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Mothers Who Kill: Number of Victims, Sexism, and a Just World

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High profile cases, such as those of Susan Smith and Andrea Yates, have drawn the attention of the public and scholars to the act of filicide, the killing of a child by his/her parent. Although relatively rare, filicide has occurred throughout history. Most experts agree mental illness is frequently an underlying factor when mothers kill their children. After giving birth women are at greater risk for psychiatric illness, specifically postpartum depression. Symptoms of postpartum depression include abrupt mood swings, suicidal thoughts, and thinking about hurting their new born child (Davidson, 2000). Postpartum depression occurs in only one woman out of 200 and full-blown postpartum psychosis develops in only .2% of these women. Infanticide, the killing of a child less than one year of age, is frequently occasioned by postpartum psychosis (Meyer & Oberman, 2001).

Society perceives mothers who kill their children as unique cases different from other people accused of crimes. "Mothers who murder their children evoke sympathy, confusion, and abhorrence...Society is torn between wanting to protect the helpless child and recognizing that perhaps the very act of

child murder suggests that the mother was severely ill or demented and therefore deserving of sympathetic sentencing (Manchester, 2003, p. 714)."

Despite the prevalence of mental illness in women who kill their children, these women are prosecuted under homicide laws in the United States. The logical plea for women accused of filicide is Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity (NGRI). Prior research has found when a woman kills two children, most jurors find her guilty of first-degree murder rather than NGRI (Hurst & Foley, 2004). Mock jurors rationalize the impact of seeing what she had done to the first child would prevent the mother from killing her second child. But, perhaps, jurors would be more likely to believe a mother was NGRI if she killed more children. Is it possible a mother who kills four children would be more likely perceived to be insane than one who kills one child? The current case varies the number of children killed (1, 2, or 4). It was hypothesized that women who kill four children would be more likely to be perceived as NGRI than a woman who kills one or two children. One factor that can contribute to the development of postpartum depression is lack of social support (Logsdon & Usui, 2001). A husband is an important force in the lives of both mother and baby. His assistance in the care of the baby can alleviate some of the external stresses on the new mother. The current study varies the level of support given to the mother by her husband. It was hypothesized that participants would be more likely to find the mother NGRI if she had little support from her husband. Our rationale was they would perceive the mother to be under greater stress without social support and have more empathy for her.

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Personality variables can influence jurors' decisions. There is evidence jurors with negative attitudes toward women tend to be harsher toward women defendants (Laski, Bohn & Foley, 2004; McGraw & Foley, 2000). It is likely that a juror's antagonism or hostility toward women's issues and demands would play a role in determining the mother's guilt in a filicide case. It was hypothesized that jurors who were high in Modern Sexism (MS) would be less likely to find the mother NGRI.

Another personality characteristic which influences mock jurors' decisions is Belief in a Just World (BJW) (Foley & Pigott, 2000; Hyme, Foley, & Pigott, 2001). Lerner's (1970, 1980) just-world theory proposes that people view the world as a just place; when people are good and kind, good things happen to them. Likewise, when bad things happen to a person they believe that person deserves it. According to Rubin and Peplau (1975), people vary in their level of BJW. People with a high BJW are more likely to find the person responsible for their victimization than those with a low BJW. It was hypothesized that participants with a high BJW would attribute more responsibility to the mother as the number of children increases. They would be more likely to convict the mother of first-degree murder and more likely to believe she deserves the death penalty.

Method

The 121 participants (20 men, 99 women) were students at a middle-sized, urban university in the southeast. They ranged in age from 18 to 50 years with a mean age of 23.8.

The study was a 2 (level of support: low or high) X 3 (number of children: one, two, or four) between subjects factorial design. The dependent variables were three separate questions: not guilty by reason of insanity, guilty of first-degree murder, or should receive the death penalty. Each response was on a six point Likert scale from 1) *strongly disagree* to 6) *strongly agree*.

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, the Modern Sexism Scale, and the Just World Scale. Participants were asked to read a description of a criminal case in which a woman is accused of killing her child(ren). One of the six scenarios was randomly assigned to each group. Participants were asked to answer questions concerning their perceptions of the case, and their agreement with the three questions. The participants then formed a mock jury, selected a foreperson, and deliberated until a unanimous verdict was reached on whether the defendant was NGRI or guilty of first-degree murder. If the defendant was found guilty of first-degree murder, mock jurors then were asked to determine whether she should be sentenced to life in prison or given the death penalty.

Results and Discussion

Contrary to our hypothesis, there was no significant effect for the number of children on whether participants found the defendant NGRI. The impact of number of children was seen on recommendations for the death penalty. People were most likely to recommend the death penalty when there were four children involved and least likely to recommend it when there were two children involved ($p = .003$).

Recommendations fell between those extreme when there was only one child involved. It is understandable people would view the crime involving four children as the most serious. What is less clear is why the murder of one child is perceived to be more serious than one involving two children. Perhaps people believe there is less stress on a woman raising one child and the mother should have more control.

Contrary to our hypothesis, there was no effect for the level of support provided by the husband on perceptions of the responsibility of the mother. Participants apparently believed the mother was totally responsible for her behavior and whether or not her husband supported her did not enter into their evaluation of the defendant's guilt. They did not have more empathy for the mother who had no social support from her husband.

An ANOVA with Modern Sexism (high and low scorers) as the independent variable and responses to the question about NGRI as the dependent variable found a significant effect ($p = .033$). As hypothesized those low in Modern Sexism were more likely to find the defendant NGRI than those high in sexism. Clearly, when jurors express antagonism or hostility toward women's issues and demands, these attitudes play a role in determining their perception of the mother's guilt in a filicide case. Apparently, evaluations of the insanity defense in cases of filicide committed by the mother are influenced by the juror's level of sexism. It would seem, the insanity defense has little value if a juror is hostile toward women's issues. If the mother kills, then the mother is guilty. A juror, however, who has high awareness of women's needs and demands, and sympathy

toward them, appears to be inclined to find the mother NGRI.

A MANOVA was run with Just World Scale (high and low scorers) and number of children (1, 2, or 4) as the independent variables and responses to the questions about NGRI and guilty of 1st degree murder as the dependent variables. There was a significant interaction effect for JWS by number of children ($p = .03$). Follow-up univariate F – tests found a significant effect for the interaction on whether participants would find the defendant guilty of 1st degree murder ($p = .027$). As hypothesized, participants with high JWS were more likely to convict the mother of 1st degree murder, the more children she killed. For low JWS the results were in the opposite direction; the more children the mother had the less likely they were to find her guilty of 1st degree murder. Although there were no significant results for JWS by number of children on the insanity defense, it is possible the results of 1st degree murder indicated more sympathy toward the mother by those with a low JWS.

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