

## Article

# Mad and murderous: two matricides reported by the Italian press before and after the Basaglia law

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*This study presents the results of a qualitative analysis based on 13 crime news articles from Italian newspapers, to show that the belief that mental disorder predisposes many of those suffering from it to behave violently has endured, though the 180 bill was passed 25 years ago.*

*Although the question has already been addressed by social psychologists and psychiatrists, it has not been discussed in great detail by science communication. However, this considers crime articles in newspapers as very interesting examples of indirect communication on health issues, where common belief prevails.*

*The articles analyzed were about two matricides dating back to 1972 and 2001 respectively. The analysis showed that the belief that people with mental illnesses are recognizable, antisocial, can behave violently and cannot recover, has endured over many years. Nevertheless, statements about people with mental disorders are more accurate and the idea that the risk of violence among released mental patients is predictable, has been set aside.*

**Keywords:** Public health, Science communication to non-experts, Newspapers

## Introduction

After a long period of trials, a bill was introduced in 1978, according to which the idea that people with mental illnesses are “dangerous for themselves and for others” was ruled out.<sup>1</sup> This 180/78 bill was part of the first great law and administrative reform of the Italian healthcare system, the 833 bill, which set up the Italian healthcare. Together with the 180 bill, any reference to the idea that people with mental illnesses are dangerous was abolished from the Criminal Code.

A number of authors state that there are three relevant aspects of this law.<sup>2,3</sup> Firstly, “the juridical idea that people with mental illnesses are dangerous was discarded; therefore, it was no longer necessary to hold the mentally disabled people in custody, or even mistreat or oppress them. Secondly, it was no longer necessary to create new mental hospitals. Thirdly, psychiatrists shifted their attitude, as they could treat mentally ill patients who were no longer regarded as dangerous or held in custody”.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, Italian institutions have recognized that there is no connection between violence and mental illness, despite strong opposition.<sup>5</sup> Psychiatrists, in turn, have provided more and more evidence that mental disorder does not predispose many of those suffering from it to behave violently.<sup>6,7</sup>

However, what is the public image of people with mental illnesses today? In particular, is mental illness still linked with violence? Are these images of mental illness perpetrated by the media? In order to answer these questions, public perceptions of madness<sup>8,9,10</sup> in newspapers are examined according to the definition given by Denise Jodelet, according to which public perception is a “socially developed and shared form of knowledge that has practical consequences and contributes to create a common social reality”. Therefore, newspapers reflect these perceptions and the layman’s knowledge on mental disorders.

A number of social psychologists and sociologists have already examined this aspect<sup>11,12,13,14</sup> and information about public images of mental illness has often been gathered in crime news. According to previous studies,<sup>15,16</sup> mental disorder on crime pages is a functional aspect to describe the context in

which the crime occurred; whereas the cultural and scientific articles in newspapers deal with mental illness in different ways according to the political party the newspaper affiliates with – though always carefully. The newspaper's political affiliations are no longer relevant; the news is reported by left-wing or right-wing newspapers in almost the same way. Public perception of mental illness can thus be better analyzed, in particular because most people read crime pages in newspapers and because their readers generally represent a wider spectrum, both in terms of number and of education, jobs and wealth.

Newspapers are thought to play an important role in shaping the image of mental illness,<sup>17</sup> as they report biased news and perpetrate the idea that madness and violent behaviors are intimately connected. "Although many adults are familiar with medical terms related to mental disorders, unfavorable stereotypes are perpetrated by mass media and in everyday conversations. (...) The description of a violent murder in graphic detail has a greater impact on the reader than statistics showing the rate of violence by mental patients as a whole".<sup>18</sup> Therefore, "newspapers have established an inevitable correlation between mental disorders and violence, and maybe – and this is important – this correlation indicates that mental disorders can not be treated".<sup>19</sup>

As far as science communication is concerned, the implicit assumptions made on mental health issues on the crime pages have not been discussed in great detail, despite their unique features – at least in Italy. These articles often include no opinions from experts – psychiatrists or psychologists –, or, if any, marginal and functional opinions. Moreover, they give no insight into the causes of mental illnesses and the news report includes inaccurate statements and images.

Our analysis was carried out only on Italian newspapers, but the research methods adopted could be used for analyses in other countries. In particular, it must be underlined that the 180 bill was considered to be in the forefront in Europe since it was came into effect in November, 1979 – when the WHO European Office for mental health referred to it as an example for the other member states.

