

Media Bias in Cases of Maternal vs. Paternal Filicide

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Abstract

Although filicide, the deliberate act of a parent killing a child, was historically regarded as a female crime, there has been an increase in the number of men killing their children. In the United States, maternal and paternal filicide now occur in roughly equal numbers. The purpose of this study was to determine whether media coverage of mothers who commit filicide differs from coverage of fathers who commit the same crime. We conducted a content analysis comparing two paired cases of actual filicide (maternal vs. paternal) described in print media articles. A 5-point Likert scale was used to assess degree of bias. A follow-up survey was also administered in which respondents were asked to read one of two versions of a fictional case study of filicide (maternal or paternal) and rate how harshly they would punish the offending parent. We expected our research to reveal that maternal filicide is treated with more bias in the media and viewed more harshly by the public than paternal filicide; these hypotheses were partially confirmed. One explanation for our findings might be that violating expected gender stereotypes, such as the view of mothers as nurturers, is viewed especially negatively.

Introduction

Filicide is a commonly committed offense that has occurred in multiple countries throughout time. Despite its frequency, the murder of a child by his or her own parent is often portrayed as a crime set apart from all other types of homicide. According to Ferguson, Miller-Stratton, Heinrich, Fritz, and Smith (2007), the United States is among the few developed countries with high rates of filicide. Contrary to popular belief, mothers and fathers commit filicide in roughly equal numbers. Because the United States relies heavily on the use of media to report information, it is important to assess whether coverage of filicidal cases is biased against the media portrayal of mothers in comparison to fathers for breaking stereotyped gender roles.

According to Leveillee, Marleau, and Dube (2007), there are slightly more paternal filicide cases occurring each year than maternal filicide cases. The media, however, tends to provide more coverage on mothers than on fathers who kill their children. Content within the media coverage is also segregated by sex, depicting fathers as having violent predispositions and mothers as having psychological issues. Comparing gender differences in behavior on seventy-five different filicidal cases, Leveillee et al. (2007) conducted a study using coroners' investigation reports and notes. They found that overall, men were more likely to show aggressive traits and that women were more prone to emotional disorders prior to committing filicide.

A similar study conducted by Liem and Koenraadt (2008), which compared maternal and paternal filicide offenders' characteristics, yielded different results. Reviewing clinical records on 161 individuals who were placed in a psychiatric hospital after committing filicide, they found no gender differences in the amount of depression and similar disorders. They also analyzed patients' behaviors to determine motives using Bourget and Bradford's (cited in Liem and Koenraadt, 2008) classification scheme. According to their findings, men were more likely to commit filicide due to anger or resentment towards their spouse, whereas women were more likely to direct their hostile feelings internally.

Similarly, a study conducted by Orthwein, Packman, Jackson, and Bongar (2010) found that participants regarded envy and revenge as motivating factors after analyzing a fictitious case study when the perpetrator was male. Participants in their study also agreed that mental illness was the leading motive when the perpetrator was female. Orthwein et al. (2010) also found that their participants – all California defense attorneys – were more likely to agree to a prison term when the perpetrator was the father and more willing to use an insanity plea if their client was the mother. While our study is not focused on finding patterns among motives, relevant to our research is whether the general public tends to attribute mental illness more to women than to men and if there is a sentencing

disparity between the two sexes.

Ferguson et al. (2007) also used an invented filicide case study to analyze how 218 university students judged the perpetrator's morals and mental stability, the appropriate punishment for the offender, and the fairness of the justice system. They drafted eight different variations of the crime scenario, however, all the background information stayed the same. Each of the twenty-one questions was formatted using a Likert scale. Their results showed that male respondents were more likely to determine that a perpetrator was guilty and morally wrong; female respondents were more likely to report offenders to be mentally ill and worry that the criminal justice system might treat them unfairly. Although this study provided a relevant methods approach that we decided to inform the structure of our own study, we were less interested in the differences among male and female respondents and more interested in the differences between the perceptions of the male and female offenders.

In order to determine whether print media sources contain bias in the coverage of filicide cases, we looked to Cavaglioni's (2009) study, which focused on twelve different paternal filicide cases across forty-five articles from three popular Israeli newspapers. He used narrative analysis and implemented a coding procedure to find similarities and patterns between the articles; he found that the authors often incorporated negative criminal stereotypes in references to the offenders. Descriptions of facial expressions were included to depict the father as having a lack of emotion or as being wicked.

Although Cavaglioni's research provided strong evidence that there was media bias in Israeli newspapers towards paternal filicide cases, the lack of analysis in regard to maternal filicide cases did not allow a comparison by sex. Also, the differences among societal gender roles in Israel and the United States may be too drastic to make predictions about the level of media bias in the latter. We used Cavaglioni's approach to analyze print sources, but examined *both* paternal and maternal filicide cases in order to draw a comparison between the two.

Using previous research as a guide, we conducted a project that incorporated both a fictitious case study to assess public opinion concerning mothers and fathers who commit filicide and a content analysis to examine print media for bias within the articles. In our study, we expected to find more negative opinions regarding maternal filicide due to the mothers' violation of expected nurturing roles and anticipated seeing this bias perpetrated through print media.

