad in jail was a positive experience. "We went to go see him, and I couldn't wait to go see him. I went to go see him with my grandma. So I did always stay in contact with him."

One of the consequences of having the role of father a major consideration was a transference of guilt that came with shared blood:

He's my father, even though he did what he did. If they're calling him names, they're calling me names, and that's when you don't really know your identity. I must be that too if they're calling him that, and he's a killer. I'm the killer's daughter, and so it was, it was kind of like a scary feeling in one aspect, and the other aspect just feeling just like sad, you know, just a big sad feeling.

For these women it is painful to have a killer for a father, but his role persisted and they would not deny it. Another woman said, "it's still that parental connection, even though he did a horrific thing and he's locked away. Well I'm not totally an orphan yet, I still at least have one parent left. [It was] . . . something that helped me."

Some of the women seemed to want to be rid of this burden of role identity but were not able to:

I did reconcile with my father and have a relationship with him, you know, as minimal as possible. . . . I say, well, we can't carry his sin, he has to answer for that, so I can't have hate for him because, like my mother always said, well, you have his blood, you're his child and you can never

deny that, so we just go on and live our life and make the best of it.

A surprising number of daughters decided to take care of their fathers as they grew older and were not able to care for themselves, because it was their role:

We have an odd relationship. I go over . . . obviously if he calls me and needs something, I would go over. . . . He doesn't have anybody else. It's not going to hurt me. . . . I'm not diminished by that. He is still my father. Regardless of what our relationship is and the feeling is certainly different than what I think it is supposed to be for a father, but he's all I've got and I'm all he's got and quite frankly every one else kind of kicked him to the curb and no one is really there to help him now.

Those participants for whom role and blood relations were not a major consideration were freer to feel anger and to avoid their fathers. One participant was clear that she wanted nothing to do with the man who killed her mother. She said to the nurse who was caring for her father at the end of his life,

You can let me know when he dies, but other than that that's all you get from me. . . . I told her, you know what, that man laying in that hospital bed killed my mother in front of my face when I was 3 years old and you're asking me to sign papers for his care.

This woman is clear that her father has become "that man." It was his violent act that mattered, not his status as her father.

For some of the women, reaching adulthood meant that the parental role was no longer very important,

. . .when I saw him, I didn't feel anything. I didn't want to talk to him but I didn't hate him anymore, I hated him for along time. I didn't hate him anymore. Really, honestly I looked at him and say he looked pathetic, older, gut, and all that. So he didn't look like my daddy.

She had given up both hating him for what he did and thinking of him as her father.

The women who were afraid of their fathers could not really honor that parental role. "There's always a little side of me that feared him. I never wanted him to get out of prison.

Because my big thing was if he gets out where is he going?" He was dangerous and living with him or caring for him was dreaded. He was what he had done and still considered dangerous by his daughters.

The worst problems were experienced by women who conflated the 2 approaches. One woman believed that because this man was her father, he would have the desired traits of an idealized father, but she betrayed by his actual behavior. She said, "I really wanted people to look at my dad as a wholesome good dad figure, and I guess that was a part of the hope maybe that I had thought my dad had changed."

She reunited with her father after he was released from jail. At first, they wrote and talked on the phone. Eventually, she decided that he needed help taking care of himself, and she asked him to move in with her. Things went well for a few weeks, but he began to be sexually inappropriate with his granddaughter and when she confronted him,

He became violent and at that point I saw that my dad was not who I thought he was as a young kid, and I had a lot of flashbacks go on. I was scared to move. I was in my kitchen and he was shaking his fist and yelling and stuff, and at that moment I wasn't the 47 year old woman that I am today. I was that kid going way back in time and I was scared.

At this point, his behaviors overruled any attempts for her to allow him to reassume his parental role.

## DISCUSSION

These women, all of whom have lived through a trauma more challenging than most of us have experienced, related a variety of ways through which they came to some form of resolution. For some women, this resolution involved a later relationship with their fathers, whereas others were comfortable excluding their fathers from their future. For women who refused to have a relationship with their fathers, the violence of their actions seemed to have more influence than religious, familial, or personal beliefs about the

role of family. Most of the women wanted to understand why their fathers killed their mothers and they grappled with the idea of forgiveness. Again, their religious and familial influences played a large role in how they defined forgiveness and what it meant to them. For 1 group, transferred guilt from father to daughter could be a problem. Accepting father because he is a father did not guarantee a close relationship, just as concentrating on his behavior did not preclude a continuing relationship. Both forgiveness and anger were options. However, seeing the role of "father" more than his behavior and personality facilitated forgiveness. This was particularly true for the sisters who believed that taking care of their father following his incarceration was what their mother would have wanted. For them, taking care of him was a way of honoring her memory.

