Medea in the media: Narrative and myth in newspaper coverage of women who kill their children

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ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

In reporting news stories about maternal infanticide, journalists and sources employ the narrative of the flawed mother in explaining why women killed their children. A qualitative analysis of 250 US news articles over a 12-year period found that journalists characterized murderous mothers in oppositional terms, as either superior nurturers driven to insanity because they cared so much, or inferior caretakers who shirked their maternal duties because they cared so little. This focus on the individual allowed journalists to organize and simplify complex information from diverse sources; however, reporters missed opportunities to present infanticide in the broader context of gender inequity and to examine disparities in punishments for women convicted of murdering their children. Journalists' accounts of the causes of maternal violence – postpartum illness, economic stress, alcohol and drug abuse, too early and unplanned pregnancies, and loss of hope for the future – too often were superficial, reinforcing the myth of the all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful mother, and ignoring the fact that infanticide is a crime that has complex causes. Journalists can strengthen reporting on maternal violence by critically examining stereotypes of mothering as 'natural', and therefore easy, and by questioning the availability of family, community, and institutional resources for women who cannot or do not mother well.

KEY WORDS ▪ feminism ▪ infanticide ▪ journalism ▪ maternal violence ▪ motherhood ▪ myth ▪ narrative ▪ news

Motherhood has been represented in contemporary society as a supreme calling, a happy achievement, a heavenly blessing, a womanly profession, the consummate feminine achievement (Brockington, 1996; Dally, 1982; De Beauvoir, 1952[1949]; Diquinzio, 1999; Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Nicolson, 2001; Rich, 1976; Showalter, 1982; Thurer, 1994). Mothers are supposed to be guided by 'natural' feminine instincts that confer an angelic temperament and make them instantly loving toward their infants, clairvoyant about their children's needs, and willing to place their own desires second to those of

their families (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998; Nicolson, 2001). 'Motherhood is expected to come naturally. When the umbilical cord is cut, and the baby passes into the new parents' eager arms, maternal aptitude is expected to flow like breast milk' (Harberger et al., 1992: 43).

Feminist scholars have challenged traditional notions of motherhood, suggesting that it is not a singular experience for all women; that race, class and sexual orientation can affect the circumstances in which women mother; that motherhood is not desired by all women; and that ideals of what motherhood should be often are far different from the day-to-day realities of child care (Chase, 2001; Collins, 1993, 1995; De Beauvoir, 1952[1949]; Firestone, 1970; Hollway and Featherstone, 1997; Kitzinger, 1995; Kristeva, 1986; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998; Nicolson, 2001; Oakley, 1979; Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1995; Thompson, 2002; Thurer, 1994; Trujillo, 1997). Feminists have further suggested that mothers are often objects, not subjects, in the discourse on their experiences (Cixous, 1981; De Beauvoir, 1952[1949]; Irigaray, 1985[1977]; Kristeva, 1986; Lazarre, 1976; Oakley, 1979; Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1995). When women are silent, myth may define stories of motherhood, and such fictions create unrealistic expectations of maternal perfection (Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Ruddick, 1980, 1995; Thurer, 1994; Wolf, 2001).

Professional codes of conduct encourage journalists to respect truth and to report events in ways that emphasize accuracy, fairness, and balance (International Federation of Journalists, 1986[1954]; Society of Professional Journalists, 1996). However, news and myth are intertwined as journalists rely on familiar cultural scripts to tell their stories (Bird and Dardenne, 1997; Hanson, 2001; Kitch, 2002; Lule, 2001, 2002). One familiar myth in journalists' repertoire of stories is that of the good and bad mother: the good mother is the consummate nurturer; the bad mother, the consummate destroyer (Lule, 2001).

This analysis examines maternal myths and how these myths inform journalistic accounts of infanticide. While scholars have studied journalistic representations of women as victims of violence (see, for example, Meyers, 1997), less research has been conducted on women's roles as perpetrators of violence, particularly violence in the domestic sphere. An analysis of news accounts of women who kill their children can offer insights into how the media challenge or reinforce myths about motherhood, femininity, and women's roles.

Literature review

Although fictional stories, such as Euripides' *Medea*, have depicted infanticide as an unsavory crime committed by women on the verge of desperation,

factual accounts have presented infanticide as an action driven by intricate motives (Brockington, 1996; Kumar and Marks, 1992; Milner, 2000; Rich, 1976). Across time and cultures, parents have murdered their children (Milner, 2000), with deaths framed as a sacrificial killing to appease angry gods, as a means of gender balance, or as a form of birth control when too many children were born too quickly.