Method

Content Analysis

Materials

We examined a total of forty print media articles about two maternal and two paternal filicide cases – there were ten articles per case. Both of the maternal filicide cases matched a paired paternal filicide case in year and state the offense was committed in. The sources of articles ranged from local to national newspapers. We took note of any key words that contained negative connotations within the article and also whether the inclusion of photographs impacted how the mother or father was portrayed.

We also searched the archive databases for four national newspapers to see how many related articles were written regarding each case. The four chosen newspaper sources – New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, and Washington Post – were rated in the top five most circulated newspapers according to *ThePaperBoy.com*.

Measures

We analyzed each of the forty print media articles according to a rating scale that contained questions regarding basic information about the source (name, date, and length of article), whether there was a photograph in the article, and the portrayal of the accused parent. To assess any bias against the parent in the articles, we developed a list of key descriptors that contained negative connotations (example: disgusting, psychotic, heartless, crazy, etc.). We kept a tally of the number of negatively connotated words per article and converted it into a five-point Likert scale, with 1 = Neutral (containing no negative connotations) and 5 = Extremely Unfavorable (containing seven or more negative connotations).

Procedure

The forty articles were randomly chosen from various local and national newspaper websites. We each analyzed the content of half of the total articles, noting the number of words that contained negative connotations. When we were finished, we checked over each other's work to ensure consistency in our ratings.

To determine how many articles were written in national newspapers, we accessed the archives of four of the top five most popular newspapers – New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, and Washington Post. For each archive section of these newspapers, we typed the names of the four offenders into the search engine and tracked the number of related articles that pulled up.

Results

Content Analysis

Seven articles – three covering paternal filicide and four covering maternal filicide – contained at least one word with a negative connotation. However, only two of the articles were rated as moderately or severely unfavorable (i.e., Likert ratings of 3, 4, or 5), suggesting that reporting bias was minimal.

The results from our newspaper archive search indicated a strong difference between the maternal and paternal filicide cases in terms of the number of articles written about each (see Table 1). The two cases involving females were both highly represented, while no articles focused on any of the matched cases involving males.

Table 1: Total Number of Articles in Archive Databases about Selected Cases

National Newspaper Talley - Number of Articles in Archives				
Name of Parent	New York Times	Los Angeles Times	USA Today	Washington Post
Casey Anthony	776	98	512	743
Andrea Yates	112	23	98	624
Chauncey Robinson	0	0	0	0
John Battaglia	0	0	0	0

Method

Survey Study

Participants

A total of 50 participants took part in the survey portion of our research project. Twenty male and thirty female students from the University of North Carolina Asheville's research participant pool completed a survey, for which they received research credit in their introductory psychology classes.

Measures

The survey contained two parts. The first section contained a name recognition task: Participants were asked to review a list of twenty-four names and circle any names that looked familiar to them. The list of names contained twelve men and twelve women. Only six of the male names and female names listed people who committed filicide; the remaining twelve names were randomly generated. The four cases of filicide that we analyzed in depth in the content analysis were included in the listing. In order to differentiate between responses that were true name recognition responses and those that were vague recollections (and possibly, just guesses), participants were asked to write down any information they recalled about the names they circled.

For the second section of the survey, we created a fictional case study approximately half of a page in length. The case study described a scenario in which a parent endured a series of unfortunate events (e.g., teenage parenthood, financial issues, divorce, termination from employment, Social Services investigations, depression), which ended in filicide. In order to avoid potential media bias, the case study was carefully written so it would not

resemble any real-life murder case.

After reading the case study, participants were asked three questions about the case: whether they thought the parent was mentally stable, what the appropriate sentence should be if he or she was found guilty, and whether they believed the case should qualify as a death penalty case. For the question regarding suitable sentencing, participants could choose one of six options: three options regarding jail time length (less than 5 years, 5-15 years, or 15-25 years), life in jail without parole, time served in psychiatric care, or “other.”

Participants were randomly given one of two versions of the survey. The only difference in the two versions was the gender of the parent in the case study. Half the participants (n =25) completed surveys that listed “Sarah Turner” as the mother who killed her daughter, while the remaining 25 participants completed surveys describing “Derrick Bowler” as the father who committed the same crime.

Results

Survey Study

The results from the name recognition portion of the survey clearly illustrate that maternal filicide cases are better known than paternal filicide cases (see Figure 1). Eighty percent of participants circled Casey Anthony as a name that they were familiar with; Andrea Yates and Susan Smith were the next two most frequent responses. Our research results show that recognition of mothers who commit filicide is nearly thirteen times more likely to occur than recognition of fathers who commit the same crime.