## Objectives

The aim of this study is to determine whether the common belief that mental disorder predisposes many of those suffering from it to behave violently and other stereotypes of mentally ill people have endured, though the 180 bill was passed 25 years ago. Newspaper crime articles will be analyzed in order to give an example of implicit medicine communication which excludes the experts' opinion and is characterized by popular belief.

## Research materials and methods

This study presents a qualitative analysis based on 13 crime news articles on two matricides from Italian national and local newspapers. The first matricide was committed in 1972 by Giordano Savarin, a mental hospital patient from Trieste, who had been discharged on an experimental basis. The second crime was committed in Rome in 2001 by Emilio Massimiliano Quaroni, son of a famous architect, who probably suffered from no mental disorders.

Quaroni's mental health issue is not dealt with in great detail on the crime pages. However, it is not relevant to our analysis.

The two crimes can be compared only because they are both matricides, one of the most heinous crimes. This is also the reason why matricide was chosen: if madness is not mentioned in articles on matricide, it is supposedly not mentioned in other articles on less violent crimes.

The two murders were chosen because they were relevant to our objectives.<sup>20</sup> The first was chosen to define the prototype of mentally ill characters, in a time when the Italian law still referred to the idea that people with mental illnesses had homicidal tendencies. Thus, the layman's "diagnostic tools" used 30 years ago to identify mental disorders have been analyzed. These tools have been analyzed to understand how the second murderer was portrayed – he was probably not mad, but certainly dangerous. Our aim is to understand whether journalists and other laymen – not least, readers – who gathered information about Quaroni's violent murder, also tried to understand the causes of his madness. And, if so, they

perpetrated the widespread belief that mental disorder predisposes many of those suffering from it to behave violently –or even to commit matricide.

Both local and national newspapers were analysed. Among the local newspapers are *Il Piccolo* for the Trieste murder, whereas *Il Messaggero* for the Rome murder. Among the national newspapers, the four best-selling newspapers were chosen. Data from ADS (Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa) were collected as to the 2001 newspapers, while data from FIEG (Federazione Italiana Editori Giornali) were analysed as to the 1972 newspapers. The latter are not reliable, but FIEG pointed to the four best-selling newspapers in the first years of the 70's according to previous researches.

As to local newspapers, the issues sold on the two days after the murder were analysed, as crimes are usually dealt with over a longer period of time in the local newspapers. This was the case for both murders.

Newspapers were collected at the library of Pisa town council and at the national library in Rome. For the 2001 case, the following newspapers were analysed:

- *Il Messaggero*
- *Corriere della Sera*
- *la Repubblica*
- *La Stampa*
- *Il Giornale*

Instead, for the 1972 case:

- *Il Piccolo*
- *Corriere della Sera*
- *La Stampa*
- *l'Unità*
- *Il Giorno*

Articles, headlines, and crossheads were compared – together with panels, boxes, and cross-references to the first pages.

The research method used was similar to the qualitative approach of the text analysis. In particular, a series of questions was arranged in order to describe the language and the narrative structure used to portray the murderer and the context where the murder was committed, and to identify value judgements:

1. Is the murderer's psychology portrayed? How?
2. Is the murderer's physical appearance portrayed? How?
3. Is the murderer's behaviour portrayed? How?
4. What is the murderer's past?
5. Is the victim portrayed? How?
6. What is the relationship between murderer and victim?
7. What is the socio-cultural context in which the murder was committed?
8. Is a diagnosis of the murder's mental illness made? If so, what is it?
9. Is the murderer's mental illness portrayed? How?
10. How is the murder portrayed?
11. Are general considerations on mental illness portrayed? If so, which ones?

Together with this series of questions, the person who describes or talks about the issue in the article, is then identified – be it a journalist, a psychiatrist, a lawyer, a witness, a policeman or a relative.

The questions were not binding as to our qualitative analysis, but helped us create a transparent and unbiased scheme for our research and comparison. Moreover, some of these questions produced no significant results. Answers will be discussed, not listed.

## Results

Apart from *l'Unità* newspaper, which does not report the news, the Savarin articles perpetrate the belief that people with mental illnesses are dangerous. Headlines are almost all the same: in *La Stampa*, "A loonie discharged from mental hospital stabs mother and father to death"; in *Corriere*, "Discharged from mental hospital, slits his parents' throat"; in *Il Giorno*, "Mentally ill man kills his parents". In *Il Piccolo* newspaper, there were two articles on the subject: "Father and mother stabbed to death by a madman" and "He hated red cars and boats".