> Numberless women have killed children they knew they could not rear, whether economically or emotionally, children forced upon them by rape, ignorance, poverty, marriage, or by the absence of, or sanctions against, birth control and abortion. (Rich, 1976: 258)

In contemporary America, infanticide is a covert practice – but one that occurs nonetheless. The US Department of Justice (2001) reported that more than 13,500 children were murdered in the USA from 1976 through 1999, with the most likely culprit a parent. Thirty-one percent of children were murdered by their fathers, while 30 percent were killed by their mothers. While men typically commit most of the homicides in the industrialized world, women are more likely than men to kill family members (Jensen, 2001), and a unique aspect of child murders is that the perpetrators are as likely to be women as men (Alder and Polk, 2001). Women may kill their children because of economic stress (Gauthier et al., 2003; Jensen, 2001), to avoid the social stigma of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, because they feel isolated or depressed about a romantic relationship, or, as part of a complex murder-suicide plot, in which the woman hopes she and her children will be reunited in heaven (Alder and Polk, 2001). Additionally, postpartum illness has been cited in medical literature, news accounts, and court documents as a cause of child murders (Grundy, 1859; Hamilton, 1962; Hamilton and Harberger, 1992; Hickman and LeVine, 1992).

Although parents murder their children with disturbing frequency – nearly one child per day in the USA – the news media treat such events as rare and spectacular (Milner, 2000), and infanticide becomes especially newsworthy if the perpetrator is the child's mother (Coward, 1997; Douglas and Michaels, 2004).

> On the face of it, such an action by a mother (infanticide) is a violation not only of broadly maintained understandings of women as non-violent, but also, perhaps more powerfully, of dominant ideologies about the nature and role of motherhood. (Alder and Polk, 2001: 1–2)

Feminists have suggested that factual accounts of motherhood have strong foundations in fiction, that ancient myths of women as all-powerful creators or destroyers and Victorian ideals of female virtue have shaped modern (and unrealistic) stories of motherhood (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998; Macdonald, 1995; Sanger, 1999; Showalter, 1982). The myth of the perfect mother permeates mass media, yet the 'ridiculous, honey-hued ideals

of perfect motherhood in the news media and the reality of mothers' everyday lives' stand in stark contrast (Douglas and Michaels, 2004: 2). Journalists' use of myth, while often unintentional, offers a compass for readers, a way to help them navigate and make sense of complicated events (Fisher, 1987; Hanson, 2001; Kitch, 2002; Koch, 1990; Lule, 2001, 2002; Tuchman, 1978). Myths inform, but they also serve a comforting purpose 'by telling tales that explain baffling or frightening phenomena and provide acceptable answers' (Bird and Dardenne, 1997: 336).

Research questions

The purpose of this article is to explore journalistic accounts of maternal infanticide. Specifically, this research project asks:

RQ1: How do the media portray women who have murdered their children?
RQ2: What collective narratives (stories) do the media tell about women who have murdered their children?
RQ3: How do news media narratives reflect or challenge myths about motherhood, women, and femininity?

Methodology

To examine the narratives and myths embedded in journalistic accounts of infanticide, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis of newspaper stories published in the USA since the 1990s. Narrative analysis is a logical tool to analyze the meanings of media texts: 'Narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives' (Richardson, 1990: 133). In this phase of the research, I developed a matrix, adapted from a rhetorical framework by Foss (1989), which allowed for the examination of narrative elements – events, characters, setting, narrator, temporal relationships, and causal relationships. The unit of analysis in this research project was the news article. The matrix was used to analyze and deconstruct the text of each news story, to describe narrative content, to analyze narrative substance, and to evaluate narrative meaning. At the end of the process, I developed a list of dominant narratives and myths that emerged. I also conducted a simple content analysis of news articles to determine how journalists and sources described the crime of infanticide and its perpetrators.

I began this project by conducting a LexisNexis search of major US newspapers to retrieve print news articles about women who killed their children, using search terms such as 'infanticide', 'motherhood and violence', and 'motherhood and murder'. After reviewing headlines and lead paragraphs,

I selected 10 cases of infanticide for in-depth analysis and again used LexisNexis to retrieve stories about these cases from local newspapers, national newspapers, and national news magazines. The result was a data set of approximately 250 articles. In this study, I analyzed the following cases:

- Bethe Feltman, who tried to kill herself after feeding the anti-psychotic drugs she was taking for postpartum depression to her three-year-old son and three-month-old daughter.
- Andrea Yates, who drowned her five youngsters in the bathtub of her home, then told police she committed the murders because she was a bad mother and wanted to save her children from Satan.
- Melissa Drexler, a teen who gave birth to her baby in a bathroom stall at the prom, then returned to the dance floor.
- Amy Grossberg, a teen who gave birth to her son at a Delaware hotel, then abandoned the baby in a dumpster.
- Susan Smith, a white woman who told police a black man hijacked her car, taking her two sons hostage; Smith told the story to cover up the fact she had drowned the boys.
- Marie Noe, a homemaker who was arrested at age 69 for the murders of eight of her 10 children – all of whom Noe had said died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.
- Awilda Lopez, a mother who beat her six-year-old daughter to death in a case that eventually led to an overhaul of the state's child welfare services.
- Jennie Bain, whose two sons died inside a hot car while she attended an impromptu party inside a hotel.
- Khoua Her, a Hmong refugee in the USA, who strangled her six children, then tried to commit suicide.
- Urbelina Emiliano, a Mexican immigrant to New York, who helped her husband and brother bury her infant daughter alive; Emiliano's husband was not the father of her child, and they murdered the baby to protect the husband's honor.

