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I, Amy Baumann Grau, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology.

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The Epitome of Bad Parents: Construction of Good and Bad Parenting, Mothering, and Fathering in Cases of Maternal and Paternal Filicide

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The Epitome of Bad Parents: Construction of Good and Bad Parenting, 
Mothering, and Fathering in Cases of Maternal and Paternal Filicide

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Abstract.

Motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are often treated as universal constructs. This is especially true in the construction of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. However, as previous research such as that by Collins (2009), Glenn (1994), and Risman (1998) all demonstrate, parenting is affected by both race and gender. In this dissertation, I show that the social construction of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are gendered and racialized. Specifically, I focused on media portrayals of the crime of filicide, or the murder of a child by its parents, to show the gendering and racialization of parenthood. I chose media portrayals of filicide as the focal site for this research precisely because it is divergent from “normal” parenting activities.

I examined twenty-five cases of filicide that were committed by thirty-three parents. I conducted a qualitative content analysis of 372 stories about these thirty-three parents from stories that I collected from local television news affiliate websites. Cases were limited to those in which it was reported that the parent(s) had been convicted of a charge in relation to the death of their child between June 10, 2010 and June 10, 2012.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The November 14, 1994 cover of *Time Magazine* reads “How Could She Do It?” and depicts an emotional Susan Smith as well as a photo of her two sons (Bonner 1994). Weeks prior, Smith went to police alleging that she had been carjacked by a black man with her two sons in the car. After a nationwide search and extensive media attention portraying Smith as a distraught mother and victim, Smith admitted that she strapped her one and three year old sons in the car and drove it into a nearby lake, drowning her sons. As Bragg reports, “They [the jurors] said that in the end, as they sat at a table talking to one another of how they felt, they found Mrs. Smith more pitiful than evil” (1995: lines 41-42).

On June 20, 2001 Andrea Yates drowned her five children, ranging in age from six months to seven years, in the bathtub in their Houston, Texas home. Yates, who suffered from postpartum psychosis, was tried in 2002 for her crimes and was convicted of capital murder and sentenced to life in prison (Huckerby 2003). In 2006, Yates was retried and found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed to a Texas state mental health facility. The March 4, 2002 cover of *People* magazine, for example, depicts Yates in an orange jumpsuit with the eye-catching headline of “After bouts with mental illness, Andrea Yates drowned her five children. Now a jury must decide: Villain or Victim?” (Hewitt 2002). While an article by Newman after Yates’ retrial describes that Yates had “told police that Satan was inside her and that she was trying to save them from hell” (2006: lines 46-47).

In 2008, another mother made headlines in connection with the death of her daughter. Described as the “most hated woman in America” (Boroff 2013, line 1), Casey Anthony was accused of murdering her daughter Caylee. Anthony was found not guilty of the murder in 2011
and as Alvarez reports “the young mother whose seemingly heartlessness at the disappearance of her daughter transfixted America for three years, was found not guilty on Tuesday of killing the girl, Caylee Marie” (2011: lines 1-4).

These three women and the coverage of their cases are notable for numerous reasons. Susan Smith, Andrea Yates, and Casey Anthony are some of the most notorious names when it comes to the crime of filicide. All three garnered national and international attention for killing their children, yet the coverage of these women is widely disparate. Susan Smith is portrayed as pitiful while Andrea Yates is presented as mentally disturbed and Casey Anthony is despised and heartless. The specific goal of this dissertation is to show how the media construct the concepts of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood with a particular focus on the use of racialized and gendered themes. I chose to focus on filicide, an extreme case, as it is the most likely to depict the most variation in these constructs as opposed to more routine or normal activities in which parents engage.

Homicide is an oft discussed topic in the media from crime-solving television shows to news media coverage of real-life crimes. The attention that murder merits in the media is vast but some cases garner more coverage than others. Certain elements have been found to make some crimes and cases more newsworthy than others, such as if the victim is female, a child, or elderly. Meanwhile cases involving blacks, Hispanics, or those with less than a high school education receive less media attention (Sorenson, Manz, and Berk 1998). Cases of children being killed, particularly when the culprit is the parent of the victim, are one type of homicide that is often fodder for the news media.
The murder of a child by a parent or parents is known as filicide. Although this term is not commonly used in the mainstream media, it is a succinct way of describing the crimes that I cover in this dissertation. Between 1980 and 2008, 63% of homicides of children under the age of five were perpetrated by their mother or father (Cooper and Smith 2011). While the work of scholars such as Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) suggests that filicide is generally newsworthy, media attention devoted to cases of filicide varies widely, with some receiving little or no attention while others becoming a part of national or international coverage. Cases like those of Susan Smith, Andrea Yates, and Casey Anthony may be widely known, but as examples of filicide these cases are atypical. Furthermore, the attention given to these cases, and others like them, reinforce an image of filicide as a crime committed only by women, and then only rarely.

In 2005, a total of 555 cases of filicide occurred in the United States according to Fox and Zawitz (2007). Notably, this number comes from Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data and so this number reflects only those cases that were reported to police and that resulted in arrest, thus automatically excluding all unreported cases, a problem likely faced in cases of filicide. Indeed, Porter and Gavin (2010) further suggest that the number of filicides reported could be skewed by cases of infanticide being ruled as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) instead. In addition, the UCR does not distinguish between murders of children by stepparents, adoptive parents and biological parents, thus it is unknown how many of those cases were committed by biological parents versus stepparents (Porter and Gavin 2010). With all these data limitations in mind, the precise number of filicides per year is unclear, and is likely that the numbers suggested by official police and arrest data—as compiled in the UCR—underreport the occurrences in a given year.
Regardless of the accuracy of the reported official reports of filicide, the murder of a child by its parent or parents is typically subject to intense media coverage. Importantly, these stories provide more than just information about particular crimes that occurred. Details about the parents, the children, and their home environment are also provided. These details are then informative on larger issues, such as parenting, and illustrate how knowledge is constructed in these media portrayals. Scholars such as Tuchman (1978), Barak (1994), and Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987) all demonstrate that the media are a source of social control and that the media construct knowledge. By calling attention to certain issues and making them into social problems or by demonstrating the expectations associated with various roles in life and society, the media create and recreate meanings. As I argue, the news media through cases of filicide demonstrate and reinforce the concepts of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood. Furthermore, I argue that media coverage of these cases act as social control on all parents, not just filicidal ones, by reinforcing in various ways what good parents do in both overt and subtle ways.

Before getting deeper into the issues at hand, it is important to note two points. Throughout this dissertation I discuss “good” and “bad” motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. The terms “good” and “bad” are themselves constructed; however, rather than interfering with the readability of this dissertation, I chose to simply use the terms good and bad. Secondly, and building upon the issue of construction, as I focus on good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood it is important to elucidate why these concepts are even needed in society. As I briefly mentioned in the preceding paragraph, media coverage of filicide acts as social control. The ability of such coverage to act as social control occurs because of the boundaries around good and bad parenting. For example, motherhood is a highly valued
concept. The dichotomy between good and bad motherhood enables motherhood to continue to be held in high regard through the praising of acts that are encompassed within the confines of good motherhood. This holds equally true for fatherhood and parenthood despite society’s greater valuation of motherhood. As such, the boundaries around good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood accomplish one major thing. These boundaries act as social control and reinforce good parenting behaviors while demonizing those who exhibit bad parenting behaviors, a point that I repeatedly stress throughout.

**Purpose of This Dissertation**

My focus of this project is on the construction of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood through news media portrayals of filicide. As such, I am interested in the ways in which this media coverage frames the crime. Framing, as Iyengar defines it, “subtly direct attention to particular reference points or considerations” (1990: 20). As such, media coverage of crime can highlight particular social problems or can reinforce stereotypes about who criminals are and what types of people commit particular crimes. Much of the research on media coverage of crime and its ability to prime stereotypical views has focused on the connection between race and criminality (i.e. Chiricos and Eschholz 2002; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). I expand upon the view that the media portray and reinforce stereotypes by adding to it the ability to exert social control. Furthermore, it is not as though black criminality is the only stereotype that is primed in news media coverage of crime, as I demonstrate through the focus on good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood.

The examination of mothering, fathering, and parenting as racialized constructs is a major contribution that I make. Scholars such as Collins (2005, 2009) note several controlling images
of black motherhood, such as mammy and matriarch, but the racialization, and gendering, of parenting extends beyond just these controlling images. Good motherhood as it is typically conceptualized may only be achievable by white, heterosexual women (Fumia 1999; Glenn 1994). As Fumia (1999) argues, good motherhood is only possible because there are deviant motherhoods to contrast it against. As such, women who are non-white or who can otherwise be considered deviant (e.g., homosexual, poor) are marginalized and presumed unable to achieve good motherhood. But, that does not mean that women of color are exempt from criticism when failing to live up to this standard. Furthermore, when it comes to the standard of parenting, mothering and fathering are still equated with different skills and with different roles.

Continuing from the work of Tuchman (1978), Barak (1994), and Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987), there is evidence that the news media exert social control. Taking further inspiration from other lines of media research, such as those of Kahlenberg and Hein (2010), who reviewed toy commercials and gender stereotypes presented with the commercials, and Rivadeneyra (2011), who looked at portrayals of gender and race in telenovelas, gender and race are greatly influential and are the same across contexts (e.g. news coverage, television shows, or commercials). Taking this research further, I show that social control is exerted through news media portrayals of filicide by constructing and reinforcing the concepts of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood.

As I addressed above and more thoroughly in the second chapter, research has addressed some of the elements of this project but has not specifically addressed the ways in which motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are racialized and gendered. For example, there is research on the social construction of motherhood and fatherhood but parenthood as a concept is not discussed. There is an abundance of research on what mothers do and think about the role of
mothering and on what fathers do and think about the role of fathering. This research has shown that there are clear expectations associated with one role or the other but it is much less clear what the expectations are for parents, as parents, regardless of gender. Furthermore, many roles that are more readily associated with mothering or fathering are roles that both parents actually do perform in everyday life. In other words, the categorization of specific roles and duties as either mothering or fathering neglects the fact that parents of both genders perform those roles and also sometimes devalues the role of one parent while elevating the other.

Previous research that has focused specifically on filicide of the media coverage of filicide also has gaps that this project will attempt to fill. Meyer and Oberman (2001), for example, focus only on maternal filicide. They state: “the extent to which infanticide is a reflection of the norms governing motherhood is a constant that links seemingly disparate crimes” (2001: 2). Infanticide, although a type of filicide, has historically been and continues to be a crime much more commonly committed by women than men (Oberman 1996). Thus, while Meyer and Oberman’s argument about how the norms of motherhood are reflected in infanticide, it is not as if this claim is less true if applied to the more broadly defined crime of filicide. Overall, this claim about the norms of motherhood merits further research on its own accord but research also needs to understand what the crime of filicide reflects on the norms governing fatherhood and parenthood.

Filicide is not a usual topic of sociological inquiry. Although I do utilize research from a range of disciplines, my evaluation of prior research as well as this entire project is still sociological in nature. Through this project, I aim to demonstrate the sociological significance of the media coverage of filicide as it is informative on the social construction of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood as well as a mechanism through which social control on desirable
parenting behaviors can be exerted. Furthermore, as I have already briefly discussed, my major contributions are to understanding parenthood as racialized and gendered, a uniquely sociological bent to understanding media coverage of this crime. Such an understanding is important contribution to make in sociology, as well as for other disciplines, precisely because the practice parenting is influenced by the race and gender of the parents (i.e. Collins 2005, 2009; Gavanas 2004).

**Theoretical Framework**

This project draws from theories of Berger and Luckmann’s social construction of reality, Arjen Mulder’s media expression theory, Patricia Hill Collins’ intersectionality, and “doing gender” from Candace West and Don Zimmerman. These theories emphasize very different understandings of society but taken all together they are greatly informative on media portrayals and thus provide the theoretical foundation for this project.

The social construction of reality, put forth in 1966 by Berger and Luckmann, emphasizes the fact that reality is created through interaction. Berger and Luckmann analyze language and the ability of language to typify experiences in such a way that there are categories of meaning that are applicable and understandable by one’s self and others. Their emphasis on language and the meaning behind language is important to this project as the meaning of language extends beyond the definition of individual words. To elaborate, it is through language that knowledge can be shared. As such, social constructions of reality can be widespread and individual constructs like good and bad motherhood and fatherhood can be a common part of reality. This approach is useful for understanding how the media perpetuate the social
construction of reality through the dissemination of “knowledge.” I more fully articulate upon
on their theory and the importance of it to this project in chapter two.

A second influential theory for this project is Arjen Mulder’s media expression theory,
which focuses on how the media portray reality. Mulder argues that there are three levels of
“medial expression” and those are information, meaning, and the effects of one on the other. For
Mulder (2004), information cannot be interpreted, but the meaning of that information can. In
Mulder’s view, information and meaning are not the same things. He understands information to
be what is shown in the media while meaning refers to what an individual takes away from that
depiction. Thus, information is constant. By that I mean that, a news article, for example, says
the same thing in each individual’s paper; however, that does not inherently mean that the
information will be interpreted the same way. Information is thus interpreted by individuals and
those interpretations can vary from person to person but at the same time some interpretations
surpass the individual as they resonate with the multitude and as such become a collective or
shared interpretation of information. For example, through media portrayals of mothers, fathers,
and parents, the meaning of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are
transmitted and shared across society. As I argue more fully in chapter two, Mulder (2004,
2006) expands upon the theory of Berger and Luckmann and makes it even clearer that the media
can shape knowledge through the portrayals of information.

Next, I draw from intersectionality. Collins (2005, 2009) argues that race, class, gender,
and sexuality uniquely situate people within society and the intersections of these social
positions impact how people are treated. Although intersectionality has been conceptualized in a
number of different ways (Davis 2008), I am influenced by Collins’ (2005, 2009)
conceptualization of the theory. As Collins explains: “Intersectionality refers to particular forms
of intersecting oppressions… Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (2009: 21). Furthermore, while these intersections shape the lives and experiences of people, those people shape those social organizations. This understanding of intersecting oppressions is important to this project as the concepts of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are gendered and racialized constructs. As such, employing an intersectionality approach allows for an understanding of these constructs as gendered, racialized, and both gendered and racialized at the same time, as well as seeing how the gendering and racialization of these constructs works to control and oppress particular groups of people.

Although intersectionality speaks to experiences being gendered, given the focus on parenting being a gendered experience it is important to draw from other gender scholars, too. West and Zimmerman argue that people “do” gender and so engage in “activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (1987: 126). They further argue “Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and woman and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the ‘essentialness’ of gender” (1987: 137). Although West and Zimmerman do not directly reference the experience of parenting as “doing gender,” the view that people engage in behaviors as displays of their gender can be readily seen in parenting, particularly as parenting itself is typically thought of in terms of mothering or fathering. I address the importance of “doing gender” in this project more fully in chapter two.
Purpose of Study

My primary aim of this study was to examine motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood through news media portrayals of a crime that is considered to be antithetical to good parenthood and to, through those portrayals, identify ways in which motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are informed by race and gender. It was because of the antithetical nature between filicide and good motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood that I chose filicidal as the focal site of this project. A crime that is so diametrically opposed to understandings of good parenting I thought would be ideal to get at what is a part of the social construction of good motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood because of its foil-like nature. Additionally, considering that good parenting is not thought to be embodied in a person who commits filicide, the stressing of an offender as a good mother or father would highlight the ways in which good parenting is a social construct. In other words, because a parent who commits filicide would generally be thought of as a bad parent, almost by definition, cases or instances where a filicidal offender is portrayed or discussed as a good parent indicates the fluidity of such a construct.

Additionally, I extend upon what we know about the social construction of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood by illustrating how the constructs are influenced by race and gender, resulting in different expectations for black and white mothers as well as black and white fathers in their mothering, fathering, and parenting roles. Motherhood and fatherhood as concepts are gendered through the very construction of motherhood as being done by women and fatherhood as being done by men. Beyond that, the construction of motherhood and fatherhood are influenced by femininity and masculinity in ways that then inform the view of a mother or father as being good or bad in their parenting. Furthermore, motherhood and fatherhood are both encompassed in parenthood; yet, parenthood is itself a construct that has at times the same and at
other times different expectations depending upon if the parent is a man or a woman. Finally, as I draw from intersectionality, I expand upon the constructs of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood as being informed by the intersections of race and gender simultaneously. As such, black motherhood is influenced by the women being black and female, but also by being black women.

Through this project, I aim to expand upon understandings of the social construction of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. Research has more typically emphasized the ideal, and more specifically an ideal achievable only by white women, of good motherhood (i.e. Fumia 1999; Roberts 1995), the myriad ways of failing and falling into the camp of bad motherhood (i.e. Fumia 1999; Naylor 2001), and the fluid and vague boundaries of good fatherhood (i.e. Jordan 2009; Summers et al. 2006). I expand upon these conceptualizations and point out the contributions that race and gender make towards understanding good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood.

Research Questions

Drawing from previous research and the theories of the social construction of reality, media expression theory, and intersectionality, I proposed the following research questions. For now, I have provided the research questions and in the next section the hypotheses that have driven this work. The previous section briefly outlined the theoretical basis for these research questions and hypotheses. I more thoroughly address the theoretical and empirical basis of my hypotheses in chapter two.

