Review

How are women who kill portrayed in newspaper media? Connections with social values and the legal system

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SYNOPSIS

Consideration of the media's representations of women who kill highlights dominant discourses in the framing of public responses to criminal acts of a particular kind, which in turn shapes legal responses to such acts. Generally, women who commit murder are, in some way, portrayed as an aberration of true womanhood — as either 'bad' or 'mad'. Through an overview of the vast literature that has examined the reportage of these women, we examine how this is done and consider whether the framing or portrayal is affected by the woman's relationship to her victim: a violent partner, a child, or a non-family member. We identify some common themes in the 'mad', 'bad' and 'sad' representations of these women, as well as a tendency to downplay information that might contextualise or explain the women's actions. Details of the women's appearance and sexuality were also emphasised in media reports, with particular attention given to sensationalised images, for example, depictions of debauchery, vampirism and lesbianism. By contrast, underlying social issues and causes are often not included. We therefore conclude that our ability to make sense of such crimes in a manner that may assist in their prevention is diminished.

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Introduction

Framing and language have been identified as important in shaping media portrayals of women (Bullock, 2007; Jewkes, 2002, p. 1423–1429). Importantly, these can both contribute to the 'production of myths' (West, 2004–2005, p. 1, 5) and be influenced by stereotypes and mythology (Mead, 1997, p. 6). For example, feminist theorists have noted that 'representations of violence against women may in fact reflect the media's ambivalence towards feminism and a tendency to reflect an uneasy coalition of patriarchal values and the language of empowerment' (Easteal, Holland & Judd, 2015: 106, discussing Mendes, 2012 and Walter, 2010).

In this review article, we consider whether such patriarchal values and myths also translate into the representation of women who kill. It has been suggested that, in breaking the law, female offenders are 'doubly deviant' (Naylor, 1990, p. 4; see also Collins, 2014, p. 11; Weatherby et al., 2008) because they breach general social expectations as well as transgressing appropriate feminine behaviour (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002, p. 50). In other words, gendered ideals of behaviour derived from cultural ideas about femininity (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009, p. 144) do not include the commission of crime. As Easteal has noted,

> The woman who commits a crime is perceived as having perpetrated an act that is diametrically in opposition to the traditional characterisation of her sex as gentle, nurturing and angelical. She is far closer to the 'whore', the 'bad' woman end of the scale, since her behaviour is deviating from the 'natural' feminine traits.
>
> [2001, p. 22]

Accordingly, women who kill are *extra* deviant. Violence is incompatible with our conception of 'good' women who are nurturing and emotional mothers and/or passive and cooperative wives (see Brennan, 2002; Huckerby, 2003; Naylor, 1990). Therefore, a woman who kills 'profoundly challenges deeply held assumptions about women and their capacity to nurture others' (Storrs, 2004, p. 9, 12). Whiteley, 2012 recently completed her doctoral research on Australian women incarcerated for murder in Australia and observed that:

> Despite the significant contributions to the understanding of the phenomenon of a woman who kills, the gravitation to demonise what the western world cannot adequately account for continues. The act of murder by a woman stands opposed to the essential nature of womanhood as realised through the discourse of normative femininity.
>
> [2012, p. 36]

Unsurprisingly, media discourse tends to present female perpetrators as emotionally unstable or insane (Barnett, 2005; Farr, 2000); evil manipulators (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Wilczynski, 1991, p. 71); victims of domestic abuse (Jewkes, 2004; Morrissey, 2003); sexual deviants (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Farr, 2000); bad mothers and wives (Barnett, 2005; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Huckerby, 2003; Morrissey, 2003; Naylor, 1990); and 'non-agents' (Morrissey, 2003). These representations uphold 'feminine norms by constructing female criminality in terms of gender

deviance' (Lin, 2012, p. 2–3; see also Skilbrei, 2012, p. 136–141; Kerry, 2011, p. 263, 271).

Deviance can be correlated with 'badness' or 'madness' caused by female hormones or disordered reproductive systems, and has more recently been linked to 'sadness' in the context of victims of violence (Easteal, 2001, p. 22). In each instance, some external factor is related in the story that explains the criminal behaviour of women who are not classified as 'bad'. They may be depicted as 'victims of circumstance', with criminal behaviour linked to a biological malady or a medical condition (Barnett, 2005). In contrast to the 'bad' women, the narrative for these 'mad' or 'sad' women is more likely to include the offender's feminine appearance (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002), a story that frames their act within an adherence to traditional female traits and fulfilment of domestic responsibilities and/or as sexually and religiously pure (Barnett, 2005; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Farr, 2000; Huckerby, 2003; Naylor, 1990; Wilczynski, 1991).

Thus, it seems that women who commit murder are, in some way, portrayed as an aberration of true womanhood: 'man-hating, lesbian vampire, demented castrator, unnatural mother' (Creed, 1996, p. 120) or 'drug addict, prostitute, welfare recipient' (Farr, 2000, p. 62) or as a victim herself (Jewkes, 2004). According to Maras, 2014 'these typologies force women into categories, which they often do not fit into', creating 'a seemingly general profile of a woman murderer, which relies on gendered assumptions about women and the motives behind their crimes' (2014, p. 31).

In this article, we provide an overview of the vast literature that has examined media reporting of women who kill and we consider whether or not portrayals vary according to the relationship of the offender to her victim. We therefore structure our review on the basis of the woman's relationship to her victim, namely, women who kill a violent partner, women who commit filicide, and women who kill a non-family member.

Many of the studies we review draw upon the concept of framing to describe the role that media reporting plays in emphasising some aspects of cases of women who kill, while obscuring from view other pertinent factors. We understand frames as being embedded in the symbolic environment and thus available for journalists and other social actors to draw upon in making sense of social issues (Reese, 2007; Van Gorp, 2007). Van Gorp observes that individuals 'connect the framing devices in a news story with cultural phenomena because they are already familiar with them' (2007, p. 63). Thus, by invoking a particular cultural theme 'frames can determine which meaning the receiver attaches to an issue' (p. 63). The media provides an important source from which members of the community, such as jurors, form their views about legal issues and through which legal and law enforcement professionals seek to advance their preferred frames. It is important, therefore, to closely examine the prevailing narrative when reporting on women who kill. As Chesney-Lind and Eliason, 2006 have observed:

> Both the media and the criminal justice system play crucial and complementary roles in the control of women. Popular media masculinize and demonize a few women, effectively casting them out of the 'protected' sphere of femininity, while celebrating the presumed passivity of the rest of womanhood. The criminal justice system steps in, both