My reason for selecting these cases is that they provided a breadth of diverse maternal experiences, including women's experiences with postpartum psychosis, unplanned pregnancy, and alcohol and drug abuse.

While qualitative methods are appropriate for discovering meanings, they often rely on a small sample for data analysis. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalizable. Although I made an effort to retrieve stories that represented women from a broad range of ages, ethnicities, and economic circumstances, I included only articles from mainstream publications. Reports in alternative newspapers and news magazines might have revealed a different perspective; however, the LexisNexis database did not include these publications, and other internet and library searches failed to provide a sufficient number of articles for analysis. In addition, I limited my sample to US newspapers, in part because many stories about infanticide in developing

countries focused on the general topic, not on specific cases. Another limitation was that, while stories mentioned ethnicity, they did not identify women by race, so I was not able to consider that as a factor in analysis.

Findings: the flawed mother

Four dominant narratives emerged from this analysis. In this article, I discuss only one of the narratives – the flawed mother; other narratives are discussed elsewhere (Barnett, 2005, 2006a, b)

The content analysis revealed that journalists typically reported maternal infanticide as a sensational crime story, relying on police officers to supply the facts of the case and relying on attorneys, relatives, and neighbors to explain women's actions. Infanticide was presented as horrific and surprising – even when there were past reports of violence in the home or parental neglect – and both journalists and sources characterized women's actions as unfathomable (see Table 1).

Women who killed their children were most often portrayed as evil, deceptive, and callous. In some articles, however, friends, relatives, and neighbors characterized the women as good mothers who made mistakes that resulted in children's deaths; when women who killed their children were interviewed, they presented themselves as good mothers who made isolated errors in judgment. Journalists and sources typically remarked that only an insane woman would murder her children (see Table 2).

Because content analysis examines frequencies but does not explore meaning (Riffe et al., 1998), the primary focus of this study was a qualitative textual analysis of news articles. This phase of the analysis revealed that journalists told the stories of infanticide as mysteries, but not classic 'who dunnits'. Instead, the mystery was 'why did she do it?', and journalists explained women's motives through interviews with police, lawyers, family, and friends. Johnson-Carter (2005) suggested that journalists engage in 'motivational analysis. . . to reveal inner most secrets for an audience' (p. 123), and much of the reporting on infanticide incorporated explanations as reporters

Table 1 Characterizations of infanticide in news stories*

Descriptors	By news source	By journalist
Horrible, shocking	13%	16%
Mysterious	17%	11%
Tragic	15%	4%
Rare	6%	6%
Preventable	6%	4%

*Several descriptors may have appeared in a single story. Percentages do not add up to 100.

Table 2 Characterizations of women who killed their children*

Descriptors	By news source	By journalist
Callous, uncaring	12%	10%
Insane or mentally ill	31%	23%
Good mothers	23%	4%
Deceptive, devious	17%	15%
Unaware actions would cause harm	14%	2%
Abusive, neglectful	22%	16%
Remorseful	10%	5%
Suicidal	10%	6%

*Several descriptors may have appeared in a single story. Percentages do not add up to 100.

tried to answer the question of how a mother could harm her children. In news accounts of infanticide, journalists often played the role of the shocked observer, mirroring Hackett and Zhao's (1998) concept of journalism as 'a kind of Greek chorus' (p. 31). For example, a *Newsweek* sub-headline on Melissa Drexler's arrest asked, 'Why did a teenager hide her pregnancy and then deliver and dump her baby between dances?' (Koehl, 1997), while the *Chattanooga (Tennessee) Free Press* began the first story on Jennie Bain's arrest with the lead: 'How a mother could leave her two toddlers to die in an unventilated, sweltering car while she partied for hours with friends at a motel seems incomprehensible. . .' (*Chattanooga Free Press*, 1995a: para. 1). When Andrea Yates killed her five children, *Newsweek* asked, 'How could a mother commit such a crime against nature and all morality, ending the lives she had so recently borne and nurtured?' (Thomas et al., 2001, para. 1).

