

News Framing Theory and Postpartum Psychosis: How the Media Has Shaped the Public Understanding of Postpartum Psychosis

INTRODUCTION

Infanticide (or filicide) is defined as the intentional killing of a child, particularly one's own offspring. Many of the cases of infanticide in American history most sensationalized by media were committed by mothers experiencing postpartum psychosis. When infanticide is committed in the context of postpartum psychosis, polarities in the public discourse surrounding these cases become apparent: some support the mother and are sympathetic to the struggles of postpartum psychosis experience while others vehemently criticize the mother and demand punishment. These polarizing viewpoints arise from lack of understanding of perinatal mental health disorders and have been fueled, in part, by media coverage of infanticide cases.

Stigma surrounding mental illness is often rooted in a lack of understanding or fear of the experiences, thoughts, and emotions that the individual experiencing these disorders is going through (American Psychological Association [APA], 2022), and inaccurate or misleading media representations of mental illnesses contribute to the lack of understanding and fear surrounding mental health issues (APA, 2022). This false media representation reinforces societal stereotypes surrounding individuals with mental illness, including the beliefs that they are dangerous, incompetent, to blame for their disorder, and unpredictable (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Not only do women who commit infanticide while experiencing postpartum psychosis face severe prosecution from within the legal system, but they also often face anger, hatred, hostility, and vitriol from their families, friends, and the American public, often highly influenced by the media coverage surrounding these controversial topics.

OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study was to:

- Locate cases of infanticide committed in the context of postpartum psychosis that received a large amount of media attention in the United States and examine the media coverage of these cases and the public discourse.
- Theorize how the news coverage of these cases impacted the public's opinions and knowledge of postpartum psychosis
- Highlight how these cases have led to social change through increased attention to perinatal mental health disorders.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sources used for this historical analysis were 1,925 media articles published in the United States (U.S.) between 1986 and 2006. The Access World News database was searched using the term "postpartum psychosis." In the results, the earliest year that contained the search phrase within a relevant article was 1986, making that the starting point of this analysis. The ending time point of 2006 was chosen because it marked the completion of the landmark case of Andrea Yates, one of the most well-known cases of infanticide in the context of postpartum psychosis that has ever occurred in the United States.

Articles covering cases of infanticide committed in the context of postpartum psychosis that were prosecuted in the legal system were the primary focus of this analysis. This discussion excludes cases with successful suicide attempts of the mother, as these cases either had no confirmed postpartum psychosis diagnosis or typically never entered the legal system..

A conventional content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used to examine the content of media articles focused on six cases involving mothers who commit infanticide while experiencing postpartum psychosis. Across the media coverage of a single case, words and phrases were grouped by similarities to develop themes of recurring content. The analysis focused on how words, phrases, and authors' sentiment stayed consistent or shifted over time, and how any changes in reporting likely contributed to a change in social perception. In addition to analyzing media content, we included content focused on the legal defense and court process for some cases to demonstrate how the criminal justice system interacts with mothers who commit infanticide.

Our approach was reflective of an issue-specific news frame analysis, in that we described communication content and captured the meanings embedded in the internal relations within texts (Reese, 2007; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). We also observed issue-specific news frames about infanticide in conjunction with values (Brüggemann & D'Angelo, 2018), presented by the authors of the news articles. Across the coverage of each case, we noticed that stronger and weaker frames emerged and were emphasized, which likely contributed to (and were influenced by) varying societal views about each case, including the understanding of postpartum psychosis and attribution of responsibility.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

- 2 "camps": One in support of birthing persons and one in support of harsh punishments
- Use of softer language over time in a subset of the media
- Increased articles in support of mothers and families over time
- Andrea Yates case as the biggest driver of social change
- Frustration with the systems that fail birthing persons
- With increased awareness comes increased intensity of stigmatization

- News coverage of perinatal mental health disorders is a significant driver of public understanding and awareness.
- The two camps continue to be a representation of a deeply divided American public. Future research will examine the political leanings of the states in which media articles were published to investigate whether there may also be political implications involved with the views of individuals living in each state.
- Public health researchers and perinatal mental health specialists and providers need to work with the media to leverage their ability to increase awareness.
- Increased awareness leads to increased intensity of stigmatization when inaccurate information is disseminated to the public. This polarizes the views surrounding perinatal mental health based on the accuracy and understanding of the information received
- Systems are still failing mothers experiencing postpartum psychosis, and no end is in sight.
- There are incremental changes happening in the portrayal of perinatal mental health disorders over time in the media, largely due to increased celebrity attention to perinatal mental health and the sensationalization of extreme cases of these disorders. To continue making changes, targeted efforts need to be made to leverage the power of the media to influence change and increase the awareness and understanding of perinatal mental health disorders in the United States.

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