



## Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences Section – 20??

### I19 Infanticide by Starvation and the Medea Complex: A Case of a Statistically Rare Form of Crime

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After this presentation participants will learn how to better understand the dynamics that play a significant role in committing such a rare form of crime as the one described in this case.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating the in-depth explanation of a rare and complex case in which an exceptional form of neglect, abuse and anger directed toward a little child is not caused by a relevant psychopathology, but mostly by personal/relational dynamics and socio-cultural factors.

Infanticide is the murder of a child carried out by one or both of his/her parents. There are different ways to carry out an infanticide, as well as different motives.

The case presented here involves a statistically rare form of infanticide, in which the death of female child under 18-months-old occurred as a result of a three month period of severe abuse, neglect, and malnutrition, to the extent of starvation.

The mother was a 22-year-old woman who lived with a 42-year-old man. She was raised by her grandmother, as both her parents were emotionally distant from her. She grew up in poverty. Her mother – who had worked as a prostitute - died after having suffered from alcoholic cirrhosis when she was about fifteen and her father had previous penal convictions.

When she was 18, she married a man and had two children. They had substantial financial difficulties and continuous conflicts that were worsened by the fact that her husband was unemployed and forced her to work as a prostitute.

At the age of 19 she met a client, whom she soon began to date, even though she knew that this man already lived with a woman and had two children. She fell in love with him, soon idealizing that sentimental relationship, to the point of believing they could have a future together and raise a stable family. Therefore, she left her husband. She and her children moved in with the new partner, but he abandoned her after only one or two months, while she was newly pregnant.

She continued to believe in this idealized relationship, but the man never came back. After a while, she returned to live with her husband for a few months, during which she worked as a prostitute again, until the birth of her third child, the baby girl who would be later left to die from starvation and whose father was the one she lived with for about one or two months before being aware of her pregnancy.

She left her husband for the second time and let another man move in with her. This man, who had prior penal convictions, did work somehow, but did not have a steady income. When she turned 21, she had her fourth child with the latest partner, but never stopped thinking about that man who had abandoned her. Her current partner often noticed her crying and became jealous of the other man. The woman had conflicting feelings towards that little baby, having chosen to not have an abortion in order to keep the baby's father tied to her. A few days after the birth of her fourth baby, she left the third one in the care of some relatives for a few months.

When the third child returned home with her, she only gave her small quantities of food (mostly milk, or water with sugar and breadcrumbs), left her in the stroller all the time - not allowing her to take her first steps - and without a blanket during winter (there was no heating system in her apartment). She also used to throw objects at the child when she was crying.

She referred to that baby as the "evil" child, due to her feelings of revenge (resulting from ambivalent love/hate feelings) directed toward the absent father, but also due to popular "magic" beliefs that she was under a spell of bad fate.

Her partner was involved in these dynamics and contributed to the same neglecting and abusing behaviour, which, finally, led to the death of the child after about three months.

A relevant psychiatric disorder was excluded in both the mother and her current partner and the explanation for the crime emerged from the study of the personal history and relational dynamics between the couple.

That child was the symbol of a personal failure for both the mother and her current partner.

For the mother, that baby was the concrete representation of the abandonment from the man (the natural father) on whom she had relied for her personal and family gratification. Moreover, that baby was another symbol of failure, as she represented an attempt to gain control over the father, who, on the contrary, decided to leave anyway. In other words, she failed in her personal realization. All her feelings of anger were projected on the baby and those same feelings were shifted from the real target (the man) and re-directed toward the symbolic target (the baby). In some way, these dynamics resembled the description of the so-called "Medea Complex", in which the mother killed her own children to gain revenge on the father, thus inflicting the ultimate punishment on him.



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Confirmation of these specific dynamics was also evident from the realization that her other three children were healthy, well fed and treated normally.

The feelings of anger and hate were also apparent from the fact that the parents never called the baby by her name, but with demeaning nick- names as “The Palermitan” (the father was from Sicily), or “The Dwarf”, from the mother, and “The Monster” from her current partner.

The latter also considered that baby as the symbol of the woman’s relationship with another man, towards which he showed open feelings of jealousy and anger. In other words, the baby symbolized the failure of his personal realization with his woman.

**Infanticide, Starvation, Media Complex**