Journalists and sources answered the question 'why?' by explaining that mothers who killed their children were flawed women who failed at caretaking tasks. News accounts presented two different types of flawed mothers. The first group was characterized as superior caretakers who nurtured not only their own children but other family members, other people's children, the sick, their neighbors, and strangers in the community. The adjective 'perfect' was used frequently to describe them; ironically, the terms 'normal' and 'ordinary' were used as well. This group killed because they were mentally ill. The second group included women who were inept caretakers. These women either performed their mothering tasks poorly or rejected mothering work altogether, putting personal pleasure and convenience above maternal sacrifice.

This dichotomy mirrored Meyer et al.'s characterizations of 'mad' and 'bad' mothers:

> Women portrayed as 'mad' have been characterized as morally 'pure' women who by all accounts have conformed to traditional gender roles and notions of femininity. These women are often viewed as 'good mothers,' and their crimes are considered irrational, uncontrollable acts, usually the direct result of mental

> illness. In contrast, women characterized as 'bad' are. . . depicted as cold, callous, evil mothers who have often been neglectful of their children or their domestic responsibilities . . . These mothers are often portrayed as sexually promiscuous, non-remorseful, and even non-feminine. (2001: 70)

One of the women who cared too much was Bethe Feltman, diagnosed with postpartum depression at the time she killed her children. The former middle-school teacher, who became a stay-at-home mom after her first child was born, taught Sunday School, participated in the Mothers of Preschoolers support group, brought meals to sick neighbors in her suburban neighborhood, and wrote letters of encouragement to a missionary family in Ecuador (Vaughan and Gutierrez, 1998, para. 2). Former students remembered Feltman as supportive, although five male college professors could not remember her at all, and her college girlfriends said she was the ideal roommate, thoughtful, studious, and deeply religious. 'I guess I remember her as just a very good girl', one said (Meadow, 1998). In interactions with her own children, Feltman appeared loving and tender. Lynne Ford, the custodian at the Feltmans' church, remembered her as gentle with her shy three-year-old son. 'She was so patient, so kind, a perfect mother' (Crowder, 1998).

Community members were horrified when Feltman killed her children, but they also expressed compassion toward a woman whose sickness appeared to transform her from loving to violent. In accounts of the Feltman murders, reporters privileged news sources' remarks that postpartum depression was a form of insanity. 'This is not a made-up disease', said Jeffrey Metzner, a Denver forensic psychiatrist. Dr Doris Gundersen of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center suggested that 'we must be careful not to punish women who develop this disorder and commit infanticide when their illness goes unrecognized or undertreated' (Lindsay, 1998). News stories cast Feltman as the mad mother – a woman who was a perfect caretaker until illness damaged her.

Unlike Feltman, Andrea Yates was presented as both a mad/bad mother. The young mother of five was the supreme caretaker and achiever, but that changed on 20 June 2001, when she drowned her children in the bathtub of their suburban home. Relatives and friends were stunned, describing Yates as kind, conscientious, and loving. Yates' mother, Jutta Kennedy, told the press: 'She was always trying to be such a good girl . . . She was the most compassionate of my children. Always thinking of other people, never herself. She was always trying to care for everybody' (Thomas et al., 2001, para. 7). Terry Arnold, who owned the home-school bookstore Yates visited weekly, called her 'a totally delightful woman', who spoke lovingly of her husband, was very gentle with her children, and appeared 'very upbeat' (Bardwell et al., 2001, paras 34, 39). Yates' brother Andrew Kennedy said his sister 'was just a good

person. She followed the Ten Commandments . . . She loved them [the children] a lot' (Rendon, 2001, para. 17).

The valedictorian of her high school class and a registered nurse, Yates cared for patients in a cancer unit until she resigned to rear and home-school her children. While pregnant and caring for her own young family, she also provided daily care for her father, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease. 'She would change his clothes and wash him and help feed him', Yates' mother recalled (Thomas et al., 2001, para.7). *The Houston Chronicle* reported that 'Yates has spent her adult life catering to the deepest needs and visions of others, strangers and loved ones alike' (Bernstein and Garcia, 2001, para. 3), and *Newsweek* observed that 'if anything, she cared too much . . . In a horribly twisted way, she may have tried to be too good a mother' (Thomas et al., 2001, para. 6).

Family and friends saw Yates as a diligent caretaker, but they also saw signs that she was suffering from postpartum psychosis. Relatives sought psychiatric help for Yates, yet no one suspected Yates, who had tried twice to kill herself, would become violent with the children. Husband Russell Yates said that neither he nor his mother-in-law, who visited the home daily, 'saw Andrea as dangerous. We didn't know what she was thinking. Neither of us thought it would be a problem leaving her by herself an hour here and there' (Christian, 2002a, para. 6). Russell Yates also explained that his wife hid her moods well. 'She's a very private person. She doesn't say much' (Thomas et al., 2001, para. 14). Like Lazarre's (1976) ideal mother, Yates was quiet, giving, and undemanding.

