



MEDIA

'Media' is the page of the Society's Press Committee. This section of *The Psychologist* aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV programme or radio broadcast involving psychology, if you have tips for others based on recent experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the 'Media' page coordinating editor, Harriet Gross (Chair, Press Committee), on H.Gross@lboro.ac.uk.

Why do parents kill their children?

ACCORDING to a recent *Mail on Sunday* article, 'mothers always get the blame'. Since the early 20th century, influenced by Freud and Watson, newspapers and then TV have had 'a tendency to link "bad mothering" to everything from obesity to teenage pregnancy, hooliganism to illiteracy'. But when mums actually kill their offspring, do the media actually turn a bit of a blind eye?

Take this batch of headlines from November: 'Killer fathers' (*Sunday Telegraph*), 'What makes a father kill his children?' (*The Independent*), 'Why do Dads kill children?' (*The Guardian*), 'What makes a doting father kill his child?' (*Closer* magazine).

Now consider this (very small) correction from *The Guardian*:

In the article 'Why do Dads kill children?' we said that more than half of under-16-year-olds killed in the UK between 2002 and 2003 were killed by a parent and maternal killings accounted for only 5 per cent of that total. In fact, Home Office figures for England and Wales show that killings of children by a natural parent are committed in roughly equal proportions by mothers (47 per cent) and fathers (53 per cent).

Yet gender differences and marital relations are never far from the foreground in the explanations offered for filicide. *The Guardian* article notes the common explanation that men are fuelled by sexual jealousy, but points out that it's not one with much currency among police officers. It also says: 'In the rare case of maternal killings they are almost always attributed to

PA/EMPHICS

Callum, Joshua, Daniel and Thomas, who were killed by their father, Keith Young

post-natal depression.' The *Sunday Telegraph* article claimed that 'Psychologists agree that the majority of women kill their children are seriously mentally ill, but fathers who do so rarely are.'

I'd be interested to know what that is based on. I have no reason to argue with the expert opinion that men who kill their children 'don't talk to dogs. They don't hear voices in an empty room, they don't suffer from a profound disorder' (Professor Jack Levin, Northeastern University, Boston, in the *Daily Mail*). But do we really have enough solid research to know why anyone, dads or mums, kill their children? I would imagine that killings by mothers are more likely to be babies or one child, but what are the hard facts on this?

Perhaps in the absence of real insight it's too easy to fall back on gender stereotypes: men in a rage of sexual jealousy kill their entire family, whereas 'women tend to talk to their friends, go out and drink too much or maybe chop off the sleeves of their husbands' suits' (Dr Alex Yellowlees, consultant psychiatrist at the Priory Hospital, in the *Daily Mail*).

Look beyond the 'explanations' – often, as noted in *The Guardian*, 'the old-fashioned baddie stereotype... a child-snatcher with cod-psychology thrown in' – and the latest batch of articles offered some fascinating insights into forensic psychology. In the *Sunday Telegraph*, Dr Keith Ashcroft described viewing crime scene photos in moving terms: 'I consider

myself quite a tough chap...but nothing prepares one for the utter horror of looking at the bodies of little children, often in their nightclothes, who have been murdered by their fathers.' Dr Julian Boon (University of Leicester) told me something very similar: 'Never will I forget the crime-scene pictures – never.' Are the 'post-Cracker psychology boom' students ready for that? What professional support is available to forensic psychologists in this situation?

As to whether family killings are becoming horribly common, opinion was mixed. In *The Independent*, Ged Bailes (Head of Forensic Clinical Psychology at the Norvic Clinic in Norwich) said: 'It looks like a spate of incidents, but we need to be careful. In the scheme of things this is still a fairly rare event.' Tony Black, a former chief psychologist at Broadmoor, said: 'I get the impression that this kind of violence is on the increase.' Julian Boon told me: 'These things go on all the time. The press go with a flurry of them, but next month it will be something else.'

Perhaps the final word should go to Zoe Williams in the *Guardian* article: 'The spectre of fathers killing their children is not one that is conjured up to spook people...nor is it blown out of proportion because each individual narrative is so wrenching, arresting and memorable; it is not exaggerated by vengeful single-mother feminists as a critique on the authenticity of fatherly feelings. It is a phenomenon that happens – often.'

Jon Sutton

EARLY 2007 MEDIA TRAINING

Monday 19 February Introduction to working with the media

Monday 5 March Broadcast media training

Monday 14 May Introduction to working with the media

☐ Contact Dawn Schubert for details on mediatraining@bps.org.uk or tel: 0116 252 9581.