The murder is portrayed in a very similar way in all articles. Giordano Savarin is presented as a "sturdy, muscled" young man and defined as "loonie", "mad", "the man with wild eyes wearing briefs", who was "drenched in blood and with bruises all over the body" and "talked nonsense". He "suffers from a disorder that cannot be treated"; he is a "lunatic, who was sent to mental hospitals several times". His madness is obvious, as he has always behaved in an inexplicable and inhuman way: "Everyone could see that he was violent. (...) He used to walk around the house like a madman, mumbling threats". He behaved so violently because, according to the journalists, the murderer suffered from mental illnesses: he tramples on his mother's blood "without horror" "in a fit of bloodthirsty cruelty". Finally, he was sent to mental hospital again: "It was as if he was waiting for somebody to pick him up. He did not put up resistance. He was handcuffed and brought back to the mental hospital".

Giordano Savarin is mad, therefore violent. The only way to treat his madness is to send him to mental hospital. This is shown by his willingness to stay there, as if he knew beforehand - as if he killed his parents to show that it was necessary for him to go back there.

Emilio Quaroni's image presented by the newspapers is less clear or monolithic. However, his character is depicted in a similar way as Savarin's, either to state or to deny his madness.

"He talks freely and nonsense. He says he is a frog, a dwarf, says to be the son of Erik the Viking (...) He wasn't nervous as he was asked whether he killed his mother. 'Yes, I did it', he replied careless". At the beginning of the *Corriere* article, Quaroni is raving and cruel - as Savarin was.

The whole story is depicted as unusual: "the young man played music in his spare time, had dropped out of school and his 'ill-temper' caused domestic problems. He had just come back after a year's stay in the UK". The article goes on by stating that Emilio Quaroni was used to walking barefoot - as Savarin was -, as stated by the Filipino in charge of the entrance to the building of his uncles, who were the first to know about the murder. At the bottom of this article, the murderer's cruel behaviour is mentioned again. The porter of his building says he saw him enter the flat and walk out shortly after, probably right after he committed matricide. He was "quiet and looked down, as usual". However, the uncle is the only one who mentions the mental disorder at the tail end of the article and dispels all doubts aroused by the article: "I can only say that he has never been treated for mental illnesses".

*Il Messaggero's* report is even more exaggerated. "When he was taken to the police station, he wore slippers and tights and had somebody next to him caress his hair (...) but his mind was elsewhere. He was raving: 'Gentlemen. Union is strength (...)'. Then he bowed to the policemen, greeted and smiled to everybody with his bloodshot eyes". Quaroni's behaviour is described as very similar to Savarin's "mad" behaviour - bizarre clothes and weird glances. The porter in charge of the entrance to the building where the murder was committed, is the first explicitly to state that Emilio Quaroni was quite weird. He also points out that he has been working there for seven years and is a painter in his spare time. "I sometimes saw the couple's son, but always very briefly. He looked a bit weird. But I can't say anything else, because I've never talked to him face to face". The idea that mentally ill people are easy to spot is to be found in the neighbours' statements: "Some witnesses saw the young man hang about lately 'in a very weird way', as if high on drugs".

In a brief article from the same newspaper the day after, the counsel for the defence confirms the belief that mental illness cannot be cured and predisposes to behave violently: "The murder was committed in a fit of madness. The young man had already suffered from mental disorder". What the defendant's lawyer argued is irrelevant to our analysis, as he played on his alleged mental illness in order to influence the court's decision.

*La Repubblica* is the only newspaper which does not depict Emilio Quaroni as mentally ill, however presents the above-mentioned characteristics of the murderer's behaviour. He is crying and threatens to commit suicide, which shows his repentance. His next-door neighbours say he is quiet. Emilio Quaroni

seems to have never behaved in a strange or outrageous way. That is why his neighbours did not reckon he was mad. A friend of Emilio says that “he was a strange guy, not crazy” and that “he had an impulsive and unstable nature, but not violent”. Therefore, he describes him by means of two negative adjectives: “not crazy” and “not violent”. These adjectives are relevant; the positive adjectives, given as alternatives to the other two, refer to more socially accepted behaviours – “strange, impulsive, and unstable”. The idea is stated again when the victim’s siblings say that “Massimiliano had never shown signs of insanity. He wasn’t treated for mental illnesses”. The title of another article from the same newspaper presents his opposite viewpoint, yet is very significant: “Yes, I killed her. We got on well, but the voices told me to do so”. The young man is alleged to have said that, though no other newspaper quotes this sentence. However, this brings back the old theme of the commanding voices that order schizophrenics to commit murder – which nowadays psychiatrists tend to reject. Nonetheless, in the central part of the article Emilio Quaroni is not depicted as mentally ill – which implies that the title was chosen by a different journalist, as is often the case.