Prosecuting attorneys presented a different portrait of Yates, one that cast her as selfish and manipulative. Yates exemplified 'an evil mindset beyond what most people can imagine' (Tolson, 2001, para. 28), according to one prosecutor. Some attorneys acknowledged that Yates might be insane, but they argued that mental illness did not excuse her from her maternal responsibilities. One legal consultant made essentialist arguments that Yates deserved harsh punishment because 'all women will reject the idea of destroying their young' (Christian, 2002b, para. 13). Indeed, jurors did not believe mental illness excused Yates, and when they convicted her of murder, prosecutor Kaye Williford deemed the verdict appropriate. 'To find her not guilty by reason of insanity is to say that we no longer have self-accountability in our society' (Christian and Teachey, 2002, para. 38).

Journalists did, in some cases, challenge simplistic representations of Yates as sick or mean by asking why Yates did not receive adequate care for postpartum psychosis. A *Newsweek* writer concluded her article on doctors' failed attempts to treat Yates by asking whether Yates' admission that she heard Satan tell her to kill her children was an 'admission of culpability, or is it a cry of anguish?' (Gesalman, 2002, para. 6). *The Houston Chronicle* published

an explanatory article about the illness and noted 'in hindsight, Houstonians can see that Andrea Yates was overburdened, did cry for help and did receive help, although it was inadequate' (Feldman, 2001, para. 33). *The Chronicle* also reported that area residents questioned Russell Yates' failure to protect his children from their sick mother (Snyder, 2002; Teachey, 2001), an issue that was not raised in the Feltman case, even though Bethe Feltman told her husband she fantasized about drowning their children.

While news accounts explored the issue of postpartum psychosis as a cause in the Yates and Feltman murders, articles did not explore the types of services available for women who suffer from the illness. Nor did articles advise family members what steps to take if they suspected a loved one was a threat to children.

What is also remarkable in stories about Yates and Feltman is that so few people acknowledged the women's caregiving work as unusually demanding. In spite of her work as a teacher, church volunteer, and mother, one news reporter described Feltman as having 'lived a life that was stunningly ordinary' (Meadow, 1998). Andrea Yates cared for a sick parent and five children, and her husband viewed his wife's full-time caretaking as stressful but manageable (Bardwell et al., 2001). Women's mothering work is taken for granted because it is considered 'natural' (First, 1994), and newspaper articles about Feltman and Yates reinforced the notion that women who strove to be perfect, worked non-stop, and never complained were just fulfilling a biological destiny.

The ideal of perfection was one of the factors that apparently motivated Amy Grossberg not to tell her parents she was pregnant. Grossberg 'put a premium on being the perfect daughter, and she thought this [pregnancy] would be a disappointment to her family', an attorney explained (Hanley, 1998b, para. 22). John Daley, a friend, observed that in Grossberg's wealthy New Jersey community, 'there's a lot of pressure. . . especially with the girls, to be the perfect princess' (Peyser et al., 1996, para. 12). When Grossberg was arrested after giving birth to her son in a Delaware motel, then throwing his body into a dumpster, one family friend told *Newsweek* it was 'like Barbie getting busted' (Peyser et al., 1996, para. 9). Friends described Grossberg as obedient and affectionate – terms that might be applied to a cocker spaniel but in this case were used to describe a model adolescent girl.

Kristeva (1986) observed that Marian images portray mothers as quiet, and this expectation of silence allowed Melissa Drexler's pregnancy to go unnoticed among family and friends. In her comings and goings in high school, Drexler lived 'an undistinguished life, she was an ordinary girl' (Goodnough and Weber, 1997, para. 1). The New Jersey teen was so inconspicuous, no one suspected she was pregnant; no one even noticed when her water broke in the car on the way to the prom.

Drexler and Grossberg shared the common bond of an unplanned adolescent pregnancy, and in telling their stories, journalists and sources often characterized the two young mothers as individuals concerned more with protecting a secret than protecting a newborn. A prosecutor in the Grossberg case said the young woman showed 'chilling indifference' toward her child (Hanley, 1998a, para. 11), and when Drexler confessed in court, reporters observed that 'the innocence of her voice seemed misplaced against the remorseless account she gave of killing her newborn' (Zambito, 1998, para. 2). There were, however, some cracks in this flawed mother narrative. News reports on the Drexler case included comments from prosecutors and the judge who suggested the young woman panicked when her baby was born, a *Newsweek* article on Drexler questioned the 'awesome power of denial over a young woman's heart and mind' (Koehl, 1997), and a *New York Times*' article on Grossberg explained infanticide as a centuries-old practice, noting that adolescents may kill their newborns because they fear society's disapproval (Hoffman, 1996). It is worth noting that in news coverage of the Drexler and Grossberg cases, journalists reported that the young women *concealed* their pregnancies. Journalists might also have asked the question: what made these young women so invisible that adults around them did not notice the pregnancies?