Question 1: Do media representations of filicidal offenders differ depending upon the gender and race of the offender? If so, how?
Question 2: How is motherhood constructed in the media portrayals of maternal filicidal offenders and how are gender and race influential on this construction of motherhood?

Question 3: How is fatherhood constructed in portrayals of paternal filicidal offenders in the media and how are gender and race significant in this construction of fatherhood?

Question 4: How is parenthood constructed in the media portrayals of filicidal offenders and how are gender and race important in this construction of parenthood?

I address question one throughout the entire dissertation while questions two, three, and four are addressed in chapters four, five, and six, respectively. I chose this organization in order to specifically address the unique ways in which media portrayals are racialized and gendered specifically in the construction of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood as individual and separate concepts.

Hypotheses

From those research questions, I developed the following hypotheses. As mentioned above, the theoretical and empirical evidence that informed my hypotheses is discussed in more depth in chapters two and three. For now, I have briefly placed these hypotheses within the context of the above mentioned theories of the social construction of reality, intersectionality, and media expression theory as they all play major roles in the formulation of these hypotheses and this entire project.

Hypothesis 1: Media portrayals of filicidal offenders will vary depending upon the race and gender of the offender.
Hypothesis 2: Filicide will be used to reinforce constructs of both good and bad motherhood.

Hypothesis 3: Unlike the cases of mothers who committed filicide, filicide committed by fathers will say less about the men as fathers and more about the men as masculine beings.

Hypothesis 4: Cases of filicide, whether committed by a mother alone, a father alone, or a mother and father acting together, will be used to construct good and bad parenthood and this construction will be influenced by the race and gender of the offender.

Like with the research questions, I address hypothesis one throughout all of the empirical chapters. I address hypotheses two, three, and four within the three empirical chapters of four, five, and six, respectively. Again, I mentioned above, this was a conscience decision to understand the constructs of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood as distinct from one another.

Limitations

This project focuses on acts of filicide covered in the news media on local television news affiliates websites. Like all research, there are limitations that must be noted. Filicide, like most other crimes, is culturally informed, as are the reactions to the crime. I only focus on twenty-five cases of filicide that were covered in the news media in the US between June 10, 2010 and June 10, 2012. Cases were selected only if the parent or parents were ultimately convicted of a crime related to the death of their child or children. I intentionally decided to limit the cases in which there was a sentence or conviction so that all of the parents included had been found legally responsible for the death of their children. Cases in which the parents were not convicted, sentenced, or even charged in the death of their children could substantially differ
from the cases included in my research. As such, the findings here cannot be applied to all cases of filicide that occur in the US during this two year time period or beyond. Additionally, I limited my study to black and white parents who committed filicide. I more thoroughly address this limitation and my rationale for only examining black and white parents in chapter three.

Significance of Study

Beyond filling in the gaps in previous literature, my work is significant in the advances it makes towards the understandings of parenthood. My aim with this project was to understand the ways in which the constructs motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are influenced by race and gender as exhibited through media portrayals. It is important to understand how these constructions are being portrayed in the media as these media portrayals are influential on the ways men and women do parent. Through media portrayals of filicide, a crime that is an antithesis of good parenting, more can be learned about both good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. As most research has focused heavily on good mothering or good fathering, it is important to address more fully bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. Additionally, as I focus on filicide, I illustrate how good parenting is articulated when a parent does not act in a way consistent with good parenting.

More specifically, the significance of this project lies in the analysis of the racialized and gendered nature of these constructs. Research has been conducted on the concepts of good and bad mothering and fathering (i.e. Jordan 2009; Tardy 2000) and these constructs have also been found in media portrayals of filicide (i.e. Cavaglion 2008, 2009). Although research has examined media portrayals of filicide and the constructs of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood, the racialization and gendering of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood has not
been fully explored. In this project, I discuss those roles and expectations as well as the racialization and gendering of those roles. To more fully elaborate on what I mean in terms of the racialization and gendering of parenting, I offer these brief examples. As Chodorow (1978) posits, the meanings associated with mothering a child and fathering a child are vastly different. While mothering evokes ideas about caretaking and the daily tasks associated with that role, fathering has connotations of biological reproduction and little more. The difference in usage and meaning of these terms is just the tip of the iceberg, as I demonstrate. In regards to racialization, there are different expectations for parents that are informed by their race. For example, and a point that I stress throughout, good motherhood has been defined in terms that make it achievable for only middle-class, white women (i.e. Glenn 1994; Harris 1995). This results in different expectations and portrayals of black motherhood and white motherhood, especially within the media.

Additionally, when it comes to understandings of parenthood, research has focused primarily on understandings of motherhood or fatherhood, as if they were identical to, or interchangeable with, parenthood. As such, parenthood, or the ways in which mothers and fathers are both expected to behave towards their children, has not been explored. There are clear roles and expectations associated with being a mother and being a father, but there may also be roles and expectations associated with being a parent, regardless of gender. As Meyer and Oberman argue:

Mothers are supposed to be loving, self-sacrificing, and patient. Motherhood is supposed to be a woman’s greatest aspiration and women are therefore expected to protect their children under any circumstance. Fatherhood is not viewed in the same way. Although
many people do not condone fathers abusing their children, a father’s primary role does not involving protecting and nurturing children. (2001: 158)

Meyer and Oberman (2001) might be overstating the differences in expectations associated with mothering and fathering, but their point is still a valid one. There are different expectations associated with mothering and fathering. But, importantly, while roles and expectations of parenting are gendered and may be more readily associated with mothering or fathering, it is reasonable to assume, as I do here, that at least some expectations apply to both parents, regardless of gender. If so, it should be possible to identify the elements around which definitions of good and bad parenting revolve.

Some scholars argue that filicide reflects traditional parenting roles. For example, Wilczynski (1997) and Meyer and Oberman (2001), that I discussed in the prior paragraph, both argue that traditional masculinity and femininity are played out in filicidal acts. For example, Wilczynski argues that men are socialized to be unemotional and aggressive. This characterization of men as unemotional and aggressive is then reflected in the view that most filicides committed by men involve “retaliation, jealousy and discipline” (1997: 369). Yet, it may be that filicides are framed as occurring due to retaliation or discipline because they are perpetuated by persons who are thought to be unemotional and aggressive. The conclusion that filicide is a reflection of traditional masculinity or femininity is an interesting one but this is a point that she does not elaborate upon fully.

Furthermore, the claim that filicide reflects traditional roles is worthy of more investigation. It is possible, for example, that filicide is portrayed in such a way as to reflect and/or reinforce traditional roles rather than being an act that in itself reflects traditional gender
roles. In other words, the same act on the part of a mother and a father may generate different depictions and interpretations. Moreover, scholars are increasingly emphasizing that the role of father is undergoing change. Some, like Gavanas (2004) and Gillis (2000), argue that fatherhood has not changed that much historically. But there are others like Drakich (1989) who argue that fathering has moved in the direction of nurturing, and other traditional motherhood characteristics. I do not discuss whether or not the roles of fatherhood have shifted. However, both sides of that argument demonstrate that fatherhood, just like motherhood, is gendered. The traditional, more-economically based, provider role falls in line with understandings of traditional masculinity while the more nurturing, mothering-like role draws from understandings of femininity. It is important to note, though, that traditional or hegemonic masculinity or femininity is very much influenced by race and class as Klenowski et al. (2011) demonstrate. Thus, I suggest that traditional parenting roles are more reflections of traditional masculinity and femininity. However, traditional masculinity and femininity are also racialized phenomena. So, expectations associated with traditional masculinity and femininity will differ depending upon whether a parent is white or black, for example.

Organization

In this chapter I have merely highlighted the issues that I address in the proceeding chapters. In the next chapter, the literature review, I more thoroughly address the theoretical and empirical research that informs my research questions and hypotheses. Additionally, this literature review helps to situate my research within the larger scholarly context to identify the connections that I make across the myriad disciplines and topics addressed. In chapter three the methods of this dissertation are described. Within this chapter I describe the rationale behind data collection, case selection, and provide details about the overall distribution of cases.
As I am focused on motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood, I organized this dissertation around those focal issues. Chapters four, five, and six focus on mothers, fathers, and parents who were both held convicted for crimes in relation to the death of their children, respectively. Chapter four details eight cases of maternal filicide which was committed by three white women and five black women. In this chapter, I focus on the construction of good and bad motherhood and find themes of unfit motherhood, inadequate mothering, demonized mothering, and good mothering. The first three of these themes demonstrate bad mothering while the last theme, although not portraying these filicidal mothers as good mothers, addresses conception of what good mothers do.

Next, chapter five focuses on paternal filicidal offenders and is also based on five cases of white fathers and four cases of black fathers who convicted of crimes for the death of their children. In this chapter I discuss themes of the minimization of the fathering role, father as caretaker, demonization of fatherhood, and the importance of mothering. In chapter six, I discuss the cases of parents who together were convicted in the death of their children. This chapter focuses on eight cases of filicide in which both parents were convicted in relation to the crime. These eight cases involve five sets of white parents and three sets of black parents who were both held responsible for the death of their children. In chapter six, I discuss themes of shifting of responsibilities, requirements of care, and the importance of motherhood.

Finally, in chapter seven, the conclusion, I discuss all of the themes found discussed in the previous three chapters. Throughout this chapter I draw more connections between the themes detailed in the previous three chapters and the ways that those themes describe and are evidence of the racialization and gendering of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood and revisit my hypotheses. Additionally, in this chapter I identify opportunities for future research to
continue to expand upon this line of research on the racialization and gendering of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood as well as for research concerned with the media representations of filicide.

**Conclusion**

In this dissertation I detail the racialization and gendering of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood that occur through media portrayals of filicide. Although the constructs of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood are up for continued construction and reinforcement this does not mean that the constructs are uniform for all parents. Instead, the expectations of parents are clearly racialized and gendered and this racialization and gendering is readily apparent in the constructs of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. This point is one that I demonstrate through this project. Good and bad motherhood and fatherhood are still constructed using a white, middle-class ideal that is unattainable not only for non-whites but also for many whites whom are not a part of the middle-class.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As my aim of this dissertation is to understand the racialization and gendering of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood through media portrayals of filicide, I draw insight from a wide variety of research. In this chapter I briefly detail some of the previous research that has informed this project and the hypotheses that I proposed. In this chapter I first address the theoretical background for my project and discuss the social construction of reality, media theory, intersectionality, and “doing gender.” After this I discuss parenting, moving from the social construction of parenting to the gendering of parenting and finally the racialization of parenting. Next, I detail the media construction of reality generally and move to research more specific to the goals of this project which discusses media coverage of crime and concluding with media portrayals of filicide. I organized this chapter in this way to highlight the theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation to the focal issue of the social construction of parenthood. I conclude with a discussion of media portrayals and coverage of crime, and specifically filicide, as it is through such media coverage that I propose much can be learned about the social construction of parenthood.

Filicide, the murder of a child by its parent or parents, is a crime that seems to be counterintuitive to being a parent. The exact frequency of filicide in the US is difficult to determine (Porter and Gavin 2010), but the number of cases reported to police and compiled in the UCR, as of 2005, place that number at 555 per year (Fox and Zawitz 2007). Regardless of the exact number of cases that occur in a given year, cases of filicide do garner media attention. As such, the media have the ability to report on these cases of filicide and these portrayals of filicidal offenders are informative on more than just the crime that occurred. My aim here is not to understand what causes filicide to occur or to explain the behavior of the individual parents
who committed this crime, rather my focus is on media portrayals of filicide and how these portrayals are informative on the social construction of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood.

Like many other roles in life, there are expectations that come with being a parent and these are manifested in the constructs of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. The questions that I proposed attempt to better understand how these constructs are reinforced through media portrayals of filicide but also to understand how the constructs are racialized and gendered within these media portrayals, too. Fundamentally, through this research I examine how race and gender impact media portrayals of filicide and how motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are constructed in these media portrayals.

This project draws from the fields of communications, media studies, sociology, and criminal justice to place this research within the intersections of these fields. Altogether, there is a wealth of research on the topics of media portrayals, filicide, and the social construction of parenting, but the intersections of these topics is less understood and benefits from the variety of perspectives and fields from which the following literature is drawn.

As will be discussed further within this chapter, the theories that I draw upon for this project are the social construction of reality, media expression theory, intersectionality, and “doing gender.” As I am interested in how the concepts of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are constructed in the media, the social construction of reality and media expression theory are well-suited to approach the media as a source of social control that creates and recreates concepts to influence the behavior of members of society. Intersectionality and “doing gender” are the final theoretical underpinnings of this project. Intersectionality helps in
understanding concepts as not only gendered or racialized but also as both gendered and racialized at the same time. In other words, this theory allows for an understanding of the concept of parenthood as uniquely gendered for women but also gendered differently for white women than it is for black women. While “doing gender” helps to dig more deeply into the ways in which socially constructed differences between masculinity and femininity can be essentialized into natural differences between men and women.

Theory

Before delving into the research on the abovementioned topics, it is important to address the theoretical underpinnings. This project relies upon four major theoretical perspectives; those of the social construction of reality, media expression theory, intersectionality, and “doing gender.” All together, these theories allow me to explore gendered parenthood by investigating media representations of parents who commit filicide and additionally demonstrate that these media representations provide boundaries for parenting in a racialized manner.

The social construction of reality focuses on the ways in which objective and subjective reality are developed. From Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) focus on face-to-face interactions to Zhao’s (2006) more recent expansion of social constructionism to include internet communications, reality is constructed by individuals in interactions with others. Although Berger and Luckmann may have been speaking more about face-to-face interactions, they argue that face-to-face interactions are “the prototypical case of social interaction” (1966: 28). Thus, even when the focus is on interactions that are not of the face-to-face variety, knowledge is still being socially constructed and is influenced by one’s location and interactions within the social world. In other words, what is considered to be reality or knowledge is developed in social
interactions, not naturally occurring. Overall, Berger and Luckmann focus on language and the ability of language to construct reality. This construction occurs through the typification of experiences so that general categories are created and can be shared. For example, father represents a role but it also becomes more than that as it includes specific expectations associated with the role of father.

To further elaborate, in their discussion of roles, Berger and Luckmann make it clear that reality is exerted through the roles that one embodies in life. These roles, including social controls and the “standards” associated with roles, influence the way we view the world and so affect our construction of reality (1966: 74). Zhao’s (2006) expansion into internet based communication further increases the realm into which social interactions can occur and recognizes the importance of relationships and interactions beyond the face-to-face level. Although Berger and Luckmann were not speaking of the media, their views still are greatly beneficial to this project. The media are one way through which these “standards,” or as I refer to them, concepts or social constructions, are created, recreated, and reinforced. The media become an agent through which reality is constructed and through which a social construct is shared. As will be discussed in more detail later, Tuchman (1978) demonstrates that the media decide what is and is not constructed as knowledge and so the media play a huge role in the construction of reality and the creation and spread of specific images and meanings that deem some social items (i.e. people, things, behaviors) as desirable and others as undesirable.

While Berger and Luckmann’s theory of the social construction of knowledge is generally accepted in sociology, there are competing theories in the sociology of knowledge that refute some of their points. Van den Bulck (1999), for example, argues that Berger and Luckmann’s theory does not take mediation into account. As Van den Bulck explains: “it is not
important for an individual to know whether his or her knowledge resembles objective reality…

All that matters is which construction of reality makes practical acts possible and is most pragmatic in explaining reality” (1999: n.p.). Van den Bulck argues that the distinction between direct experience (e.g. face-to-face interaction) and indirect experience (e.g. media) is an unnecessary and nonsensical one as the medium through which information is conveyed does not change the message or degree to which that message is thought to be believable. In other words, it does not matter if information is learned from the local television news or from a conversation with one’s neighbor because the message will be considered to be equally true. Furthermore, as Van den Bulck relates, “[p]eople seldom learn about reality directly” (1999: n.p.). Thus the media are a prime medium through which those values and norms can be developed and reinforced. As Van den Bulck states:

Only when experiences are detached from direct interaction and specific events can values and norms develop. After all, for this to happen it has to be possible for experiences to become more abstract and generalised, so that they may be shared with people who lack direct experience, independently of distinct, individual cases (1999: n.p.).

Media portrayals of specific events, such as a crime, become examples that are detached from direct interaction and then become “controlling images” such as mammy and matriarch (Collins 2009) or other racialized and gendered constructions.

Another useful theory is the media expression theory, developed by media scholar Arjen Mulder. According to this theory, communication is an exchange of information and that the medium through which that information is exchanged influences both sender and receiver
(Mulder 2006). For Mulder, media are broadly and simply defined as “means of reaching others” (2006: 289). Mulder’s theory is inspired by the work of Marshall McLuhan (1964), another media theorist, who is best known for the claim, “the medium is the message.” By this, McLuhan means that the medium, or the way through which the message is passed, influences how the message is received. Mulder expands upon this point and argues that the “media make us who we are” (2004: 7).

Mulder identifies three different levels of media expression: information, meaning, and effects of information or the effects of meaning. This last part, the effects of information or the effects of meaning refers to the social nature of media. In other words, as Mulder argues, this level “concerns the effectiveness with which the sent meaning influences the receiver’s behavior in the way desired by the sender” (2004: 27). Beyond tying back into McLuhan’s “the medium is the message,” Mulder sees the media as not only transmitting information and meaning but also as potentially affecting the behavior of the person interacting with the media.