Many women were comforted by being able to label their fathers as alcoholic or mentally ill. With a label, their behavior became explainable and reflected less on these women as their blood relatives. If their fathers did this terrible thing because they were alcoholic or because they were "sick," then it became a medical and not a moral problem.

Some women who were not satisfied with the labels were afraid that they might have inherited their fathers' violent traits. For many women, the need to understand their fathers and their motivations was part of this fear. For example, if their fathers' behavior was because of alcohol or drugs, they would be safe from violence if they abstained. In fact, many women stated that they avoided all alcohol and drugs.

Relationships in families are complex, including those of daughters and their fathers. Electra does not carry the mythic and psychoanalytic weight of Oedipus, but that does not mean we have a clearer and less emotionally charged understanding of father-daughter relationships. Our goal in this study was to explore what happens when the person who is often charged with the duty of protecting the family destroys it. The father is taken

away but does not disappear out of the life of the family. Even those daughters who wanted nothing more to do with their fathers could not erase them from their lives. These fathers had to be thought about and dealt with. It is not possible from this study, and probably could not be possible with any study design, to say that daughters who forgive their fathers are better off than those who do not. Certainly, the women in this study were traumatized and deeply hurt in numerous ways by what their fathers did. How best for them to stop the continuation of the trauma to live as happy a life as possible despite the injury remains a complex question that will probably have individually crafted answers. This study, we hope, is the first step in helping all the daughters who are survivors of uxoricide find answers.

#### **LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS**

As a qualitative descriptive study, these findings are necessarily limited by the nature of the sample. It may be that women who chose to speak to us are considerably different from female survivors of uxoricide who did not participate in this study. Our participants were willing and able to speak with us and thus were not incarcerated or incapacitated by substance use or mental health problems. In fact, a number of participants noted that their siblings were dead at a young age, incarcerated, or simply "missing." Some had not spoken to siblings in years. Other nonparticipants may have so completely resolved their feelings about their childhood experiences that they did not feel compelled to speak of them with researchers. In light of the paucity of the existing research on this population, however, this study provides rich insight into the experiences of at least some survivors of uxoricide and thus a basis for future research. Currently, the authors are using what they have learned from this analysis and from the larger study to craft an intervention for current guardians of children bereaved by parental homicide.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING

Given that up to 4000 of children survive uxoricide each year, there are tens of thousands of adult survivors in the United States. Therefore, many nurses will interact with female survivors of uxoricide, usually without knowing it. We cannot create a specific protocol for the nursing care of these women based on our findings, in light of the limitations noted above. We can, however, make some general recommendations.

Obtaining a full trauma history with clients is a necessary first step and should include asking family members about relationships. For instance, the nurse who contacted our participant assuming that she would want to care for her father as he was dying had no idea what she was requesting. As always, it is important for nurses and other clinicians to honor clients' and family members' responses in the clinical setting because they may not always have the full story.

Nurses also need to be aware that some women are very concerned that they are carrying a tendency toward violence and homicide. One woman went to a therapist to make sure that she would be a good mother and not a violent one. Other women purposely decided not to have children in order to end the cycle of violence.

On the basis of our interviews, many women may want to contact their fathers. As we saw in these stories, the outcomes of such contact are variable, so we cannot suggest that women should or should not pursue this contact. Nurses can warn women that they should not expect their fathers to correspond to their idealized vision of a father and that they may be surprised by the outcome of the contact. It may be helpful for women to spend some time preparing before making contact. Women could, for example, think

about what would happen if their fathers did not desire to reciprocate contact, denied having committed the crime, defended his actions, continued to present a danger to the woman or the community, or needed ongoing care. Women may also want to consider what they will tell other family members and prepare for the possibility of negative reactions from those family members. It may be helpful for women to identify a supportive person before initiating contact, or even to work with a mental health professional. Some areas of the country offer programs such as victim-offender conferencing. These programs allow for victims (and family members of victims) of serious crime to meet with the offender after substantial preparation and with a mediator present to offer support before and after the meeting.<sup>33</sup> Professionals working with these programs will have extensive experience in preparing and supporting individuals making contact with a family member under similar conditions.

Nurses can let women know that on the basis of our findings, there is no ideal manner for achieving resolution. In some ways, this complicates the situation for women who may want a clear "prescription" for how to resolve their complicated feelings about their childhood history. This can be a hopeful message, however, as it also means that no matter how horrific the crime, other survivors have been able to find peace. Women should not feel obligated to "forgive" their fathers or not, include or bar their fathers (if still living) in their lives, or to do anything that others may insist are "necessary" tasks for moving forward if these tasks do not fit with the women's worldview. Nurses can reassure women that other survivors have been able to have successful intimate relationships, raise families, and pursue their own goals in life.

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