Kristeva (1986) theorized that Marian ideals situate mothers as sexually pure and child focused, and this construct transformed Susan Smith from good girl to bad mother in her community's eyes. Smith's mother, Linda Russell, characterized her daughter as an ideal adolescent. 'Susan always minded', Russell said. 'If she was supposed to be home at 10, she was home at 10. I always knew where she was and who she was with and what time she'd be back. She was dependable and responsible' (Baxley, 1995a, para. 21). A former schoolmate remembered Smith as 'perfect. You've got your bad girls at high school, and you've got your good girls. She was your good girl' (Adler et al., 1994, para. 14). Perhaps the images of perfection and compliance were what led to feelings of betrayal and anger among community members when the sheriff revealed that Smith's children were missing – not because they were in the back seat when a black man carjacked her car – but because the white woman had pushed the car into a lake with the boys strapped inside. *Newsweek* said town residents saw efforts to search for the boys' kidnapper 'mocked by an even greater evil than it imagined' (Adler et al., 1994, para. 4).

At Smith's murder trial, witnesses commented on Smith's love for her children, but it was her love affairs with men that gained the most news interest. Sources portrayed Smith's sexual life as complex, tangled, and squalid, a series of short-lived sexual relationships motivated by lust and greed. Smith's romantic relationship with co-worker Tom Findlay became a centerpiece of

trial debate, as prosecutors argued that Findlay did not want the responsibilities of parenting, and Smith murdered her sons to remove the chief obstacle in their relationship.

However, Smith's attorneys suggested that her relationship with another man – her stepfather – also might have played a role in the children's murders: Smith was molested by her stepfather, but when journalists revealed that Smith willingly had sex with her stepfather six months before her sons drowned, news reports characterized Smith as a temptress who invited and enjoyed sexual attention. Smith 'succumbed to her own molestation as a teenager and grew up to become a promiscuous, sexually exploitive young adult', *Newsweek* reported (Morganthau et al., 1995, para. 1). While one psychiatrist testified that Smith's sexual encounters were a reflection of 'her aim to please people and a desire for affection rather than any heightened sexual interest' (Baxley, 1995b, para. 27), *Newsweek* writers suggested that Smith, at age 15, indeed might have been responsible for her stepfather's actions: 'Although Russell clearly initiated sexual contact, the case file suggests Susan may have led him on' (Morganthau et al., 1995, para. 7).

Smith's attorneys argued that she 'tried to cope with a failing life, and she snapped', while prosecutors said 'this is a case of I, I, I, and me, me, me' (Baxley, 1995c, paras 25, 6). In their efforts to adhere to the professional standards of balanced reporting, journalists presented accounts of Smith as victim and victimizer; in so doing, articles reinforced the mad/bad mother dichotomy. Missing from news articles were serious examinations of power in parental relationships, the long-term effects of sexual abuse, and the use of sex as a bargaining tool for women who have few economic options. Feminists have theorized that sexuality and maternity are generally not compatible in Marian constructs of motherhood (De Beauvoir, 1952[1949]; Kristeva, 1986), and journalists might have considered the relevance of Smith's sexual history in her murder trial by asking whether a man who killed his children would have been subject to questions about his sexual life.

Another flawed mother was Jennie Bain, whose children died in a hot car as she partied inside a motel room with four men. Like Smith, Bain was not homebound or child focused, and her relationships with men were an issue in news coverage of her trial. Bain's mother-in-law, Annette Ducker, said it was Bain's wanton behavior that prompted her son to file for divorce and to ask for custody of the children. 'James knew she had her men, and he didn't think she was taking care of the babies . . . She'd go out and leave him with the kids. He'd have to go hunt her. He found her drunk on several occasions' (*Chattanooga Free Press*, 1995b: paras 24, 27). James Ducker, Bain's estranged husband, noted that his ex-wife was carousing with men the day his children died. 'Any mother who was a good mother wouldn't have her children out at 3:30 in the morning' (*Chattanooga Free Press*, 1995c: para. 6). Yet one article challenged

the flawed mother narrative by questioning the role of fathers in child care. At Bain's trial, the judge called attention to the fact that, in spite of his protests that Bain repeatedly abandoned the children, Ducker had not seen his sons in a year (Williams, 1995).