Mulder’s theory elaborates upon that of Berger and Luckmann (1966). While Berger and Luckmann are concerned with the sociology of knowledge and argue that knowledge is constructed through interactions, Mulder is less concerned with how knowledge is created and more concerned with how that meaning is spread and then interpreted. The effects of information and meaning are concerned with the effectiveness of which the desired meaning of the message affects the receiver (Mulder 2004). In regards to this research, this means that the news sources project a meaning through the news stories. Overall, the media present a message and have a desired meaning behind that message. This desired meaning can be seen through the presentation of socially desirable roles and behaviors as well as through the presentation of undesirable roles and behaviors. As such, the media present social constructs, such as good
mother or bad father. Constructs, such as good mother, that are socially desirable are presented to reinforce these constructs and the desirability of these constructs. While constructs, such as bad father, that are not socially desirable are presented to reinforce the desirable constructs as well as serve as a warning for ramifications that may result from behaving in undesirable ways. For example, news stories that follow trial proceedings of a crime reinforce the understanding of that behavior as criminal and unwanted as well as demonstrate that those who engage in such behavior will be caught and punished.

The next theory that I employ is intersectionality. Taking inspiration from Patricia Hill Collins (2005, 2009), intersectionality demonstrates how issues of race and gender come together to influence representations of the social world. Intersectionality focuses on systems of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexuality, nation, and age as part of social institutions that shape how those institutions respond to people as well as how people respond to those institutions. Although intersectionality focuses on more than just race and gender, these two areas are the focus of this project and will allow for the effects of race, gender, and both together to be seen as influential on understandings and constructions of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood.

Intersectionality has already been applied to understandings of parenthood but specifically in regards to black mothers only. For example, Collins (2009) identifies images such as mammy and matriarch as controlling images for black women. This research will examine if other controlling parental images are constructed for other racialized and gendered groups, too. As Collins argues “Ongoing tensions characterize efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood to benefit intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation” (2009: 190-1).
Intersectionality also allows me to see the ways in which the representations of filicidal offenders are influenced by both the race and gender of the offender. Thus, I anticipate that the ways news reporters will report on cases of filicide will be influenced by the race and gender of the offender, rather than just one or the other. Given that there are specific stereotypes out there that define good and bad motherhood for black women, as Collins has illustrated, an intersectionality approach is crucial to this project to understand the ways in which the constructs of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are racialized and gendered.

I also draw from West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing gender.” As I previously and briefly discussed, West and Zimmerman argue that people perform tasks in particular ways that are taken as expressions of masculinity and femininity. The tasks and the gendered way in which they are performed are then framed as natural differences between men and women. As such, when people engage in parenting those tasks are performed differently depending upon the gender of the parent and those differences are equated to be the result of natural or biological differences between men and women.

Thus, mothering and fathering as gendered constructs are rooted back into biology and treated as essential differences that result in differing displays for women as mothers and men as fathers. On a fundamental level, mothering and fathering are biologically rooted (e.g. reproduction). However, the concepts of mothering and fathering extend beyond just reproduction and the biological connection between parent and child. In terms of parenting, the biological link becomes essentialized as the basis for parenting actions in numerous ways. For example, in terms of mothering, because a mother carries a child in the womb she is thought to have a natural, bodily connection with her child. That experience that then carries over to understanding women as better prepared and more “naturally” able to care for their children. As
men cannot have this same experience and cannot have this same bodily connection fathers are not expected to be as “naturally” able to respond to their needs of their children and are so less nurturing than are mothers. In essence, gender is used to emphasize essential differences and then those differences are thought to explain way men engage in particular activities and women engage in other activities. In relation to parenting, this means that the reproductive differences between men and women are used to emphasize a greater and natural connection between mother and child and then use that connection to explain the more involved and hands-on role that mothers play in the lives of their children.

While West and Zimmerman’s “doing gender” can help explain differences in parenting, the theory can be applied to myriad other differences between men and women. There exists some criminological research in which men are depicted as more violent, more aggressive, and more likely to commit crime than women for biological, evolutionary, and other “natural” reasons (e.g. Archer and Cote 2005; Steffensmeier and Allan 1996). Such theories obviously fail to note the ways in which such behaviors are socially constructed as acceptable behaviors for men but unacceptable behaviors for women. Under the lens of “doing gender,” male criminality is being explained as a natural part of maleness of masculinity and so when men engage in such behaviors it is a gendered display of that masculinity.

To elaborate more fully, in Lucas et al (2002), the researchers relate that men use more violent methods (e.g. gunshot, stabbing) than women (e.g. drowning, neglect) in committing filicide. But this distinction about particular methods of committing filicide as more violent helps to reinforce views about gender and the essential view of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). Although this research is psychological, not sociological, and involved the reviewing of family history, physical exams/autopsies of the victims, and interviews with involved parties,
their analysis is greatly informative on how filicidal acts are classified. Classifying one method as more violent than another and then demonstrating that men typically employ the more violent method reinforces ideas that violence is a natural male response. It is possible that any method which would be used more by men than women could be constructed as the more violent method while the method or methods employed by women would be construed as less violent and more nurturing because of the gender and parenting role of the offenders. In other words, as violence is thought to be more rooted in the nature of men than women, whatever method men would more commonly employ would be construed as the more violent method because men are more violent than women due to those “natural” or evolutionary differences between men and women that Archer and Cote (2005) and Steffensmeier and Allan (1996) discuss.

To summarize, by taking together these varying views, it is understood that the media serves as a medium through which a shared construction of reality is disseminated and that the images put forth by the media are influenced by the race and gender of those being portrayed. This also suggests that the images are understood differently depending upon the race and gender of the viewer but that is beyond the scope of this project. Reality, knowledge, and the social construction of roles, such as mother or father, are propagated through the media and bestowed with meanings.

*Parenting and the Social Construction of Parenthood*

Within recent decades more attention has been paid to the social construction of parenthood. And yet, much of this research has paid especial attention to the social construction of motherhood over that of fatherhood and has emphasized conceptions of both good motherhood and bad motherhood.
In a review of scholarship on motherhood of the 1990’s, Arendell (2000) notes the connection between motherhood and gender. Arendell (2000) makes it clear that motherhood cannot be separated from femininity. Furthermore, motherhood, and in particular views that mothering is a natural and essential experience of being a woman, is reinforced by ideas about femininity and female gender identity. Arendell (2000) further notes the distinction between good and deviant motherhood. Good motherhood is defined as time-consuming, emotionally involved, and child-centered and, importantly, a good mother is viewed as self-sacrificing and devoted to others (Arendell 2000). Deviant motherhood, conversely, is less about the acts that a mother embodies or does and more about a mother not being appropriately feminine or lacking the ability to expend all time and energy on her child. Arendell (2000) describes single, minority, immigrant, and lesbian mothers as well as mothers on welfare as deviant mothers. Thus, unless a woman is white, heterosexual, married, not poor and able to embody all of the characteristics he defines as a part of good motherhood, she will be a deviant mother.

Other researchers have found that good motherhood is also reinforced by the acts of mothers themselves. For example, Austin and Carpenter (2008) focus on mothers whose children have ADHD. While these mothers may be constructed as bad mothers by doctors and others if their child fails in any way, the mothers still situate good motherhood as being indispensable, selfless, and fulfilling all of the expectations of women who are mothers. Likewise Tardy (2000) examined the social construction of good motherhood in conversations about healthcare in a mother/child playgroup. Tardy (2000) finds that within this group of mothers, discussions and actions are influenced by the construct of good motherhood but the mothers also reinforce cultural expectations of mothers and thus contribute to the perpetuation of the construction of good motherhood.
Other research on the social construction of motherhood has focused on motherhood in connection with crime. Litzke (2004), researcher focusing on family therapy, studied motherhood and mothers on drugs. Litzke elaborates on the difference between motherhood and fatherhood in connection with drug-dependency. Litzke states: “Gender privilege allows men to be exonerated in terms of their fatherhood. In other words, they are not expected to have access to their children nor are they blamed for neglecting them” (2004: 54). This is manifested through the different ways parents who are drug-dependent or drug-abusing are discussed by family therapists and drug and alcohol treatment programs; women are discussed as substance-abusing mothers but “men are never referred to as substance-abusing fathers” (Litzke 2004: 54).

Similarly, Roberts (1995) focused on the connection between motherhood and crime but with an emphasis on how motherhood is enforced through criminal law. Roberts (1995) argues that for most general crimes women are treated leniently so that they may still provide for their children. However, “it treats women who commit crimes as mothers most harshly for violating the traditional role” (Roberts 1995: 104).

Law scholar, Bronwyn Naylor (2001), also focused on motherhood and women who had engaged in crime. Naylor (2001) reviewed news stories and legal documents about Rosa Richards, a mother of eight, and Lindsay Gregory, her boyfriend, who killed one of her sons in 1995. Naylor (2001) demonstrates how the constructions of good motherhood and bad motherhood are connected and states that “Failures of ‘mothering’ reconstruct the meaning of the maternal, while being themselves given meaning by it” (155). Naylor’s (2001) work focuses more heavily on Richards than on Gregory but this is, in part, due to the greater media and legal attention that was paid to Richards during the course of the criminal trial. Naylor notes that “the press reports…established a number of features critical to ‘bad mother’ narratives: persistent
violence, swearing, lack of patience, lack of love, uncontrolled and indiscriminate sexuality” (2001: 169). Naylor’s work makes it clear that news reporters establish features of good and bad parenting. These news reports build upon common images of good and bad mothers and fathers such as the images discussed by Collins (2009) of mammy or matriarch as well as creating new images of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood.

Fatherhood began to be more heavily researched beginning in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. So far, scholars have largely focused on the meaning of fatherhood for fathers themselves (i.e. Jordan 2009; Olmstead, Futris, and Pasley 2009; Summers et al. 2006). Jordan (2009) conducted research with divorced fathers involved in a fathers’ rights group and illustrated the ways in which involvement in the group helped the men recast themselves as involved fathers even though they had less interaction with their children. Olmstead, Futris, and Pasley (2009) compared the father role identity of married and divorced fathers while Summers et al. (2006) focused on low-income fathers and their construction of good fatherhood. These studies identify a shift in the understanding of fatherhood. This shift changes fatherhood from primarily a provider role to a co-parenting role, where fathers and mothers share in all parenting roles and responsibilities. From these constructions of fatherhood, the acts and behaviors associated with good fatherhood by particular groups of fathers, such as nurturing and equal parenting (Jordan 2009) and fulfilling roles such as those of teacher, caregiver, provider (Olmstead, Futris, and Pasley 2009; Summers et al. 2006) have been identified.

Jordan (2009), a political scientist, identified four different types of fatherhood, two of which were manifestations of good fatherhood. The two types of good fatherhood that she identified were those of nurturing father and father as superhero. The other two types of fatherhood that were identified were the good enough father and the bad father. The two types of
good fatherhood that Jordan identifies point to the ways in which gender affects views of fatherhood. The creation of the nurturing father is evidence of the ways in which understandings of fatherhood have changed to include fathers taking a more hands on role. This view also understands fathering as more of a social construction, rather than “simply ‘naturally’ occurring as a result of biology” (Jordan 2009: 424), a view long held by sociologists.

Yet, while fathers themselves take this as good fatherhood, it is clear that some of the roles that fathers are taking on as nurturing fathers mean that fathers taking on some of the responsibilities that traditionally have been associated with mothers. This echoes the findings of Gavanas (2004) that will be discussed later and the argument that she makes that parenting needs to be masculinized in order for men to take on more nurturing roles. The second type of good fatherhood, the superhero, is in many ways unique to the fathers that Jordan studied. As Jordan focused on fathers who were fathers’ rights activists, the construction of father as superhero had very little to do with actual fathering but more to do with their activities as fathers’ rights activists which, in their view, demonstrated their love for their children. The fact that both of these views of fatherhood are thought to encompass good fatherhood demonstrates that good fatherhood has been difficult to define. As such there are multitude views among men of what epitomizes good fatherhood.

One of the most interesting and informative aspects of Jordan’s research was the view put forth by the fathers themselves that “men should be assumed to be good fathers unless strong evidence to the contrary could be provided” (2009: 426). This is partially a function of the fact that the fathers studied did not have custody of their children and thus would hold the view that they should only be denied visitation rights or custody rights if there is concrete evidence that they have truly been abusive in some way. More generally, however, the fact that fathers would
argue that good fatherhood should be assumed continues to illustrate how good fatherhood is easily achieved even when fathers have provided little to no evidence of fathering. As long as the fathers did the minimum of providing for their children, not having a drug or alcohol addiction, or not being violent that was enough for these fathers to think of themselves as good fathers, or at the very least not bad fathers.

When bad fatherhood has been defined by scholars it has been defined largely as the opposite of good fatherhood, regardless of the issues surrounding the definition of good fatherhood detailed above. For example, Jordan (2009) is one of the few researchers who have addressed bad fatherhood. The fathers that she studied clearly outline the characteristics of the two types of good fatherhood and even good enough fatherhood. However, the characteristics of bad fatherhood are not clearly defined on their own. The only specific characteristics associated with bad fatherhood that the men in Jordan’s (2009) study identified are not making child support payments, being addicted to alcohol or drugs, and being violent. While such characteristics may be widely thought of as part of bad fatherhood, it is difficult to imagine that it is only in these three ways that a man can be identified as a bad father. In light of such limited view of bad fatherhood I have the goal of providing a more complete understanding of bad fatherhood and the characteristics that are a part of bad fatherhood.

There is a notable exception to this pattern in which bad fatherhood has been defined beyond the opposite of good fatherhood. Furstenburg’s “good dad-bad dad” complex defines both good and bad fatherhood as two distinct concepts. Furstenburg (1988) finds that a good dad as one who is loving, contributes, and is a full and equal participant in parenting. Bad dads, however, are found to be absent, dysfunctional, or violent and who fail in or reject the duties of fathering. Although this description of bad fatherhood is slightly more detailed than the one
constructed by the fathers studied by Jordan (2009), the idea of bad fatherhood is still vague. Furthermore, both good and bad fathering are conceptualized in terms of participating in or completing the duties of parenting or fathering. As Gillis (2001) and Gavanas (2004) discuss, the role of father has changed over time. Furstenburg’s construction allows for good and bad fathering to be easily identified, no matter what the current conceptualization of fathering may be, as both are defined in relation to fulfilling the duties of fathering.

Gendering of Parenthood

With research on the social construction of parenthood as well as research on parenthood more generally, it is clear that parenthood is gendered. Importantly, in much research on parenting, gender is not treated as an important element to be understood. In this section I detail some of the research on parenthood and how this research reflects the gendering of the construct.

The role of woman and the role of mother have changed over time. Even so, mothering is still often thought to be something inherent to being a woman, almost as if being female automatically prepares one to be a mother. Such an understanding of motherhood implies both that mothering comes natural to women and that motherhood is essential to being a woman (Glenn 1994). However, we also know that mothers come from a variety of backgrounds and that their characteristics and experiences affect the way that they parent (Collins 1994). Thus, while there might be a culturally determined ideal way of mothering, few women have the opportunity or inclination to mother in that idealized way.

The constructs of mothering are not uniform for all mothers; indeed, mothering is racialized and gender in particular ways (Collins 1994). Women, children, and families do differ and differ in important ways, and both race and gender play important roles in determining what
are considered to be the appropriate method of and behaviors related to parenting and mothering (Collins 2009). While some research has suggested that both men and women perform mothering (e.g. Risman 1987), motherhood, and the particular responsibilities and normative behaviors associated with mothering, are deeply gendered. The mere fact that we utilize specific terms such as mothering and fathering, rather than the more general, non-gender specific term of parenting, indicates the importance of gender in the role of parent.

Drakich (1989) argues that earlier views of fatherhood did not see parenting as a part of the role of fathering. She states: “Fathers were more a simple presence in their children’s lives than parenting fathers” (1989: 69). Yet, “fathers are now seen as legitimate care-givers and socializers of children. The boundaries of fatherhood have now extended beyond that of provider and disciplinarian to include participation in childbirth, nurturance, and the physical care of children” (1989: 69). This “new fatherhood,” which involves men taking on nurturing and caretaking roles, has not translated into men participating more in childcare in concrete ways such as the daily activities of changing diapers or giving baths (Drakich 1989). Others, like Gavanas (2004) and Gillis (2000), argue that the concept of “new” fatherhood does not significantly differ from its predecessors. Tracing the history of fatherhood, both Gavanas (2004) and Gillis (2000) note how fathers were involved in the lives of their children during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and this type of involved fatherhood was revitalized during the early twentieth century to “new fatherhood.” Regardless of the degree to which fatherhood has or has not changed, presently, parenting is thought to be a part of fathering, too (i.e. Drakich 1989).

Research has illustrated that the changes that Drakich (1989) described have not come to fruition as strongly as she states. Bianchi (2011), for example, found that there has not been a
great shift in the caretaking or other duties of fatherhood over time. According to Bianchi, fathers engaged in 2.5 hours of childcare per week in 1965 and that had increased to 7.8 hours in 2008. However, mothers engaged in 10.2 hours of childcare in 1965 which had increased to 13.9 hours in 2008. Although there was an increase in the number of hours that men spent on childcare, there is still a substantial difference in the number of hours that mothers and fathers spend on childcare.