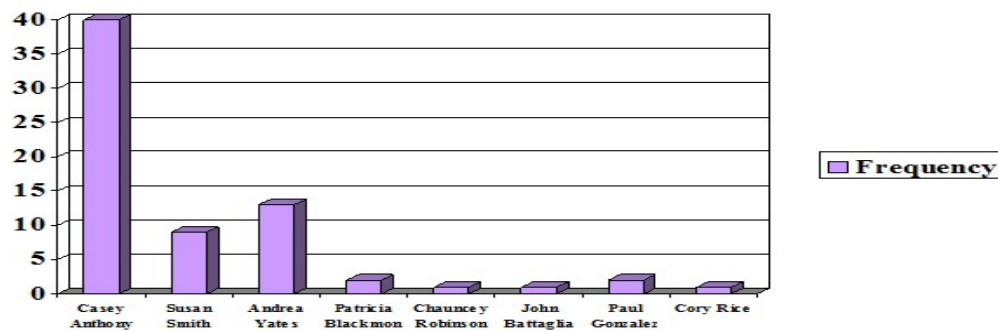


Figure 1: Number of Participants Recognizing Names of Maternal vs. Paternal Filicide Defendants

To investigate whether participants in the survey study viewed the fictional case of maternal or paternal filicide differently, we conducted chi-square analyses for each of the three survey questions regarding mental stability, appropriate sentencing, and the death penalty. There was a marginally significant discrepancy in views of mental stability of the mother vs. the father, $\chi^2 (1, N=50) = 2.91, p = .088$, with participants perceiving “Sarah” to be more mentally unstable than “Derrick” (see Figure 2). However, no significant differences were detected in views of the two cases in regard to appropriate sentencing or the death penalty.

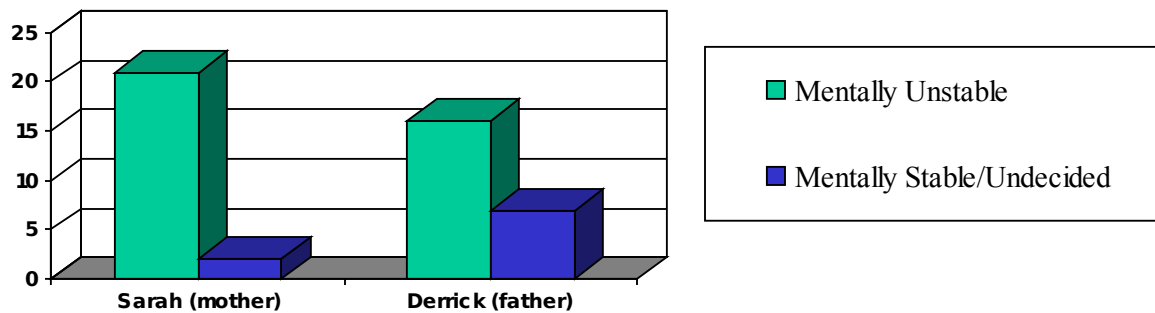


Figure 2: Perceptions of Mental Stability of “Sarah” and “Derrick”

Discussion

Before we conducted our study, we predicted that women involved in filicidal cases would be more negatively depicted in the media than men. We also expected that mothers who killed their children would be portrayed as mentally ill in an attempt to explain why they had violated their stereotyped gender roles of motherhood. Although our hypothesis was not fully confirmed by our study due to the overall lack of biased connotations in the newspaper articles, the frequency tally of each filicide case found in the newspaper archive indicated that female offenders are much more likely to be featured in the media (collectively, neither male offender showed up in any of the four national newspaper database searches in comparison to the overwhelming number of articles generated by both female offenders).

Due to the fact that the majority of articles pulled up from the archive databases and the results of the name recognition surveys overwhelmingly favored cases of maternal filicide, our study provides clear evidence of media bias in regard to the large discrepancy in amount of news coverage between the two sexes. This implies that while print media sources can be trusted to be more neutral than other forms of media, the limited quantity of accessible articles related to paternal filicide creates the impression that fathers killing their children is more frequent, thus lacking the need for a sensationalized spotlight in the media and are overall less newsworthy than that of mothers.

One possible reason for the lack of paternal media coverage is in part due to our findings from our second hypothesis, which stated that mothers who killed their children would be seen as mentally unstable because their actions conflict drastically with traditional maternal roles. This interpretation was supported by the results of our case study survey, where a disproportionate number of respondents deemed the mother as mentally ill and believed that psychiatric treatment was the most appropriate sentence. These results strongly imply that our society judges mothers according to stereotypical gender roles and expect them to be nurturers as well as the primary caretakers of their children. Women who violate these roles are quickly deemed as mentally unfit in order to explain why they cannot conform to society’s expectations of mothers. This in turn causes more media attention to be directed on maternal filicide, which reinforces the myth that mothers who kill their own children is a more inconceivable act than if the paternal filicide.

We limited our study to print media sources; video sources, though easier to detect bias on part of the reporter, were less accessible. We found, however, that multiple online newspaper archives (particularly in local sources where the crime of the highlighted cases occurred) only date back a few months. This forced us to expand our search to all types of print media from multiple sources. The difficulty in locating enough articles on paternal filicide cases made it difficult to find paired cases of studies to analyze. Consequently, we ended up with only four total filicide cases.

Despite the restrictions in our study, we were able to uncover some interesting results that are relevant to the real-world issues of gender role conformity and the subtle biases presented in how media distinguishes what information is considered pertinent. Our findings show that careful attention must be given when analyzing information received from print media and encourage further studies to be conducted on other sources of media to detect bias, as well.

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