Awilda Lopez, who beat her six-year-old daughter, Alisa Izquierdo, to death, was characterized by journalists and news sources as a violent mother who drifted from man to man and drug to drug. *The New York Times* reported that she 'lived in apartment 20A with six children by four different fathers' (Bruni, 1995, para. 21), and those who came in contact with Lopez described her as an urban savage, who waged an unjust war against her own child. One 22-year veteran of the police force called the Lopez case 'the worst case of child abuse I've ever seen' (Bruni, 1995, para. 3). When Lopez was arrested, *Newsweek* described her as a 'ranting, wild-haired' woman, who screamed her innocence as she was taken away by police (Peyser and Power, 1995, paras 2, 8), and at her sentencing, *Daily News* journalists said the 'crackhead', who had 'previously expressed little remorse' over her child's death (Ross and Gentile, 1996, paras 5, 7), was 'the most despised woman in New York. . . reviled even among criminals' (Daly, 1996, paras 2, 6). In reporting this story, journalists focused primarily on the failure of the New York City social services system to protect Alisa, subsequent bureaucratic changes that led to an overhaul of the social services system, and passage of a state law to open child abuse records to public inspection. Journalists, however, did not explore the availability of services for mothers who admit, as did Lopez, that she needed help in caring for her children. Journalists might have asked what happens when a woman admits she is not a good mother. What resources are available when women admit they do not mother well?

Khoua Her, a Hmong immigrant who killed her six children and tried unsuccessfully to kill herself in a Minnesota public housing project, was presented not only as a flawed mother but a disagreeable human being. Relatives and police told reporters Her was a chronic troublemaker, a malcontent who shunned maternal duties, and a violent woman who threatened her husband with a gun – the antithesis of Lazarre's imaginary good mother. Neighbors said the young woman neglected her children, her husband said she had a bad temper, and her mother-in-law described her as 'an evil daughter-in-law' reluctant to hold or touch her babies (Police piece, 1998, para. 10). However, news reports also presented Her as a woman plagued by violence, poverty, and poor health. Her said she was beaten and threatened by her husband, that she had been raped, and that her daughter was raped.

When police responded to Her's call saying she had murdered her children, the Associated Press reported: 'Police knew the address . . . They'd been called there at least 15 times in the past 18 months' in response to reports of spousal violence (Taus, 1998, para. 1). Reporters might have questioned why,

with Her's history as a victim and perpetrator of violence, police did not suspect she might harm her children. Journalists also might have asked how Her's position as a cultural outsider affected her ability to find work in the United States and how young age – Her had six children by the time she was 24 – affected her mothering skills.

Journalists also failed to closely examine the role cultural differences may have played in the case of Urbelina Emiliano, who helped her husband kill her two-day-old daughter, fathered by another man. Although journalists reported Emiliano's testimony that she did not want to harm her child, one lawyer scoffed at the idea 'that this young mother would sacrifice the life of her baby to save the pride. . . the machismo [of her husband]. . . that is an absolutely ridiculous concept' (Peterson, 1995, para. 19). Ridiculous or not, honor killings do occur – families kill daughters who are raped so they do not bring shame to the entire clan, husbands and wives kill spouses who are unfaithful. Journalists might have placed Emiliano's claims in a larger cultural context and asked how Emiliano's poverty and lack of education played a role in her decision to obey her husband rather than protect her child.

Because this analysis covered a 12-year-period, questions may be raised about how media coverage changed. There were, in fact, no radical changes over time; an article about the 10-year anniversary of the Susan Smith killings illustrates the point. A reporter observed that Smith left a 'dark and lasting memory' on the town (Caston, 2004, para. 6), and local residents said they continued to resent Smith for lying and harming her children. The attorney who prosecuted the case recalled he had trouble explaining the case to his four-year-old because 'Mama is supposed to be everything safe and protecting. Mama is home' (Caston, 2004, para. 23). There were, however, two changes worth noting in news coverage. First, while most stories portrayed fathers as victims of unpredictable women, news stories about Andrea Yates raised the question of paternal responsibility, not only for the crime of infanticide, but in the larger context of children's well-being. Second, a news story prompted police to re-open the investigation into the cause of the deaths of Marie Noe's children. In earlier decades, journalists presented Noe as a sympathetic victim of tragic circumstances and did not openly question her role in the children's deaths.

Discussion and conclusions: power and gender

Gans wrote that 'much news is about the violation of values' (1980: 40), and, as this article illustrates, infanticide represents the violation of deeply held values about right and wrong, childhood innocence, and women's roles, and news articles reflected those deeply ingrained cultural norms. The flawed

mother narrative illustrates the underlying assumption that mothers are all-powering, all-knowing, and all-loving, all the time. Cooey (1999) observed that 'the penalty for a mother's failure to meet cultural idealizations of motherhood is demonization' (p. 230), and casting mothers who kill their children as insane or evil was a narrative device that helped journalists simplify their stories. However, demonization allowed reporters to ignore a central paradox in western culture: we idealize motherhood but offer little social support for women engaged in the day-to-day tasks of child care (Dally, 1982; Kitzinger, 1995).