Although the notion of “new fatherhood” has largely been conceptualized as an improvement, some have compared the expectations of motherhood and fatherhood and believe that fatherhood still needs to undergo change. Davids (1972) and Dowd (1996), for example, both discuss fatherhood in comparison with motherhood and argue that fatherhood is a type of “lesser mothering” (Dowd 1996) or as parenting “in reserve” (Davids 1972). Dowd discusses fatherhood and finds that fathers are able to abandon their fathering roles with little fanfare while making it clear that she believes if mothers acted in similar ways that there would be “widespread alarm” (1996: 523). This type of fathering is problematic, Dowd argues, as it relegates proper parenting to women and turns fathering into something lesser than mothering. Parenting is thus an entirely gendered experience that is either mothering, which is done by women, or fathering, which is done by men. Her finding negates the construction of parenting as something that both mothers and fathers are capable of doing.

In the 1970’s, Davids wrote of fathers as parents “in reserve” (1972: 218). As Davids explains: “when the processes of ordinary living go smoothly, when neither crisis nor new growth leads to demands on the mother that go beyond her capacity for adequate response, then father’s role is, as we said before, symbolic and potential rather than constantly being enacted” (1972: 218). While more recent studies have shown fathers to be more nurturing and involved in
the lives of their children, the view of fathers as back-ups or “in reserve” to mothers is still prevalent. Davids further argues that mothers interpret fatherhood for their children and start doing so early in life; thus, Davids suggests, expectations of fatherhood are actually established by mothers. Such a view of fatherhood privileges motherhood while arguing that all views of parenting, including both mothering and fathering, are constructed by mothers. While fatherhood is influenced by motherhood, as well as family dynamics, fatherhood is also constructed through social institutions, like the media. The construction of fatherhood by these social institutions is pervasive and affects the construction of fatherhood that occurs within each family.

As Dowd says “Fathers parent less than mothers… Not only do fathers parent less, they abandon their children to a remarkable extent, again far exceeding such conduct by women” (1996: 523). Importantly, this conclusion about fathering is greatly impacted by the way that Dowd conceptualizes fatherhood. Dowd identifies three patterns of fatherhood which she describes as fathering like mothers, fathering as a secondary parent, and fathering as a limited or disengaged nurturer. The mere fact that one pattern of fatherhood is explicitly framed in terms of men fathering like mothers demonstrates Dowd’s view of parenting as corresponding more with mothering than fathering. Dowd does state that: “Good parenting is not sex-specific nor sex-related. The attributes of good parenting are more strongly associated with mothering, but the connection is cultural, not biological” (1996: 531). Such statements might lead to the conclusion that fathers are capable of being good parents, too. However, as good parenting is being more strongly connected with mothering than fathering, even when fathers are good fathers this does not necessarily lead to the view that they are good parents.
When the roles of motherhood and fatherhood are researched, these roles are still thought of in traditionalistic terms both by the researchers themselves and the subjects of their studies. Thus motherhood evokes images of nurturing, caretaking, and a close bond with the child (i.e. Arendell 2000; Scott and Alwin 1989) while fatherhood is still very much associated with a provider role in which nurturing and caretaking are peripheral (i.e. Meyer and Oberman 2001; Olmstead, Futris, and Pasley 2009). However, increasingly, there is the view that men can “mother.” For example, Thurer writes about good motherhood and says that there is the belief “that the mother need not be the biological mother or even female” (1994: xvi). Yet, even describing men as “mothering,” regulates parenting into mothering or fathering and fails to acknowledge that a parent, regardless of gender, engages in parenting activities. Instead, we have fully ensconced particular duties and responsibilities as within the domain of mothers or fathers. Thus, when a father, or mother, takes on a role outside of their domain, that action is still thought of as mothering or fathering, not parenting. By making mothering into a verb, and one that both men and women can do, the gendering of parenting becomes increasingly clear. Caring and nurturing are ensconced within femininity. Thus, when women mother it is fulfilling their natural calling and feminine nature. By labeling these actions as mothering caretaking and nurturing are still relegated to the feminine realm and outside the typical masculine, father role.

Some research has suggested that the gendering of parenting becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy furthering the presumption of the natural superiority of women in parenting and caretaking. Cowdery and Knutson-Martin (2005) found that parents adopt one of two models of mothering: mothering as a gendered talent and mothering as a conscious collaboration. When parents adopt the model of mothering as a conscious collaboration, they are both actively involved in the lives of their children, including all caretaking responsibilities, and both parents
have close bonds with the children. However, when parents follow the mothering as a gendered talent model, there is a clear gender division in parenting activities that creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. As mothers take on the caretaking duties and are continually responsible for the lives, needs, and wants, of their children they have close, affectionate relationships with their children. Thus, fathers see their role as more financial and step back from the day-to-day tasks of caretaking. As a result fathers “reported feeling incompetent, being fearful, and not knowing what needed to be done” (2005: 339). Because caretaking was thought to be more “natural” for mothers than fathers, fathers did not take on that role as readily and then felt that they were less prepared and able to do the tasks associated with the role in comparison with their partner who had that “natural” connection with and knowledge about their child given the birth process. The fathers might have thought that this was a “natural” connection but the researchers conclude that the mothers’ closer bonds and ability to better read the needs of the children were the result of the amount of time and energy spent with the child and taking care of the child.

While Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) focused on families, other theoretical research has similarly suggested a gendering of parenthood. Gavanas (2004) argues that parenting has become feminized and that fatherhood has had to be reimagined in such a way as to masculinize domesticity. Such an interpretation of fatherhood continues to demonstrate how fatherhood is a gendered experience. Thus, only men can be fathers, but men must father in specified ways to be both fathers and “real men.” This view that fathers must masculinize domesticity only helps to perpetuate gendered differences within parenting and the understanding by parents themselves that certain tasks are ones performed by fathers while other tasks are to be completed by mothers. Furthermore, arguing that parenting is feminized and that men must masculinize fatherhood demonstrates how parenting has been thought by some (i.e.
Gavanas 2004) to be more fully feminine. Suggesting that men need to masculinize domesticity further indicates that niches of parenting have been and continue to be carved out in gendered ways.

*Racialization of Parenthood*

There is more than one way to be a parent and the appropriate way to parent does differ depending upon one’s racial group. When race is discussed within literature on parenting, it is still discussed largely in terms of mothering or fathering. In this section, I discuss some of the research on parenting that highlights the importance of race. I first discuss the racialization of parenting as it occurs within mothering and then move to a discussion in relation to fathering.

The constructions of good motherhood have largely focused on a type of motherhood that is truly only attainable for white, middle-class women. Much like the cult of true womanhood (Welte 1966), good motherhood has been reserved exclusively for very specific groups of women who adhere to particular actions and behaviors, both as women and as mothers (Ferraro 2006; Harris 1995). Good motherhood, furthermore, is only achievable if a mother is a good woman, first. To be a good mother requires that a woman be appropriately feminine, that she be self-sacrificing and put the needs and wants of her family before her own (Ferraro 2006; Glenn 1994). As Harris argues, “This is not to say that all white mothers are Good; indeed, part of the function of these ideologies is to reinforce the notion that it is only when women are within the structure of the nuclear family and under the control of men that they can become Good mothers” (1995: 251). Altogether, this greatly limits who has the possibility of even being considered to be a good mother while bad motherhood is the only possibility for those who fall outside of the confines of white, middle-class good womanhood.
Largely, black motherhood has been defined as inferior to white motherhood in a multitude of ways. As Patricia Hill Collins argues: “African-American women’s status as outsiders becomes the point from which other groups define their normality” (2009: 77). While Collins’ observation is indicative of a broad array of ways in which the outsider status of black women is used to define boundaries of normality for other racial groups, it clearly encompasses parenting, too. Thus, as white motherhood has been established as the norm, black motherhood naturally falls outside this range of normality by the sheer fact that black mothers are not white. Furthermore, the superiority of white motherhood and inferiority of black motherhood is partly a function of the fact that good mothering has been defined in the context of white motherhood (i.e. Fumia 1999; Harris 1995; Roberts 1995) while bad mothering has been more closely associated with non-white motherhood (i.e. Cavaglion 2008; Collins 2009).

Research on good and bad fatherhood has largely ignored the issue of how race might influence these constructs. Other research more focused on race highlights the ways in which fatherhood is profoundly shaped by race. For example, Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton (2012) analyzed the construction of black masculinity in a series of Washington Post articles which focused on black men. Although the authors do not describe these constructs, they do identify particular views of black fatherhood that have not garnered much interest in other works. Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton identify the stereotypes of black fatherhood of “baby daddy” and “irresponsible father” but the characteristics of those stereotypes are not defined. While it is clear that these are negative stereotypes about black masculinity and black fatherhood, the range of behaviors, or lack thereof, encapsulated in these stereotypes is unknown.

As Gavanas (2004) describes, black fatherhood has been profoundly shaped by the history of slavery, segregation, racism, and discrimination faced by blacks. This history has
allowed for some social groups to devalue black fatherhood. For example, in her chapter on pro-marriage fatherhood, Gavanas discusses how low-income and minority men are thought of in terms of “‘destructive’ masculinities” such as “irresponsible ‘hyper’/‘protest masculinity’” by pro-marriage advocates and organizations (2004: 56). This view positions minority masculinities and minority fatherhood as inferior to white, middle class father while the construction of these different, destructive masculinities is based off of stereotypes about fathers from minority groups. Although Gavanas (2004) details that history plays a role in shaping black fatherhood, not much research has explored the ways in which fatherhood is shaped by the race of the father. The expectations associated with fatherhood do differ depending upon the race of the father and these racial differences are in definite need of continued exploration and elucidation.

What we know more about are the stereotypes about black fatherhood. Numerous stereotypes exist about black fatherhood, almost all of which are negative. A common theme throughout research on black fathers is that they are not central to the family (i.e. Coles 2001) or that they have given up their fathering role (i.e. Oware 2011). Such portrayals of absent dads (Coles 2011; Oware 2011) apply to all fathers, regardless of their race or ethnicity, but portrayals of black fatherhood continue to emphasize the failure of black men to parent (Coles and Green 2009). As discussed earlier, masculinity and gender are deeply embedded within the concept of fatherhood. Although caretaking and other parenting behaviors have long been feminized (Gavanas 2004), there is a recent shift which allows for men who fully embrace the role of fatherhood to be seen as maintaining their masculinity even when performing these feminized roles.

Many of the stereotypes about blacks, and in particular about black fathers, were formulated in a U.S. government report from the 1960’s. “The Negro Family: The Case for
National Action” a 1965 report known more commonly as the Moynihan Report. This report framed issues faced by the black community, such as the cycle of poverty, as being the result of the crumbling black family and the matriarchal structure of the black family. Moynihan stressed rates of divorce, illegitimate births, and female headed households, all of which hovered around 25% at the time. Although Moynihan noted that slavery and Reconstruction Era laws (e.g. Jim Crow laws) were influential, he ultimately concluded that black culture was responsible for the decline of the black family. This report perpetuated the idea that the “failures” of black men to father result from the matriarchal family structure which takes away the authority of black men within the family.

Overall, as this brief review of research indicates, when race is a factor of importance in research on parenting this research is largely confined to black motherhood or fatherhood. This is important for several reasons. Firstly, in research on white parenthood or in research on parenthood in which the race of the parents is not identified, race is examined as an important factor on how those parents enact their roles. However, as the research that I just discussed clearly demonstrates, race is not very much influential on parenthood. Secondly, numerous works that do discuss the influence of race and parenthood have done so through examining specific stereotypes of parenthood that are limited to just one race. Although both black and white fathers, not to mention fathers of any other racial/ethnic group, can be absent from the lives of their children, the absent dad is still a stereotype that plagues black fatherhood (i.e. Coles 2011, Oware 2011).

**Media Constructions of Reality**

As mentioned above in the brief description of Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) work, reality is socially constructed. While this social construction of reality occurs on an individual
level within the confines of face-to-face interaction, the media also play an important role in constructing reality and disseminating this reality to a wide audience. The media have the ability to choose what is stressed, what knowledge is conveyed, and how reality is represented (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987; Tuchman 1978). The view of the media as a vehicle in the construction of reality has been embraced by multiple scholars and has included focuses on the news media (i.e. Barak 1994; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987; Tuchman 1978), the internet (i.e. Zhao 2006), perceptions of media coverage (i.e. Hunt 1997), and media images (i.e. Gamson et al. 1992).

The view of the media employed in this research is an expansion upon Berger and Luckmann’s view of language and the ability of language to frame and establish reality. As they state: “Language also typifies experiences, allowing me to subsume them under broad categories in terms of which they have meaning not only to myself but also to my fellowmen” (1966: 39). Language allows for the reality of one to be shared and understood by others, a fact capitalized on by the media. Thus, even though Berger and Luckmann focus on face-to-face interactions, their views on the ability of language to create a shared reality allow for their theory to be applicable to other types of interactions, including the ability of media portrayals to create and recreate social constructions, such as motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood.

Additionally, Berger and Luckmann argue that the definitions of reality are embodied, “that is concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality” (1996: 116). Through the media, society is provided with concrete examples of a reality which is embedded with larger meanings related to the social construction of specific roles and identities. As such, the media are able to exert social control upon society by making those who violate laws and
norms into examples and, at the same time, reinforcing what is expected of people within particular roles.

For example, as I demonstrate in this project, media portrayals of filicide make an example out of filicidal offenders and how they are bad parents while reinforcing that those behaviors are unwanted and contrary to the behaviors that are associated with good parenting. As Gamson et al. make clear, facts as well as images in the media “take on their meaning by being embedded in some larger system of meaning or frame” (1992: 374). In other words, images as well as knowledge put forth by the media take on meaning by being connected with a larger issue or meaning. As I discussed later, this imagery in relation to crime has been studied by scholars such as Entman (1992) and Oliver (2003) who both examined how media portrayals of crime affect views about stereotypes about offenders. I examine this view of the media as creating and maintaining stereotypes but in this project the focus in on how these media portrayals create and recreate the concepts of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. The medium of the media may be the same and the stories may focus on the larger topic of crime, but individual cases and stories are embedded within larger systems of meaning. Thus, one case may be used to inform on values and knowledge about black criminality while another may stress parenthood and so on.

Ball-Rokeach and De Fleur (1976) discuss the media’s roles in terms of values. They define values as “‘desirable end states of existence’” and “‘preferred modes of conduct’” (1976:13). They argue that “one way the media facilitate[s] value clarification is by presenting information that precipitates value conflict within audience members and between social groups” (1976: 13, emphasis in original). Agents of socialization, such as the family and the media, create and reinforce values. Thus the media perpetuate values and they do so by portraying
events in such a way to reflect those values. Coupling Ball-Rokeach and De Fleur’s (1976) ideas with those of Tuchman (1978) and Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987) it is clear that the media are a source of social control that puts forth images and stories that reflect upon and reinforce values and norms.

Drawing from the works of scholars such as Tuchman (1978), I approach the media precisely as a medium that creates and disseminates symbols pertaining to the social world. Related to that, Tuchman (1978) understands the news as contributing to the social construction of reality as the news organizations decide what information is published. Thus, the news media both create meaning and then spread knowledge or information, in the form of meaning, to the general public. In relation to this project, it is through the media portrayals of cases of filicide that symbols and concepts will be made and remade in relation to the crimes portrayed. More specifically, news media portrayals of filicide create and reinforce the concepts of good and bad mothering, fathering, and parenting and do so through specific details and treatment of individual cases of filicide.

Similarly, Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987) see the news media as an agent of social control. They argue that journalists, as well as the overall news media, “provide an ongoing articulation of the proper bounds to behaviour in all organized spheres of life” (1987: 3). Thus, even when the media are focused only on acts of deviance, including crime, those acts provide boundaries for a wealth of areas beyond their immediate influence. Ericson, Baranek, and Chan argue that: “News discourse is one of the important means by which society comes to know itself” (1987: 15). Furthermore, the news “engage[s] in reproducing the knowledge of their sources… by the laws of social constructs” (1987: 16). For example, as I illustrate, an act of filicide will be understood within and as informative on larger understandings of parenting.
Furthermore, these media portrayals exert social control onto these larger views of parenting by encouraging behaviors that are compliant with good mothering, fathering, or parenting and demonizing those indicative of bad mothering, fathering, or parenting.

Barak, unlike many other researchers on the media, recognizes that “crime news ultimately reflects the socially constructed perspectives of both the privileged elites and the popular masses” (1994: 8). Typically, crime news and the crimes that are thought to be social problems are influenced by the privileged elites as they have the power to define social problems (Noh, Lee, and Feltey 2010). So Barak’s view that the media represent the perspectives of the masses, too, is different from that of many other scholars as most (i.e. Noh, Lee, and Feltey 2010) do not recognize the influence of the masses on the messages put forth by the media. Barak’s argument is an important expansion upon the view of the media as a mechanism of social control. Although the privileged elites can inform the media as owners of the media, not to mention in numerous other ways, it is not as though only their point of view is influential on what is shown and what values and social constructs are put forth. The masses can also influence the point of the view of the media, albeit in different ways. As Barak (1994) argues, the media sometimes pave the way for views on issues but at other times the media follow behind and the views that are presented by the media are then reflective of the views of the masses. Barak provides media coverage of the Vietnam War as an example of the ability of the public to affect news coverage. As the Vietnam War lost legitimacy in the eyes of the public, the ways in which the media discussed the war also changed and reflected back the public’s view. Additionally, the public are consumers of the media and can shape the media by the endorsement or lack thereof of the media as product. As such, if the media put forth views that are contrary to those of the public, the public can choose to abandon that media source in favor of another or
people can choose to address those issues through more direct measures, such as letters to the editor indicating their distaste.