The image presented by *La Stampa* and *Il Giornale* is less clear-cut, although they both quote Quaroni’s sentence pronounced in front of the police station (“I’m a frog”). *Il Giornale* article is the only one which emphasises Quaroni’s clumsy attempt to trick the police. At the end of the article, the murderer is described as “emotionally disturbed”. However, he then told the policemen: “Yes, I killed her. I went mad, don’t know what happened to me”. In this article, Quaroni’s madness seems to be taken for granted, even if not mentioned explicitly, and his last sentence sounds like a confession. *La Stampa* article, instead, does not support any of these hypotheses and gives no explanation.

As far as how the murder is described, all articles on the Savarin case talk about “homicidal rage”, although this expression is used as such only in *Il Piccolo*. The murder is described in the same way as the “mad killer” and fits Savarin’s portrayal perfectly. In the case of Quaroni, the murder is described generally in a more objective way. Only *Il Giornale* and, in particular, *Il Messaggero* describe the more brutal aspects of the murder. In *Il Messaggero*, the journalist alternates description and his personal opinions: “The body lay not far from there, in the kitchen, in a pool of blood. The woman’s wrists were slit. With a razor blade. Maybe he had no mercy; maybe – without logic – he wanted to set up a suicide”. The article also states that policemen found bloodstained floor clothes and buckets, “as if someone had had time to clean the floor. But even a deranged mind must have realised that it would have done no good”.

A famous actor, next-door neighbour of the victim, states to the press: “You meet somebody who looks ok, and then you find out they are murderers”. This sentence was quoted by three articles, though in different contexts. In *La Repubblica*, it is quoted in order to show that the murder has no explanation, apart from the undefined secrets of the human mind. *Il Messaggero*, *Il Corriere della Sera* and *Il Giornale* journalists mention a fit of homicidal madness. In *Il Messaggero*, in particular, the murderer’s image is similar to Savarin’s – bloodshot eyes, economic reasons, fit of homicidal madness – and all articles analysed use the same terminology to describe the murder. *La Stampa* article remains unbiased.

## Conclusions

The word “madness” is never used in the aforementioned articles on Quaroni case – except idioms. The idea of madness is created through idiomatic expressions, most of which are quotations by the murderer, policemen or next-door neighbours.

Apart from an unbiased article, the other journalists give their opinion through the use of quotations. Three newspapers depict the murderer as mad, while the fourth as not mentally ill. Journalists give their opinion on the basis of elements, which roughly correspond to those used to describe Savarin’s behaviour. Examples are inhuman gestures and characteristics, or anti-social behaviour which can not be treated. They perpetrate the idea that mentally ill people are easy to spot and violent, often for no reason whatsoever. In the unbiased article, references to madness are made through the same modalities.

Therefore, regardless of the journalist’s opinion on Quaroni, the image of mental illness in crime articles is not far from the prototype of mentally ill characters perpetrated in the articles on Savarin.

Nevertheless, the question where the madman should live is still unsolved, and is neither mentioned nor tackled in the 2001 articles. A swing in public opinion is currently taking place, as analyzed in other

studies on madness in crime articles.<sup>21</sup> The belief that mental disorder predisposes many of those suffering from it to behave violently is slightly shifting – though in one direction. For instance, a “diagnostic procedure” is applied to classify someone as mad. Secondly, a murderer can be thought not to suffer from any mental disorder. Third, the journalists’ description of a violent murder is no longer written in graphic detail, thus abandoning the idea of correlation between mental illness and rate of violence. Then, the terms used to refer to people with mental illness are more standard, and opinions on moral issues for murder and mentally ill characters are more moderate or less common. Finally, the belief that crimes can be predicted is less and less common – as opposed to the journalists of the Savarin’s articles.

Further analysis is required to establish to what extent crime articles journalists are able to depict the socio-economic context of the murderer. Then, the frequency and relevance crime news has in newspapers of different political stances should be examined when a modification to the 180 bill is proposed. Finally, further analysis is required to establish the differences among medias as to how images of people with mental illness and the alleged prevalence of crimes among mentally ill people are presented.

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## Notes and references

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