American society is predicated on the concepts of personal freedom and individual responsibility, and an underlying assumption in this set of articles is that women acted autonomously and in their own self-interests. Journalists might ask how this ideology works in a gendered culture, where women typically are taught that they should defer to others, respect authorities, and consider marriage and children as markers of success and status. Ruddick (1995) observed that women have seemingly tremendous power as mothers; however, they are often powerless in other settings. Journalists might have asked how much autonomy these women had in their relationships, homes, and communities.

Because journalists reported maternal infanticides as local crime stories, reporters tended to rely on attorneys as sources, and this source selection helped perpetuate the idea that infanticide is the isolated act of a flawed individual. Johnson-Carter (2005) theorized that journalists believe that use of official sources provides sufficient facts. In order to help readers better understand the complexities of infanticide, journalists might have looked beyond official legal sources and considered the value of non-official sources, such as mothers themselves, who could speak to the joys and stresses of child care. In addition, journalists might consider whether feminist scholars could add to the understanding of infanticide by offering historical context about the crime.

Finally, journalists might consider the disparity in charges and sentences for women who killed their children. Only one article in this data set called attention to differences in sentencing (Caruso, 2003), and that article mentioned only four cases nationwide. It is interesting to note that, among the 10 cases studied in this research project, the youngest and oldest criminals received the lightest sentences. Prosecutors originally demanded the death penalty for Amy Grossberg, then agreed to accept a manslaughter plea and a 30-month prison sentence. Melissa Drexler pleaded guilty to aggravated manslaughter, a more severe charge than Grossberg's, and received a harsher punishment; yet she served only a few months longer than Grossberg. Marie Noe murdered eight children but did not spend time in prison; instead, she was sentenced to 20 years of probation and placed under house arrest. Bethe

Feltman did not spend any time in prison; she was declared legally insane and sent to a state psychiatric hospital, where she spent four years before returning home under continued medical supervision. In contrast, Andrea Yates was pronounced guilty by a jury and sentenced to life in prison for the murders of two of her five children (although she was recently retired and found not guilty by reason of insanity). Khoua Her pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and was sentenced to serve two consecutive 25-year prison terms, plus four concurrent terms. Susan Smith was spared the death penalty but was sentenced to 30 years to life in prison. Urbelina Emiliano received a sentence of 15 years to life, as did Awilda Lopez. Jennie Bain was sentenced to 18 years in prison for the deaths of her two sons. Journalists might have placed sentences in a larger national context, and they also might have explored laws on infanticide in other countries. Journalists' failure to examine discrepancies in sentences represents a missed opportunity to raise the question of whether justice was equally applied.

A larger issue raised by news accounts of maternal infanticide is how to help women who cannot or do not mother well and what role journalists might play in shaping this discourse. Kitzinger (1995) theorized that Western cultures are particularly prone to child abuse because children are treated as possessions, and 'there is little social support for a mother who is in danger of physically abusing her child, and a great deal of depression among new mothers goes unnoticed and neglected' (p. 214). Journalists might look more closely at how the idealization of motherhood discourages women from asking for help – and discourages society from offering services to help them, assuming that maternal instinct will 'right' any troubled situation. Examining community responsibility in infanticide does not mean that women who kill their children should not be accountable for their harmful actions; they should. However, exploring infanticide as a social problem, not just an individual problem, adds another layer of inquiry to reporting, allowing journalists to present a more thorough and accurate account of infanticide.

A shortcoming of this analysis was that I was unable to determine whether there were differences in coverage by female and male reporters. News stories included multiple bylines, bylines with initials not names that might indicate whether a writer was male or female, or no bylines, so I did not analyze articles based on reporters' sex. A future research project would be to interview reporters and editors about their coverage of infanticide, news organizations' policies of reporting and covering child abuse, and journalists' personal attitudes about the stories they wrote. In developing a greater understanding of news coverage of infanticide, it will be important not only to examine the content and framing of these stories of intimate violence but to consider the perspectives of the storytellers themselves. Also, it will be important to

examine how the media portray men who have killed their children, to explore myths about fatherhood.

As a former journalist, I recognize that deadlines, source availability, economic resources, and community norms shape news coverage. However, I invite journalists to move beyond simplistic explanations of infanticide as the outburst of one demented individual and to consider this crime as a larger problem affected by romanticized notions of motherhood, gender norms that delegate child care responsibilities primarily to women, lack of recognition of the hard work involved in daily child care, lack of understanding about postpartum depression, and lack of family, community, and institutional support for mothers. The media should not *excuse* women who kill their children; however, the media can *explain* why women come to this violent point in their lives, and journalists can become more aware of how maternal myths shape the news stories they write.

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