*Media Portrayals of Crime*

Researchers have studied the media extensively. For the purposes of this paper, studies of media coverage of crime and criminals are especially important. Researchers have understood the media as a way to maintain social control through the representation of crime (Grabe 1999) or by providing boundaries for social conduct (Barak 1994; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987). Yet, crime news has been found to have widespread effects on the public beyond social control, including putting forth particular views and ideas about gender and race. For example, Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) note the representation of women as victims and men as criminal actors. This is further found to be true in non-news related media such as in reality television programming shows like *America’s Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* (Bond-Maupin 1998; Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993; Cavender, Bond-Maupin, and Jurik 1999). For example, Bond-Maupin (1998) examined the portrayals of female offenders on *America’s Most Wanted* and found that the portrayals stressed the offender’s sexuality, conventional gender roles, and male control. Altogether, this line of research makes clear that race and gender are influential on the media portrayals of victims and offenders as will become even clearer as I discuss these works and others in this section.

Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) find that some types of homicide receive more news coverage than others. For example, they found that when the victim is a “worthy victim,” such as a woman, a child, or an old person, a case receives more media attention. Furthermore, homicides of blacks and Hispanics were also underreported in relation to homicides of whites. Thus, newspaper portrayals of homicide are influenced in part by characteristics of the victim.
Although such skewed portrayals may alter the public perception of the face of homicide, in terms of both who commits the act and who is victimized, the news is a business and does choose to emphasize certain stories over others depending upon the “newsworthiness” of a particular story. Importantly, as Ericson, Baranek, and Chan argue, the media does not deliberately skew information or “distort reality” (1987: 22). Instead, the media present one version of reality and do not make claims that what is shown is typical of that particular type of event or crime. Furthermore, as reality is constructed, there are multiple versions of reality that are equally true from different perspectives.

The issue of newsworthiness has been researched as well. Katz (1987), for example, provides one understanding of how newsworthiness is determined. Jack Katz (1987) identified four factors that influence the newsworthiness of stories and argued that stories that hit on more than one of these factors it is deemed especially newsworthy. The four factors that Katz identified were personal competence and sensibility, moral integrity of the community, political conflicts, and white-collar crime. Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) focused on news media coverage of homicides that covered by the Los Angeles Times between 1990 and 1994. Although they were focused on the degree to which homicide coverage in the news correspond to actual patterns of homicide, they do discuss differences in coverage in the news depending upon characteristics of the victim. Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) found, for example, that homicides involving multiple victims, those that were committed by strangers, or cases in which the victim was female received, greater newspaper coverage.

Sociologists, Bond-Maupin (1998) and colleagues (1993; 1999) analyzed real crime based reality programming as depicted in the television shows America’s Most Wanted and Unsolved Mysteries. Cavender, Bond-Maupin, and Jurik (1999) focused on the portrayal of
women as victims in the show while the other two focused on offenders, either both men and women (Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993) or only women offenders (Bond-Maupin 1998). As Cavender and Bond-Maupin relate, the vignettes depicted on these shows “are symbolic morality plays about good and evil” (1993: 311). More important, however, is Bond-Maupin’s assertion about the portrayal of women offenders. She argues that “[a]lthough they do not represent the diversity of women’s lives and experiences, images of women on television provide important information about the persistence of dominant interpretations of femininity” (1998: 30).

Although all of these works do focus on television, specifically on reality television programming, this is not the only type of television programming or media outlet through which ideas about femininity or other ideologies are stressed.

Similarly, the media’s portrayal of crime affects views on race. Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) also investigated media portrayals of crime and found that the racialized portrayals of crime affect attitudes about racial groups as well as attitudes towards solutions to crime. The connection between the media and racial stereotypes is addressed by many scholars from the fields of political science (i.e. Gilliam et al. 1996; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000) and communications (Oliver et al. 2004). Thus, there is evidence to suggest that race and gender matter in media portrayals; but, research has yet to more fully address how race and gender together matter. Furthermore, for this project it is important to recognize that these media portrayals of crime are rife with stereotypical images and ideas about gender and race as previous research has found and that these stereotypes have effects on public perception of crime and the groups represented. Furthering research on media portrayals of crime from a sociological perspective allows me to expand upon this research and to see the ways that media portrayals are racialized and gendered.
Research on the media has also been used to explain the ways in which crime is
gendered, too. For example, Grabe et al. (2006) focused on female criminality. Grabe et al.
(2006) tested the chivalry hypothesis in relation to newspaper stories of women who engaged in
crime. They found that women who committed crime that conformed to standards of
womanhood were treated less harshly by reporters than women who committed acts that were
thought of as unfeminine, such as engaging in violence or victimizing children. Noh, Lee, and
Feltey (2010) also focused on female offenders but they reviewed newspaper coverage of
battered women who killed their abusers. Noh, Lee, and Feltey (2010) found that the media
constructed all of the women as responsible for their actions, despite the fact that these women
were abused. At the same time, social systems (e.g., social service agencies, the criminal justice
system) were excused of any responsibility through two different media typification models: the
medicalizing model and the conventional rationality model. The authors argue that these
typification models are supported in the media through the people that reporters interview to
build a story; the medicalization model is reinforced by various experts, such as psychologists,
whereas the conventional rationality model is supported by prosecutors and members of the
victim’s family. The medicalizing model constructs the woman as mentally ill thus “mitigating
her accountability, by focusing on her mental state (rather than the history of abuse) to explain
the nature of her actions leaving her vulnerable to stigma and social control through the mental
health system” (2010: 126). The second model, the conventional rationality model, reinforces
ideas of women as cold-blooded murderers. The conventional rationality model does this by
ignoring or discounting battered woman syndrome as a defense for the woman’s actions unless
the woman was in imminent, mortal danger. As such, women are thought of as opportunists who
murder to get what they want, building upon ideas of women as heartless and manipulators.
These two models cast women into the roles of mad or bad, which will be discussed again in relation to media coverage of filicide. Importantly, though, these two constructions of women as mad or bad are clearly gendered in their own right. Such constructions limit understandings of the agency and responses of women who engage in criminal acts. Under these two models, women are either mad or bad and those characteristics are capable of entirely explaining why she committed a crime. Such explanations allow for an understanding of how a woman could act in a masculine way, through committing a crime, and reinforce ideas that only women who are somehow flawed would engage in such behavior. In other words, “normal” women are not criminal; only women who have a mental illness or defect or women who do not fit within the confines of appropriate femininity would engage in crime. As such, these constructs reinforce ideas of good or “normal” womanhood and that criminality falls outside of those constructs.

Furthermore, such constructions reinforce the view that a woman only has two options: a woman is either a good woman or is deficient in some way. On the one hand, she can live up to ideal womanhood and so be considered to be a good woman. On the other hand, a woman can be thought of as having some sort of deficiency that takes her out of the realm of good womanhood. So, if a woman fails to live up to ideal womanhood, she will then be perceived as having some sort of problem which explains her behavior (Wilczynski 1997), whether that is mental illness or some other sort of deviancy.

Researchers have also noted how the news media portrays particular racial groups as more likely to engage in crime. Political scientist, Gilliam et al. (1996) found that the media over represents black violent crime and under represents white violent crime. As mentioned above, this racialization of crime by the media thus primes stereotypes about race and crime.
Related to that, other researchers from the field of communications have found that racial groups are depicted differently in the news media. Entman (1992) found that white offenders were more likely to be pictured in more formal clothes (e.g. coat and tie) and were shown in motion rather than in still imagery, a difference that the author suggests humanizes and individualizes the offender. Black offenders, in contrast, were more likely to be shown escorted by police, pictured in more casual dress (e.g. jeans and t-shirt, prison garb), and shown in a still photo.

Oliver (2003) also investigated the impact of race on the presentation of crime. Oliver (2003) found that black men were overrepresented as criminals, were likely to be misidentified by news viewers as committing violent crime, and were presented in such a way that assumes guilt. All together, these differences in the presentations of white and black offenders might be minor, but they have an impact on the extent to which the offender is perceived as threatening or not (Entman 1992) and, potentially, if the offender is perceived as more or less guilty (Oliver 2003).

**Media Portrayals of Filicide**

Research has highlighted the numerous ways in which media portrayals of crime and criminals inform social views on crime, including ideas about the people who engage in crime and the types of crime that are frequently committed (i.e. Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Klite, Bardwell, and Salzman 1997). Filicides, like other violent crimes, are crimes that garner much public and media interest (Cavaglion 2008; Meyer and Oberman 2001). While the media attention devoted to cases of filicide has been noted by other scholars, less research has examined either the social control exerted through such cases or how those cases are informative on social constructions, such as motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. Cavaglion (2008, 2009), in his analysis of newspaper articles on cases of filicide in Israel, to be discussed in more detail later, notes how particular groups are cast into roles such as mad and bad.
As mentioned above, the casting of women into groups of mad and bad is a gendered phenomenon. The creation of these categories further enables an understanding of how a woman could commit such an unfeminine act (Wilczynski 1997). That is, such categories not only describe categories of women who commit filicide, but also provide explanations for why they did it. For example, if a woman is cast as mad, she harmed her own child because of her mental illness and no alternative motive or explanation is needed. But while Cavaglion (2008, 2009) identifies the categories of mad, bad, and sad within media portrayals, he does not explore the specific ways that these categories are constructed in the text, beyond noting the divergent treatment by the media of Arab and Israeli women. Moreover, while media portrayals of crime have been found to influence social views, the media focus most of their attention on crimes such as burglary, murder, and other violent crimes which are not in fact the most commonly occurring crimes (Chadee and Ditton 2005; Heath and Gilbert 1996). As such, the media focus on the sensational rather than the more common or mundane and this affects views on public perceptions of crime and perceptions of crime as a problem (Klite, Bardwell, and Salzman 1997). When it comes to murder, the news media are more likely to focus on cases where the victim is killed by a stranger than an acquaintance or family member (Sorenson, Manz, and Berk 1998). Filicide is thus inherently different from the cases usually covered in the media because of the familial relationship between victim and offender. That said, filicide occasionally generates extensive coverage; why that is, is part of the questions addressed in this paper.

Some studies focusing on maternal filicide have relied upon news sources as data. Meyer and Oberman (2001) focused on ninety-six cases of maternal filicide that were covered by the US news media between 1988 and 1995. The cases discussed in Meyer and Oberman (2001) were from news-related media, including newsmagazines, regional and national newspapers,
newsletters, trade magazines, abstracts, and transcripts from radio and television news broadcasts. As professors of psychology and law, respectively, their fields of expertise are influential on their approach to the topic. Thus, even though both their research and mine focus on media portrayals, Meyer and Oberman (2001) review news publications to create typologies of maternal filicide from this media coverage while I see the portrayals as disseminating the constructs of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood.

While Meyer and Oberman (2001) used U.S. news accounts to create a typology of mothers who commit filicide, criminologist Cavaglion (2008) examined Israeli newspaper articles that covered cases of filicide and noted differences in treatment of maternal filicidal offenders given their racialized and classed position in society. Cavaglion (2008) found that non-marginalized mothers (e.g. middle-class, Jewish mothers) were cast into the insane role, even when there was no evidence of insanity or mental illness. Yet, marginalized mothers (e.g. Arab, single, and poor mothers) were cast into the role of bad mother (Cavaglion 2008). Cavaglion (2009) conducted a similar analysis of newspaper articles on fathers and noted disparities between maternal and paternal offenders. He states: “Both society and culture perceive mothers as non-violent even under very oppressive conditions. Women are expected to absorb frustration, humiliation, unemployment… without losing their ‘natural’ attribute of good motherhood” (2009: 139). Such research as that of Cavaglion (2008, 2009) illustrates how violence, and in particular a mother killing her child, is viewed so antithetical to good motherhood. Yet, this research does not examine the role of media in creating and reinforcing the concepts of good and bad motherhood that emerge in such media coverage.

Research analyzing news stories of cases of filicide typically focuses on either maternal or paternal filicide offenders. However, it is important to compare cases of maternal and
paternal filicide at the same time so that the influence of the offender’s gender on how the media portrays these cases can be more clearly parsed out. Additionally, as I have discussed, this project utilizes an intersectionality approach, which has not been done before in research on media portrayals of cases of filicide. Given that scholars have noted that race/ethnicity, gender, class, marital status, and other offender characteristics influence how offenders are portrayed in the media (i.e. Brennan and Vanderberg 2009; Huckerby 2003), an intersectionality approach will take this one step further. I focus explicitly on race and gender in this project and by utilizing an intersectionality approach, it is possible for me to examine how media representations are influenced by race, gender, as well as the combination of race and gender and also to determine how these media representations further inform on the constructs of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood.

While most research on filicide has focused on maternal offenders, research on paternal filicidal offenders has been sparser. Cavaglion (2009) examined Israeli newspaper articles on cases of paternal filicide and noted that all of the fathers were portrayed as rational actors, regardless of evidence and diagnoses of mental illness. Cavaglion stated that “The portrayal of men who kill usually adheres to traditional, stereotypical roles of masculinity” (2009: 139). This understanding of the fathers as rational actors stands in stark contrast to the portrayals of women as mad, bad, or sad, which signal emotions rather than rationality, as he found in his earlier research just discussed.

Conclusion

There is a wealth of research on gendered and racialization media presentations, filicide, and parenting and the social construction of parenting. While these three topics have been
discussed in detail individually, there is a void in the investigation of the ways in which these topics intersect through the gendered and racialization constructions of parenting, mothering, and fathering in media portrayals of filicide. As such, this project aims to fill in this void and show how cases of filicide highlight the racialization and gendering of the social construction of mothering, fathering, and parenting.

Drawing from the theories of the social construction of reality, media expression theory, intersectionality, and “doing gender,” I argue that images from the media are constructed in response to the race and gender of perpetrators and further influence views of good and bad mothering, fathering, and parenting in racialized and gendered ways. In other words, the media creates and redefines good and bad mothering, fathering, and parenting in different ways depending upon the race and gender of filicidal offenders.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Research on murder has focused on a myriad of topics related to the crime itself or the people who commit it and this research has illustrated patterns in offending and victimization, amongst other things. Some research addresses murder in a more general way while other research focuses on specific types of murder, such as filicide. Both lines of research are useful and explain a lot about this particular type of violent crime, the people that commit it, and the affects it has on society. I focus on filicide, the murder of a child by its parent or parents, and how media representations of filicide construct motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. In this chapter, I explain the specific methods that I employed, including how the data was collected, why the specific cases that I cover were chosen, and the limitations of my study.

Data Source

As this dissertation is interested in the construction of parenting through cases of maternal and paternal filicide, news media stories and representations of the crime were chosen as the data source. When it comes to research on media portrayals of crime there are numerous media types and sources that can serve as the basis of the research. For the most part, research has focused more heavily on news based media (e.g. Barak 1995; Brennan and Vandenberg 2009; Naylor 2001) rather than scripted or reality based media (e.g. Bond-Maupin 1998; Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993). Additionally, news based media can be further divided into different types depending upon the medium through which the news is made available. The majority of research on media portrayals of crime and criminal offenders has employed television news or newspapers as data source. In this project, I consciously chose to utilize news media websites associated with local news media affiliates of the four major broadcast networks of ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC for reasons to be discussed below.
I decided to use local news media websites affiliated with these broadcast networks because of issues associated with availability, feasibility, and other, related concerns. In regards to availability, given that I focused on cases of filicide that occurred across the US, it would have been exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to find and watch all stories associated with the twenty-five instances of filicide that serve as the cases for this project. While some affiliates do post video clips from broadcasts and interviews online, not all affiliates do so. Furthermore, utilization of local television news stations limits the available markets that need to be searched and analyzed. Although examining the coverage across multiple markets (e.g. other, neighboring cities) would have increased the number of stories, the increased number of stories would have included duplicate information and coverage as stations within the same affiliate share stories across regions and markets (Tuchman 1978).

Similarly, for myriad reasons, newspaper coverage is not uniform across the U.S. (Edmonds, Guskin, and Rosenstiel 2011). Thus, in some areas, there would be more newspapers available than in others. This difference in the availability of newspapers would have meant that some stories would have gotten more media coverage due to the greater availability and variety of newspapers while in other areas there would be less media coverage given the more limited number of available newspapers that could have been analyzed. National newspapers would have also been a poor choice as only a few cases of filicide ever achieve such a level of press coverage and cases that do become part of national news, such as those of Andrea Yates or Casey Anthony, become notorious given specific and highly unusual characteristics and details of the cases that were not evident in the cases that serve as the data for this project.

Ultimately, I decided to use local television news media sites for several reasons. Firstly, the presence of ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC affiliates is rather consistent across the country
(Webster 2005). As Webster (2005) notes, ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC are available in between 93 and 97% of all television viewing households. Although this project focuses on the websites of those local affiliates, Webster’s (2005) data indicates that these networks are highly pervasive and accessible across the US. Thus, two cities might vary greatly in number of available newspapers but those same cities would much more likely have the same number of local news affiliates from which to choose and so would serve as a way to control disparate access to news sources. Beyond the fact that focusing on the websites of these local affiliates limits variability in the number of news outlets from which cases could be collected, local affiliates’ news websites have become increasingly popular outlets for consumers to get news and these websites have also grown in terms of news content available (Potter, Matsa, and Mitchell 2011). On a related note, previous research by Pitts (2003) has also utilized local sites associated with these four affiliates, so this is not a completely novel approach to understanding the media and media portrayals.

Furthermore, people are increasingly turning to the internet for the news (Olmstead, Mitchell, and Rosenstiel 2011). According to Olmstead, Mitchell, and Rosenstiel (2011), for people between the ages of 18 and 29 the internet is the number one news platform while for those between 30 and 49 it is second, falling behind only television. Although this research is not concerned with the level of exposure that was given to each story or how stories were understood by the consumers, it is still important to recognize that the internet is becoming a greater source for news. As well, even though this research utilizes a different news medium than other, previous works on the social construction of parenthood and other works on the coverage of filicide, the focus is still on the news media’s ability to construct particular issues.
Furthermore, regardless of the particular medium employed, information is still being presented by the news media (Hoffman 2006; Quandt 2008).

Data Collection

I collected the data for this project in two waves. The first wave occurred during May and June of 2012 and was the preliminary data collection. From the first wave, I determined the particular search terms that would be employed and I determined a realistic number of cases for the final data collection. During the second wave, I collected the 202 cases that would ultimately serve as the population from which the twenty-five cases chosen for this project were drawn. I conducted this second wave between June and August of 2012 and during which I review 15,164 total stories (including duplicates) from LexisNexus and Proquest searches. Ultimately, this second wave concluded with the collection of all 398 stories from the local news affiliate websites between August 29, 2012 and September 3, 2012. 398 stories were collected during this time period but the final analysis included 372 stories (for an explanation refer to Appendix A).

My preliminary data collection was less exhaustive than the final data collection. In the preliminary collection, I only searched Proquest’s database. The preliminary data originally yielded a total of ninety-seven cases which included those who were not biological parents of the victims, such as parental figure’s, significant others and step-parents, and people who were not racially identified as black or white. The preliminary data collection resulted in a total of 56 usable cases of filicide, broken down as follows: 7 cases involving a black mother, 5 cases with a black father, 5 cases of black parents working together, 23 cases with white mothers, 6 cases with a white father offender, and 10 cases in which white parents worked together (see Appendix
A). After this preliminary data collection, I determined that it would be feasible to find five cases for each of the six groups under study within a two year period.

For the final data collection, I decided that cases would only be included if the offender(s) was the biological parent of the victim. Prior research, especially in the field of psychiatry, has included biological parents, step-parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, and those in a relationship with the biological parent all as filicidal offenders (i.e. Campion, Cravens, and Covan 1988; Goetting 1988; Liem and Koenraadt 2008). While in most of these studies the number of parents who were not biological parents was small, the grouping of all of these different types of parents as the same is problematic given that the parent-child bond would be affected in unique ways (O’Connor and Boag 2010).

I decided to include only biological parents so that conclusions drawn about parenting would not be conflated by the issues associated with the differing expectations associated with parenting roles of biological parents, step-parents, and significant others of the parent. Although the parenting expectations for adoptive and biological parents would be very similar, no adoptive parents were included in this research as none of the cases involved adoptive parents. In regards to step-parents and significant others of the parent, it is possible that step-parents or the significant others of the parent fully embrace their role as parental figure but it is also possible that such people do not adopt the role of parental figure as fully. Furthermore, research by O’Connor and Boag (2010) has found that step-parents do view their role and relationship with their step-child differently than biological parents do with their biological children. Thus, if it is known that step-parents are less emotionally attached to their children, as O’Connor and Boag (2010) found, then it is not unreasonable to believe that the weaker emotional bonds between step-parent and step-child could affect the coverage of the crime of filicide in numerous ways.
Given that the present research is on construction of parenthood, I could have decided to include step-parents precisely because the potentially weaker bonds between step-parent and step-child would add an additional facet to the construction of parenthood. However, I opted to only focus on biological parents to build a foundation for the construction of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. Future research can also build upon this foundation and expand upon the construction of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood by examining other parental arrangements and the media coverage of filicide when step-parents or others commit the crime.

For this project I also chose to focus only on white and black parents. As I was focused on the racialization of parenthood, I could have chosen to include more racial and ethnic diversity to more fully encompass all of the ways that parenthood is racialized and the myriad of different ways that this is manifested. In particular, a justifiable criticism of my project is the decision to omit Latino/a parents or interracial couples. My decision to focus only on white and black parents was made for a few reasons. Firstly, given the construction of good parenthood, in particular good motherhood, as limited to whites only and the prevalence of stereotypes about black parenthood I wanted to explore both of these issues within the confines of an act that is antithetical to good parenting. Additionally, as I determined that I wanted to include five cases of for each group, the number of cases that I would have had to include would have increased from 30 to 45. As such, I decide it was better to be able to focus more intently on a smaller number of parents rather than increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the parents discussed and risk glossing over important facets of the cases. I further decided to omit interracial couples occurred due to the low number of interracial couples found. From the original twenty-eight cases available for selection that involved two people being held responsible for the death of the
child, it was clear in only one that it was an interracial couple. All this being said, and as I
discuss in the conclusion, this is an area for future research to explore.

I searched LexisNexus and Proquest databases using a combination of terms (see
Appendix A for search terms) for cases of filicide that were reported by the media between June
10, 2010 and June 10, 2012. Stories were limited to this two year time span because the results
of the preliminary data collection indicated that such a time frame would yield at least five cases
of each racial/parenting category. Previous research on filicide has focused on longer time
frames that are typically a decade or more in length (i.e. Haapasalo and Petäjä 1999; Liem and
Koenraadt 2008; Lucas et al. 2002). Here I chose to go with a shorter time frame so that the
media portrayals of these crimes would be more consistent.

Stories were included only if the offender had been convicted of charges related to the
death of their children. I put this limitation in place so that it was known that the offender or
offenders were, in fact, held criminally responsible for the death of their children. Knowing that
a person was charged with or arrested for an offense does not guarantee that they were found
guilty or that they were held responsible for the death of the child. Thus, by including only
stories where it was known that the offender was found guilty, convicted, or sentenced for crimes
related to the death of a child or children, I sought to reduce some of the variation across the
cases in order to be able to better compare cases. Furthermore, given the limitation that the cases
included within this analysis were ones in which the offender was convicted, a story published
between June 10, 2010 to June 10, 2012 that specified that the offender was, in fact, convicted of
a crime related to the death of their child was necessary to be included in the final data selection.
As such, some cases occurred months or years prior to the two year time frame but were still
included in the final data analysis because a story was published in that time that specified that the offender had been convicted of a crime related to the death of their child(ren).

My second and final search of the LexisNexus and Proquest databases yielded a total of 202 cases in which a parent was held responsible for the death of a child or children. I dropped ten of these cases after further review indicated that they were published outside of the two-year time frame from June 10, 2010 to June 10, 2012. To whittle down this number to a manageable number of cases, I limited the search to cases where the child victim or victims were between the ages of 1 and 6 years. Given that previous research has indicated that fathers are more likely to kill older children (Liem and Koenraadt 2008; Lucas et al. 2002) and mothers are more likely to kill younger children (Bourget and Gagné 2002; Putkonen et al. 2011), and in particular are the typical offender for children under the age of one (Kunz and Bahr 1996), this age range epitomized an age range where the mother and father were approximately equally as likely to be the offender in cases of filicide. Although research by Kunz and Bahr (1996) suggests that mothers and fathers are equally likely to commit filicide when the victim is over the age of one week and under the age of 12, others have employed a narrower range (i.e. Nixon 1981; Cooper and Smith 2011).

Of the 192 cases from which I could have been selected the final cases, only fifty-five involved children between the ages of one and eighteen. And of these, forty-four involved victims in the 1 to 6 age range. The distribution of these cases across the categories of interest in this study were three black parents both held responsible, six black fathers, seven black mothers, five white parents both held responsible, nine white fathers, and fifteen white mothers. Importantly, this age range did not exclude any of the cases in which two black parents were
both held responsible for the death of their child, while still whittling down the available cases in
the five other racial/parental groups.

My final reduction to the twenty-five cases selected was based upon the region of the
country. The U.S. was divided into five regions -- Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest,
and West (see Appendix A for the state-by-state breakdown of region) – and I made an effort to
include cases from across these regions. With this regional breakdown, there was the intention
to have each region represented by one case within each racial/parental group. However, this
was not feasible for all racial/parental groups. As table 3.1 demonstrates, there was a degree of
balance of cases across regions with four cases coming from the Midwest and West regions,
three from the Southwest region, and seven from the Southeast and Northeast regions. I wanted
to include regional variation so that cases would be drawn from across the US rather than just
particular pockets of the country. Additionally, I wanted regional variation to make sure that the
findings regarding the social construction of motherhood, fatherhood, or parenthood were not
skewed by region. Although the literature on news coverage of filicide specifically does not
point to regional variations in understandings of parenthood, there is evidence from other types
of studies that regions differ a bit when it comes to conceptions of race and/or gender (Powers et
al 2003).

Case Selection

The final twenty-five cases were selected based upon the regional distribution of cases,
gender of victim(s), and method of killing. While previous research has demonstrated that boys
are more commonly victims of filicide (Fox and Zawitz 2007) and that most cases involve only
one victim (Léveillé, Marleau, and Dubé 2007), it was important to include cases of filicide in
which the victims were male or female and to include cases in which there were only one or multiple victims. It was important to have roughly equal cases of male and female children as victims so that parenthood, motherhood, and fatherhood as gendered concepts could be fully analyzed without being entangled in the gender of the victims. Furthermore, as male and female children are treated differently by their parents in gendered ways (i.e. Raley and Bianchi 2006), it is important to have built-in variations. I also deemed it important to include variation as to the number of victims. Given that Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) found that cases with multiple victims garner more media attention and knowing that most homicides involve only one victim (Léveillée, Marleau, and Dubé 2007), I thought it important to, as far as possible, include cases with varying numbers of victims. I also used the method of killing as selection criteria as research by Lucas et al. (2002), for example, found that fathers commit more violent filicidal acts while mothers use more passive methods. With these criteria in mind, the final cases were chosen.

Black Couples

All of the black couples who were both held responsible for the death of their child were chosen as the final forty-four cases included only three sets of offenders who were black mothers and fathers that were both charged in connection to the death of their child or children. While I made attempts to include regional variation as well as to include variation in the gender of the victims, there was little variation in these regards due to the fact that only three cases were found in which both a black mother and a black father were held accountable in the death of their child. In fact, all of the cases of black couples came from the Southeast region and these cases included three male victims and one female victim. The three black couples that I chose were Sade King
and William Davis, Markanthony and Jovita Ibeagwa, and Chisa Hughes and Jerald Hicks. In chapter six, I detail the stories about these offenders.

**Black Fathers**

The forty-four narrowed down cases yielded a total of six cases in which black fathers were convicted of a crime related to the death of their child. These cases occurred in Maryland (2), Florida (2), and Pennsylvania (2). Out of these six cases, two involved female victims and the other four involved male victims. Given that only three states and two regions were represented, there would be duplication regardless of which case I removed. It is arguable that the case that was eliminated should have been used to better balance the gender distribution of the victims as well as the regional distribution of the cases. Although this case, one of the available cases from Florida, was covered by the news during the two-year time frame, I chose to eliminate this one case because it actually occurred in 2006 and the offender was sentenced in 2010. Thus, I decided to eliminate this case instead of another because news media sites do not keep all stories available online indefinitely. After further review, I dropped one of the cases from Pennsylvania from the final analysis as the father was Latino. The final selection of cases yielded the following perpetrators: Ryan Bennett, Thomas Brown, Tyrone Hamber, and Stephen Nelson. These cases I discuss in chapter five.

**Black Mothers**

In regards to black mothers, there were seven cases eligible for inclusion in this project. These seven cases came from Virginia, Indiana, Oklahoma, New York, California (2), and South Carolina. Virginia and South Carolina are both a part of the Southeast region and I ultimately chose Virginia case over the case from South Carolina as the victim was female in the former
case and male in the latter. Given the desire to have roughly equal numbers male and female victims, I decided that the Virginia case was a better choice.

It would have been possible to have all five regions represented if I had included the case from Oklahoma instead of a second case from California. However, after I searched local news sites for stories about these cases, I found that there were no stories available on the local television news affiliate websites that discussed the Oklahoma case although there had been at least one instance of newspaper coverage. Hence I dropped the Oklahoma case in favor of the second California case since more stories were available to be reviewed. I also chose the California case over the second available case from the Southeast in order to achieve a more equitable regional distribution in cases overall. The final sample of cases is comprised of the following perpetrators: Carlotta Brett-Pierce, Rosondra Clay, Sheterra James, Latisha Lawson, and Ashley Williams. I discuss these cases in detail in chapter four.

White Couples

The forty-four cases from which the final cases were chosen yielded five cases of white parents who worked together. As there were exactly five cases remaining after the more limited age range was imposed, I had no need to remove any cases. These five cases were distributed regionally with two cases coming from the Northeast, two cases coming from the Southwest, and one case from the West. In terms of distribution by gender of victim, three cases had a male victim, one case had a female victim, and one case had three (one male and two female) victims. The white couples that I included in this analysis were Rebecca Christie and Derek Wulf, Christopher and Stephanie Dunham, John and Susan Griffin, Stanley and Colleen Rimer, and Herbert and Catherine Schaible. I discuss these cases in detail in chapter six.
White Fathers

There were eight cases of white fathers that I chose from to become a part of the final sample. These eight cases came from Alabama, California, Arizona, Nevada, Texas, Ohio (2), and Michigan. Since there was no case from the Northeast region, more than one would have to come from another region. In the Southeast region, I chose the case from Alabama because it was the only case from that region which fit the selection criteria. From the Southwest region I chose the Texas case over Arizona case because the death of the child in the Arizona case occurred in 2004 and so it was anticipated that stories that were once published would be unavailable given the limited time span that some websites have stories posted and easily accessible.

From the two cases available from the West region, I decided upon the case from California over the case from Nevada because the California case had a female victim and the other two cases had male victims. Finally, the last two cases came from the Midwest region. In the Midwest region there were two cases from Ohio and one case from Michigan. One case from Ohio I decided to eliminate because it had a very similar cause of death as another case that was already included. I wanted to have some variation in regards to cause of death as other research has found that the method of killing is itself entangled with gender conceptualizations.

The selection of two cases from the Midwest region was influenced by several factors. Firstly, when I looked at the overall regional distribution of cases, the Midwest region had fewer cases than the other regions. Choosing an additional case from the West or Southeast regions would have only added to the disparity in regional distribution. Additionally, the three cases that were passed over in favor of a case from the Midwest region all involved male victims while
both of the cases from the Midwest region involved female victims which helped in balancing the gender distribution of victims. Finally, in regards to the cases from the Midwest, one of them included multiple victims while none of the other eligible cases did so. The final sample of white fathers included Robert Babcock, Thomas Huge, Jonathan Katan, Steven Nicholson, and Jericho Wright. These cases are discussed in chapter five.

White Mothers

Lastly, there were fifteen eligible cases involving a white mother. Regionally, these fifteen cases come from the Northeast (2), the Southeast (6), the Southwest (2), the West (3), and the Midwest (1). One case was chosen from each region to ensure regional variation, however two of these cases were later dropped from the final analysis. For all regions, besides the Midwest, there were multiple cases to choose from and these decisions were influenced by the gender of the victim and the cause of death.

In the Northeast region, two cases were available, one from New Hampshire and one from Massachusetts. I chose the Massachusetts case as it had a female victim and involved an unusual and violent method of killing. From the Southwest region, I chose a Texas case over one from New Mexico because the mother was charged in the deaths of multiple victims. In the Southeast region, there were two cases from Virginia, two from West Virginia, one from Tennessee, and one from South Carolina. Upon reviewing these six cases I noted that one case from West Virginia involved a female victim and that this case involved a mother who neglected her daughter’s medical needs. Given that the Massachusetts case involved a violent method, I determined that it was important to include a case that was more along the lines of neglect than actively killing the child. As mentioned above, the case from South Carolina did involve
multiple victims. However, as I chose the Texas case because it included multiple victims, I decided that having an atypical cause of death was more important than having an additional case with multiple victims. Given that gender is a focus of this project, having both a case that was atypical for a female offender as well as one that was more typical for a female offender, enables me to examine how, if at all, media representations are gendered when a woman acts in a less feminine way.

Similarly, the final case from the West region was my choice because of the cause of death. In all, there were four cases from which one was to be selected in the West region. These cases came from California, Colorado, and Nevada (2). I ultimately selected one of the cases from Nevada because the death of the child appeared to be caused by negligence rather than direct violence. In the other cases I included, the mothers were more directly or actively engaged in causing the death of their child. Again, I aimed for variation in the cause of death in order to examine how the means of death, in terms of both method and intent, matter for how the women who commit filicide are portrayed in the media. The final data includes only three cases of white mothers as two of the mothers were Latina. Rather than conflate the issues of race and ethnicity, both of which have their own influence on parenting, these two women were dropped for the final discussion. The three white mothers included in the study are Michelle Lepkowski, Brandie Nelson, and Tracy Wright. These I discussed more fully in chapter four.

**Story Selection**

In this dissertation, I examine twenty-five cases of filicide. The data are comprised of stories from local ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC affiliates in twenty-four cities or regions (see table 3.3). I searched eighty-six websites for stories about these twenty-five cases. Of those eight-six
websites, nineteen did not have a story about the selected twenty-five cases or the stories on those websites were archived videos and the completeness of the story was unknown. I decided to use only news stories from these local affiliates given by the following considerations. As cases came from across the U.S. and from communities that vary in size, the four local affiliates were used for the sake of consistency (Webster 2005). I found the affiliates by utilizing internet search engines with the name of the nearest large city, which was known from the Proquest or LexisNexus results, coupled with the network affiliate. Not all areas had all four networks represented and in some cases the associated website was for two networks together (e.g. local FOX and CBS affiliates).

I gathered stories from each news affiliate by searching the news website for the offender’s name and, if known, the victim’s name. In cases in which there were two offenders, I conducted the searches twice to catch stories in which only one offender was mentioned. This yielded a total of 372 stories for all twenty-five cases. Refer to Appendix A table A.2 for the distribution of stories across each case.

Data Analysis

After I collected all stories from each of the twenty-five cases, I conducted coding to find themes across cases. I used the qualitative methods software, ATLAS.ti, to assist in the coding of cases. While the software has the capability to code all occurrences of certain words and phrases utilizing a text search, I used open coding and coded each word or phrase as the stories were read. This may have been the more time-consuming option, however, as text analysis is dependent upon the larger context of the story, of which words and phrases are just a part, this method was more appropriate to find and note the themes across the cases.
To code the cases, I read each story once and did a preliminary coding that focused on issues regarding the crime that was committed and how the offender was referenced as a parent. After all of the cases were read and initially codes identified, I read through the cases for a second time and coded again. This second read-through and coding was done to find new themes and to elaborate upon themes found during the first wave of coding. In other words, if a theme emerged in one particular type of stories during the first round of coding, then, during the second round of coding, I paid particular attention to see if this theme was present in other cases, too. Finally, in a third reading of the stories I focused on the clarity and cohesiveness of the themes and chose specific examples that exemplified the theme.

Conclusion

I examined twenty-five cases of maternal and paternal filicide that were in the news between June 10, 2010 and June 10, 2012. All of these cases involve parents who had been arrested and convicted in connection to the death of their child or children. I read and analyzed a total of 372 stories about these twenty-five different cases.
Table 3.1  Regional Distribution of Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Midwest</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Southwest</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Mom</td>
<td>Carlotta Brett-Pierce</td>
<td>Latisha Lawson</td>
<td>Ashley Williams</td>
<td>Rosondra Clay and Sheterra James</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Table 3.2. Distribution of Cases by Gender of Victim.

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*Site was searched but no stories were found related to the searched for case(s).

**Site was searched but stories that were found related to the searched case(s) were archived.
CHAPTER 4: RACIALIZATION AND GENDERING OF MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood is a concept that is seemingly universal. Yet, as I argue and demonstrate throughout this chapter, motherhood is a deeply gendered and racialized concept, too. Although motherhood is postulated as a natural part of womanhood (Glenn 1994; Harris 1995), motherhood is an individual and varied experience. In this chapter I focus on mothers who were convicted of a crime in relation to the death of their child and how these women were portrayed in the media in racialized and gendered ways.

I identify six themes from the news stories that were available about the eight offenders whom I focused on. These themes are the labeling of mother, demonization of mothering, unfit to mother, inadequate at mothering, evoking of good motherhood, and gendering and racialization of types of motherhood. The first theme of labeling of mother focuses on how the women were referred to within articles and how the usage of terms such as mother or mom is informative on the portrayals of the offender. The next three themes highlight specific details of the women and their crimes that were used to portray them as bad mothers that demonize them as mothers, depict them as unfit to mother, or illustrate the ways that they are inadequate at mothering. The next theme, evoking of good motherhood, focuses on how good motherhood and the expectations of good motherhood were directly or indirectly discussed within media portrayals. Finally, I conclude by discussing the gendering and racialization of types of motherhood in which I discuss good and bad motherhood and how these concepts are influenced by the race of the mother as well as her femininity.

In this chapter I further address two of my four hypotheses. Hypothesis two argues that filicide will be used to reinforce constructs of both good and bad motherhood. Although the
cases of maternal filicide would seem to lend themselves almost exclusively to definitions of bad motherhood, I wished to see if in special cases women were still thought of as good mothers despite the fact that they killed their child. Previous research such as Huckerby (2003) and Brennan and Vandenbep (2009) find that white women have their behavior excused in some way in media portrayals. I further believe that the portrayals of black mothers, also, will continue to reinforce the stereotypical views of black motherhood, particularly the imagery of the mammy and the matriarch (Collins 2009). Such stereotypical imagery will discourage the portrayal of black mothers as good mothers but will also reinforce the devaluation of black motherhood as a lesser form of motherhood than that embodied by white mothers.

I also address hypothesis one in this chapter and the subsequent two empirical chapters. Hypothesis one holds that media portrayals of filicidal offenders will vary depending upon the race and gender of the offender. As the cultural expectations of motherhood are more deeply engrained in femininity and there are greater expectations associated with motherhood than fatherhood (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin 2005), I anticipate there will be greater and more negative media focus on cases in which mothers have killed their child than in cases where a father or both parents have killed their child. These effects will not be uniform across racial groups, however. As black parenthood has been devalued, white mothers will be portrayed more negatively than black mothers and black fathers will be treated less negatively than white fathers, a point discussed later in chapter five.

The Cases

This chapter details eight mothers who were convicted of crimes related to the killing of their children. The cases involve three white mothers and five black mothers and the analysis
focuses on how parenting and mothering are socially constructed in response to a crime that is considered to be antithetical to proper parenting. I selected these cases from different regions of the US and they encompass vastly different crimes; yet, these differences only help to elucidate the commonalities and disparities in the framing of these women as mothers and the ways in which motherhood is continually negotiated and socially constructed.

Before delving into the findings concerning mothering and parenting, the eight cases that the analyses are built on will be briefly detailed. As mentioned in the methods section, these cases were drawn from across the United States. The amount of coverage garnered by each case varied extensively (see table A2). Thus, in some instances more details of the crime, the offender, the victim(s), and the final sentencing outcome of the case are more readily available than in other cases (see table 4.1).

Black Mothers

The five cases detailed here all involve black mothers who were charged with and ultimately convicted of a crime related to the death of their child. The exact charges, sentences, and crimes differ from woman to woman; yet, despite these differences overall themes related to parenting and mothering, including the racialization and gendering of these concepts, become clear. The mothers are Carlotta Brett-Pierce, Rosondra Marie Clay, Sheterra James, Latisha Lawson, and Ashley Williams.

Carlotta Brett-Pierce (2010). In Brooklyn, New York, Carlotta Brett-Pierce was the mother to Marchella Brett-Pierce. Marchella was born prematurely and had several health complications, including under developed lungs, which resulted in her being hospitalized most of her life. Marchella died at age four after being beaten, starved, and drugged by her mother.
Carlotta Brett-Pierce was not the only person held responsible for the death of her daughter. Her mother, Loretta Brett, as well as two child welfare workers were also charged with and convicted of crimes related to their failure to protect Marchella from this abuse. Carlotta Brett-Pierce was convicted of murder and assault and sentenced to 32 years to life for her crimes.

In all, there were forty-two stories that discussed Carlotta Brett-Pierce and her crime. Notably, twenty-four (57.1%) of the headlines of the stories do not establish Brett-Pierce as the mother of her victim and, additionally, in one story the relationship between Brett-Pierce and her daughter, Marchella, is never established. Stories were collected from New York City’s local affiliates at http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/index (6) for ABC, http://newyork.cbslocal.com/ (16) for CBS, http://www.myfoxny.com/ (8) for FOX, and http://www.nbcnewyork.com/ (13) for NBC.

Rosondra Marie Clay (2008). Rosondra Marie Clay from Victorville, California, was accused of neglecting and starving her five-year-old son Kevin Baldwin to death. Kevin had severe spastic cerebral palsy which meant that he had no muscle control. He died of as a result of severe malnutrition in July 2008 at the age of five. Clay was charged with murder in the death of her son and accepted a plea deal on charges of involuntary manslaughter. Clay was sentenced to eleven months in jail for her role in her son’s death.

There was only one story that discussed the case of Clay. In this story, Clay was directly identified as mother in both the headline and body of the story. I collected this story from the Los Angeles CBS affiliate of http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/. I also searched the ABC, CBS, and NBC affiliate websites of http://abclocal.go.com/kabc/index, http://www.myfoxla.com/,
and http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/ for stories about Clay, but none were found on those sites.

_Sheterra James_ (2010). Sheterra James lived with her sister, Latisha James, and their four children in Fairfield, California. The apartment that James, her sister, and the children lived in did not have gas or electricity so they used candles for light. Sheterra and Latisha left their children unattended in the apartment while they charged their cell phones elsewhere and the apartment caught on fire. James’ three children and her niece all died from the fire. James was originally charged with involuntary manslaughter, second-degree murder, and child endangerment. She was convicted of four charges each of involuntary manslaughter and child neglect. After serving nearly two years of incarceration, James was released and sentenced to ten years of probation.

Thirty-five stories from the local Bay Area affiliates of California discussed James. In twelve (34.3%) of the headlines James was not identified as the mother of the victims. However, she was established to be the mother of three of the four children who died in all of the stories. Of those thirty-five stories, I found eight from the ABC affiliate of http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/index, nine were reported on the CBS affiliate of http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/, sixteen came from the FOX affiliate of http://www.ktvu.com/, and the remaining two came from the NBC affiliate at http://www.nbcbayarea.com/.

_Latisha Lawson_ (2009). In Fort Wayne, Indiana, Latisha Lawson had two children. Lawson and her children lived with Natasha Hawkins and Hawkins’ three children. Lawson and Hawkins decided that their children needed to be exorcized and forced the children to drink an oil and vinegar mixture. While the four older children vomited up this mixture, Lawson’s two-
year-old son Jeziah King was given the mixture three times and on the third forced feeding had his mouth covered until he stopped breathing. Jeziah’s body was left on the bed and Hawkins and Lawson slept next to the body during that time as they believed that Jeziah would be resurrected. After two months, Jeziah’s body was stored in a tote that was hidden in a closet for nearly a year. Lawson was found guilty of murder, three separate neglect charges, and two battery charges and was sentenced to 62 years in prison.

I collected the stories about Latisha Lawson from three different websites of affiliates in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Forty-three stories in all discussed the case of Lawson and of those stories the headlines of twenty-five (65.1%) did not identify Lawson as the mother of her son. I collected seventeen of the stories from http://www.indianasnewscenter.com/, a site for both the local ABC and NBC affiliate stations. Of the other stories, I found eighteen from http://www.wane.com/, the local CBS affiliate website, and eight came from the local FOX website of http://fortwaynecitysource.com/.

Ashley Williams (2009). Ashley Williams in Richmond, Virginia, was mother to a two-year-old boy, D’Sean Williams. Williams was charged with murder and child neglect after D’Sean died from malnutrition and dehydration. Williams pled guilty to starving her son and to charges of involuntary manslaughter and child abuse and neglect resulting in injury. The sentence that Williams received for her crime was not reported in the stories I found. Williams’ family came to her defense and argued that D’Sean did not starved to death but rather suffered from an undisclosed genetic medical condition which other male children in the family also suffered from.
I found fourteen stories that discussed the case of Ashley Williams. Only three (21.4 %) of the headlines did not establish that Williams was mother of the victim, D’Sean. I collected two stories came the local ABC affiliate of Richmond, Virginia at http://www.wric.com/, four were found the CBS affiliate at http://wtvr.com, and the remaining eight came from the NBC affiliate at http://www.nbc12.com/. I also searched the local FOX affiliate of http://www.foxrichmond.com/ for stories about Williams but none were found on that site.

White Mothers

The next three cases detail the cases of filicide committed by white mothers. These women are Michelle Lepkowski, Brandie L. Nelson, and Tracy Wright. Much like the cases of the black maternal filicidal offenders, the exact crimes are quite different and the outcomes vary extensively but even with these variations it becomes clear that there are expectations associated with good and bad parenting and mothering and that these concepts are racialized and gendered in distinct ways.

Michelle Lepkowski (2007). Michelle Lepkowski from Gardner, Massachusetts, had a two-year-old daughter, Raelynn Mascal. Lepkowski was charged with murder after beating and shaking Raelynn and was ultimately found guilty of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to 12 years in prison. Lepkowski’s boyfriend at the time, Luke Malizia, was also held responsible for the death of Raelynn for his failure to report the child’s injuries to authorities.

The stories about Lepkowski came from the local affiliate sites associated with Boston, Massachusetts. In all, I found that there were eight stories about Lepkowski and her case. Of those stories, four came from http://www1.whdh.com/, the local NBC affiliate, and four came from the local FOX affiliate at http://www.myfoxboston.com/. The ABC and CBS affiliates
of http://www.wcvb.com/ and http://boston.cbslocal.com/ were also searched but no stories about Lepkowski were found on those sites.

*Brandie L. Nelson* (2010). Brandie L. Nelson from Mauston, Wisconsin, was at a weekend charity event with her son, 16-month-old Tanner. Nelson put Tanner down for a nap in a converted trailer which had an air conditioning unit inside. However, the air conditioner could only work properly if the back door of the trailer was left open, which it was not that day. Nelson let Tanner nap for three hours and claimed that she checked on him during that time by looking through the window of the trailer. After three hours, Nelson checked on Tanner and found that he was not breathing. Tanner had died from heat exhaustion. Nelson was charged with felony child neglect and sentenced to serve ten months in jail.

I found ten stories that detailed the case of Brandie Nelson. These stories came from the affiliate websites from Madison, Wisconsin. Six stories were found on the ABC affiliate site http://www.wkow.com/, one from the CBS affiliate site http://www.channel3000.com/wisc-tv, two from the FOX site at http://www.fox47.com/, and one from the NBC affiliate at http://www.nbc15.com/. Only two (20.0%) of the ten stories did not establish Nelson as the mother of her son in the headlines of the stories.

*Tracy Wright* (2011). In Hurricane, West Virginia, lived Tracy Wright and her three-year-old daughter Ashley. Ashley had cystic fibrosis and needed regular medical attention and prescription medication to treat her disease. However, Tracy Wright failed to take Ashley to medical appointments and failed to give Ashley prescribed medications. Tracy Wright was found guilty of murder of a child by a parent and child neglect resulting in death. Wright was
sentenced to life with the possibility for parole for the murder charge and an additional three to five years for the child neglect charge.

I collected the stories about Tracy Wright from affiliates for Charleston, West Virginia. I found a total of nine stories about Wright. Two of the stories came from the ABC affiliate site at http://www.wchstv.com/, six of them came from the CBS affiliate at http://www.wowktv.com/, and one from the NBC affiliate at http://www.wsaz.com/. I found no stories on the FOX affiliate website of http://www.wvah.com/. All of the headlines either directly or indirectly established Wright as the mother of daughter Ashley.

Themes of Mothering

Four different themes of mothering emerged from the stories about these eight women. These four themes were the demonization of mothering, unfit to mother, inadequate at mothering, and the evoking of good motherhood. The first three of these themes encompass different aspects of bad motherhood and illustrate the myriad ways that women can be cast into the role of bad mother as well as the multi-faceted construction of bad motherhood. The last theme, the evoking of good motherhood, captures how good motherhood is constructed as opposed to these filicidal women.

Before discussing those four themes, I address the labeling of mothers. In this, the next, section, I examined the terms used to describe these maternal filicidal offenders and how these terms and the usage of the terms are a part of the social construction of motherhood. In particular, the use of terms, such as mother or mom, label women as occupying this particular role and with such labeling come clear expectations of what a woman should and should not do.

Labeling of Mothers
The use of the word mother is gendering in and of itself. Throughout these cases, the words mother and mom are used by reporters as well as by people quoted in news stories; yet other parental identifiers such as parent and mommy are used much less frequently, if at all. As Litzke (2004) argues, the term mother has been used to either demonize or idealize women. While Litzke speaks specifically to the term mother, the terms mom and mommy are also used to reflect on the offender as a woman and are similarly used to establish the offender as either villain or victim. The terms of mother, mom, and mommy all perform the function of establishing the parental connections between victim and offender but they also suggest the ways in which an offender either successfully does or does not live up to the expectations of mothering and femininity.

The white women were exclusively referred to as mothers, moms, or women. The terms of mom and mother were used to clearly delineate the relationship between the woman and her child or children. Furthermore, while the crimes of women are thought to be unique or abnormal to begin with (i.e. Lloyd 1994), it is thought to be even more unusual for a mother to harm her child (i.e. Naylor 2001). Thus, the establishment of the parental relationship and the use of the terms mother and mom are also used to identify the crime as one which is even more unthinkable because it is not just a woman committing a crime, or even a woman harming a child, it is a woman harming her own child.

The word mommy evokes many connotations about the relationship between parent and child. Beyond the fact that mommy, just like mom and mother, are reserved solely for female parents, the usage of mommy is typically reserved for women who have small children. In all of these stories the term mommy was used only once and in that instance it was used by a mother who wrote letters to her victims and was describing herself as mommy. Sheterra James in her
testimony calls herself mommy in the letters that she wrote apologizing to her children for her crime. In her letter to her son which she read aloud in court, James is quoted as saying “Mommy is truly heartbroken for the mistake that she made that cost you your life” (SanFrancisco.CBSlocal.com 2012, lines 36-39). Importantly, this is the only use of mommy and was said by the mother herself, rather than by reporters describing James as a mommy. In many respects, a reporter referring to a woman as a mommy rather than mom or mother would be more unusual than not using that particular term.

The terms of woman, mother, and mom are gendered in the way that they are used to describe the offender in relation to the crime or crimes that she committed. In most instances, the women were clearly identified as mother or mom in the headlines of the news stories. In 61 (44.9%) of the stories about the black mothers and fifteen (55.6%) of the stories about the white mothers the headlines identified the women directly as mothers. Tables 4.2 and 4.3 further show the distribution of the usage of direct parental identifiers (e.g. mother, mom), indirect parental identifiers (e.g. her son, daughter of), and no parental identifier in headlines, sub-headlines, and stories. By identifying either directly or indirectly, the story is thus framed entirely within the larger context that the crime committed was done by a parent against their own child. This framing also serves the function of priming readers and their responses to the story.

If the offenders failed to appear as appropriately feminine, this was also evident through the lack of use of terms or by qualifying them as mothers with other terms with negative connotations. Aggression and violence are not traits that are thought to be feminine and when a woman demonstrates such traits she is thought to be “doubly deviant” (Lloyd 1994). Previous research on filicidal offenders has suggested that the methods through which parents kill their children do differ depending upon the gender of the parent. For example, Lucas et al. (2002)
find that in cases of filicide mothers use less violent means than fathers. The conclusion that particular methods of killing are thought to be more or less violent and that the less violent methods are connected with mothers is a result of gendering. As the researchers find that in most cases of filicide the cause of death is injury or injuries to the head, the labeling of particular methods of killing as more or less violent reinforces the idea that women are less violent than men. Yet, while the findings of Lucas et al. (2002) suggest mothers overall use less violent means than fathers do not mean, of course, that mothers never kill their children in more violent ways.

At the same time, while the terms used to describe these women are gendered, the terms are also racialized. The racialization of terms applies to terms used to describe the women as mothers and also as women. The terms of mother and mom were both used to identify offenders as parents of the victim. Although the terms might have been the same, the meaning behind the terms and the larger context that the terms were put in did differ depending upon the race of the parent.

Michelle Lepkowski was never once referred to as mom in the articles but she was referenced as a mother. Lepkowski shook and beat her daughter, a violent method that evokes much about the relationship between Lepkowski and her child as well as Lepkowski’s failure to be appropriately feminine. The association between women being perceived as unwomanly when they are aggressive is one that has been established (i.e. Lloyd 1994). The treatment of Lepkowski by the media clearly reflects that when a woman is violent or aggressive her actions are still very much associated with a lack of femininity. Rather than using the legal term of assault, reporters stress that Lepkowski “fatally beat” (MyFOXBoston.com 2010a, line 6) her daughter. While WHDH.com reports that “she beat the girl. An autopsy determined the child
died from blunt impact and shaking injuries to the head and neck” (2010, lines 7-8). These descriptions, albeit brief, indicate that Lepkowski acted violently towards her daughter and without any other descriptions of the relationship between Lepkowski and her child or any other details to portray Lepkowski in a more neutral or positive light, the image of her as a violent woman is the final message.

Not only was Lepkowski never referred to as mom in any of the news coverage of her case, the references to Lepkowski as mother were used more to frame the crime as one in which a mother has killed her own child. As such, the crime is evocatively framed as grossly unnatural because a mother could harm her own child and the reference to her as a mother does not speak to the mothering that Lepkowski provided. For example, WDHD.com (2007b) describes the crime as: “Mascal (Lepkowski’s daughter) died on May 18, after she was found unconscious with injuries to the neck, head and torso. On Thursday, her mother, Michelle Lepkowski, 32 and Lepkowski’s boyfriend, Luke Malizia, 21, were arraigned in Gardner District Court” (lines 6-8). Lepkowski is referenced as a mother a total of seven times in the nine stories about her and those descriptions do not speak about her actions as a mother but rather are there just to establish the relationship between Lepkowski and her daughter, Raelynn Mascal.

Unlike the white offenders, all of the black offenders were referred to as mom at least once in either headlines or within the body of the story. While this could be read as an indication that black mothers were thought to more closely resemble good motherhood, the use of the word mom for black mothers was used less to establish a quality of parenting or an adherence to good mothering than it was for white mothers. Furthermore, as the next paragraphs will demonstrate, the use of the word mother or mom could be used in conjunction with other terms or phrases to portray these mothers as less than ideal parents.
In some stories, as just discussed, reporters did not use the words mother or mom and this shaped the portrayal of these women as offenders. However, reporters sometimes qualified women as mothers through the use of other, typically negatively charged, terms to describe them as mothers. I argue that these women are qualified as mothers through the addition of these other terms. In other words, by highlighting a particular facet of motherhood for these particular women, especially in a negative way, indicates ways in which the women were not living up to the expectations of good motherhood. The description of Latisha Lawson as a “Murderous Mother” (Sarvay 2012) is a particularly stark example of this point.

Latisha Lawson had her mothering qualified and even demonized when she was described as the mother of her son, Jeziiah. As mentioned above, the full headline of Sarvay (2012) reads as: “Judge Agrees with Jury and Rejects Murderous Mother’s Insanity Plea.” Given that when this article was written Lawson had been convicted of murder, the identification of her as a “Murderous Mother” does speak to her conviction. At the same time, it also demonizes Lawson as not only a woman, a mother, and a murderer but as a woman who is a mother who murdered her child and so portraying her as deviant as both a woman and a mother. Another article by Sarvay described Lawson as “The Fort Wayne mother who killed her young child while performing an exorcism, then hiding his body for more than a year” (story 2011e, lines 1-5). The use of mother thus establishes the relationship between Lawson and her victim but this is done to demonize, not excuse, her behaviors.

Carlotta Brett-Pierce was identified clearly as the mother of her daughter and victim, Marchella. In all but one of the stories about the case it is established that Brett-Pierce was the mother. Yet, while reporters established the relationship between Carlotta and Marchella, descriptions of Brett-Pierce as a mother further related the ways in which Brett-Pierce as a
mother did not live up to good motherhood. In a story reported on MyFoxNY.com, Brett-Pierce was described as “The New York City mom who beat, drugged, and starved her daughter” (n.d., line 1) and as “the negligent mom” (n.d., lines 10-11). She was also described as “The mother [who] was accused of beating her child with a videocassette for punishment” (Pressman 2010, line 17). Although all of the phrases establish Brett-Pierce as the mother of her child, she is portrayed in such a way to highlight the ways in which her mothering needs to be limited or altered. In other words, through these descriptions, Brett-Pierce is being established as not only a bad mother but reporters are also making it known exactly why she is not a good mother. This is especially given through further reporting that the judge in her case, Patricia DiMango, described Brett-Pierce as “a ‘self-centered, volatile, and belligerent woman’” (MyFoxNY.com n.d., line 11).

Brett-Pierce’s departure from good motherhood is further stressed through her own attempt to negate the ways in which others describe her. Brett-Pierce reportedly described herself as “a ‘loving and caring mother’ overcome by poverty and a lack of smarts” (MyFoxNY.com n.d., lines 5-6). This description of Brett-Pierce stands in sharp contrast to the other descriptions made by reporters and Brett-Pierce’s attempt to portray herself as this loving, caring mother comes across as incongruous with the other reported details about her and her actions towards her daughter. At the same time, Brett-Pierce herself is identifying the ways in which motherhood, particularly good motherhood, is influenced by both class and education. Her failure to be a good mother occurred in her estimation because of “poverty and a lack of smarts” (MyFoxNY.com n.d., line 6), thus implying that without those deficits she would have been a good mother.
Overall, the labeling of women as mothers was done to illustrate the relationship between offender and victim. This is important for two reasons: it exacerbates what the women had done and indicates a fall from the grace of motherhood. By labeling these women as mothers only to establish the relationship between offender and victim, the crimes that these women committed are portrayed as even less understandable. Women who engage in crime are thought of as “doubly deviant” (Lloyd 1994), but when it is mothers who engage in crime, especially against their own children, the degree to which such actions are understood as unnatural or unwomanly intensifies. Additionally, motherhood is highly regarded and women who are mothers are, to some degree, sanctified for the sacrifices they are expected to make for the benefit and/or wellbeing of their children. Mothers who harm their own children, however, are, again, going against nature and their maternal instinct. As such, while motherhood has been known to be a factor in women receiving more lenient treatment by the criminal justice system (Daly 1987a, 1987b), maternal filicide challenges the very notion of a maternal instinct or the essentialist view of nurturing motherhood and instead of motherhood resulting in more lenient treatment it compounds the despicability of what they women had done.

Demonization of Mothering

Lawson allegedly hid the body for more than a year, even moving it with her to a new residence. Police say Lawson also beat her 10-year-old daughter with a pink belt and extension cord, leaving visible injuries (Sarvay 2010b, lines 25-30).

Latisha Lawson demonstrates the theme of demonization of mothering through the use of specific and symbolic descriptions of her actions towards her children. Latisha Lawson represents this theme because of the way she reportedly responded to her child’s temper tantrums
and her actions after the death of her child. In November 2009, Lawson “gave both her children a concoction of olive oil and vinegar to rid them of their ‘demons’ . She also told police she was tired of Jezaih’s temper tantrums” (Sarvay 2010b, lines 12-14). Lawson’s actions, such as beating her daughter and being unable to handle the temper tantrums of her son, illustrate that her methods of mothering did not fall within the domains of good motherhood and demonize the way she did treat her children. Adding to this demonization is the description of the belt that was used to beat her daughter as a “pink belt,” a color connected with femininity but more importantly with girlhood. As such, this detail evokes ideas about the innocence and youth of her daughter which stands in contrast with the deliberate, hurtful actions committed by her mother. Furthermore, as the story details that Lawson had moved the body of her son with her to her new residence, there is evidence that she was aware of and deliberate in her actions. Thus, her actions cannot be excused away meaning that she was knowledgeable of her actions and the harm they caused.

Another mother who was demonized in the media portrayals was Carlotta Brett-Pierce. Brett-Pierce was described as “The New York City mom who beat, drugged and starved her daughter to death [and who] blamed everyone but herself Wednesday as she was sentenced to 32 years to life in prison” (MyFOXNY.com n.d.: lines 1-2). Brett-Pierce is repeatedly described as the New York City mom or the mom from Brooklyn, both of which have connotations about being “urban” and thus signifying her race as well as connotations about being strong since she lives in such a place. As such, this description coupled with the details of her behavior and the resulting death of her daughter portray her as a bad mother who might be able to “survive” in New York City but at the expense of being able to care appropriately for her child. Mona Rivera from the New York CBS affiliate provides another demonizing description of Brett-Pierce and
her mothering practices. As Rivera reports, the presiding judge, Patricia DiMango, stated that Brett-Pierce “showed a calloused lack of care for her daughter and other children who were witness to the abuse. Brett-Pierce’s 7-year-old son, Tymel, testified in court that his sister wasn’t often fed” (2012, lines 31-33). Additionally, Judge DiMango, was reported as further stating that “Food, water and basic human parenting could have kept her alive” (Rivera 2012, line 34).

As such, Brett-Pierce is demonized because of the ways that she did not mother her daughter, Marchella. Importantly, these negative portrayals of Brett-Pierce and the connotations that are evoked as a result of the details provided depict her as a bad mother. Moreover, as she deflects all blame off of herself and instead as resulting from her life experiences, such as her lack of smarts, she is seen as taking no responsibility for her own actions and thus relegates herself further into the bad mother camp. The demonization of Brett-Pierce is clear not only because of her blatant denial to recognize her own role in the death of her daughter but also because of the way she treated all of her children. As she not only denied “basic human parenting” to Marchella but had her other children witness this abuse, Brett-Pierce becomes a symbol of how greatly a woman can depart from good motherhood.

Another way that criminal mothers are demonized is through references to their sexuality. Importantly, in my sample, these references only emerged in a few of the stories about one of the women, Sheterra James, and were not a part of the portrayals of any of the other mothers. However, as James is a black woman, the media coverage of her sexuality plays into stereotypes about black women and sexuality. Hypersexuality has been a negative characterization of black women for centuries (Collins 2009). Sheterra James, again, provides a prime example of the racialization of bad motherhood. The grandfather of one of James’ children spoke to reporters about how he found an ad online for a paid escort who looked like James. The grandfather
questioned James about the ad and he told reporters that: “‘She’s trying to tell me she wasn’t a prostitute or whatever. She said she did that a couple months ago when she needed some money or whatever’” (NBCbayarea.com 2010, lines 21-22). The story also describes the apparent ad in which “‘Ravyn’” claims to be a “‘freaky female’” and “‘willing to do anything’” (NBCbayarea.com 2010, lines 18-19). These details and descriptions of James portray her as the stereotypical, hypersexual black woman and reinforce ideas such as jezebel as Collins (2009) describes. This stereotype, jezebel, is characterized by having an “excessive sexual appetite” and as a result increased fertility (Collins 2009). As such, children can be seen not as desired but as consequences of their hypersexuality.

The demonization of mothering plays into the concept of bad motherhood. While the women may not have been directly referenced as bad mothers very often, the idea of what is encompassed by bad mothering is also more broadly defined than good mothering. These more vague references to bad motherhood demonstrate how a multitude of behaviors or acts can be considered parts of bad motherhood. The mothers of Lawson, Brett-Pierce, and James who were just described are all considered to be bad mothers for vastly different reasons. Importantly, these women were portrayed as bad mothers for more reasons than just the act of filicide.

Beyond the reporting that Latisha Lawson was unable to handle the temper tantrums of her son, Jeziah, as mentioned above, the descriptions of punishments doled out by Lawson showcase a different aspect of bad motherhood. As Lawson’s daughter, King, was reported as having testified in a story by Trent on Indianaasnewscenter.com:

She said when Jeziah was alive he used to get in trouble for throwing tantrums. She said he would get ‘whoopins’ by their mother and father. She too would get in trouble… she
would get ‘whoopins’ with several objects. Many of them, she said, would bleed and leave marks that are still visible today (2011a, lines 67-70).

Furthermore, “Lawson allegedly told police she killed her son in 2009 because she thought he was ‘demon possessed.’ She later hid his body in her closet for nearly a year.” (Sarvay 2011c, lines 11-13). Lawson is portrayed as unable to handle the stresses of parenting and the physical punishment that she doled out in response illustrate how bad mothers respond in more negative ways to the strains of parenting than would be expected of good mothers.

The concept of good motherhood was in some cases invoked to demonstrate how women were bad mothers. Some of the women were actually referred to as good mothers by others, yet these references did not establish them as good mothers at all but instead emphasized the ways that they failed to live up that role. Carlotta Brett-Pierce was described by her attorney and a neighbor as a good mother; yet, while these descriptions had the aim of demonstrating how Brett-Pierce was not as bad as the details of her crime would suggest, it was still clear that Brett-Pierce embodied bad motherhood more than good motherhood. In all, there were forty-two stories which were related to the case of Carlotta Brett-Pierce, and in those stories there were only five stories which contained any reference to Brett-Pierce as a good mother. Furthermore, even when Brett-Pierce was described as a good mother, particular details of the case or of the woman herself were mentioned in quick succession and thus demonstrated how Brett-Pierce should not have been identified as a good mother by her attorney, her neighbors, or herself. For example, in Brett-Pierce was described this way:

Carlotta Brett-Pierce brazenly shirked responsibility for the death of her 4-year-old daughter, Marchella, who weighed just 18.9 pounds and had a single kernel of corn in her
stomach when she died, portraying herself as a ‘loving and caring mother’ overcome by poverty and a lack of smarts (MyFOXNY.com n.d., lines 3-6).

Other stories also stress Marchella’s condition, such as “When police found her Sept. 2, 2010, she had 60 adult doses of Claritin and 30 doses of Benadryl in her system, a medical examiner said. Her stomach contained one kernel of corn” (Long 2012, lines 19-21). Such descriptions thus establish Brett-Pierce as incapable of being a good mother and in turn establish that a good mother would overcome issues such as poverty and lack of intelligence, as Gurevich (2008) describes, and be able to recognize that her child was suffering. For most women, such as Brett-Pierce, their desire to be a good mother or a good woman is never fully actualized and the continued striving for such almost impossible goals is an indication of good womanhood.

Sheterra James was also described as a good mother. James was described in testimony by her sister as “smart and a good mother” (SanFrancisco.CBSLocal.com 2010c, line 27) and her attorney further stressed that she had “experience caring for younger children while growing up in her grandmother’s home, parenting classes she had taken and her experience working as a homeless shelter manager” (SanFrancisco.CBSLocal.com 2010c, lines 28-30). Her attorney also stated: “She was responsible, and she knew how to take care of children” (SanFrancisco.CBSLocal.com 2010c, line 31). All of this suggests that James had the capacity to be a good mother. However, the prosecution argued that James was “a competent woman with ample experience caring for children who knew better than to leave them alone for up to 30 minutes with burning candles in reach (sic)” (SanFrancisco.CBSLocal.com 2010d, lines 24-27). Here the prosecutor is using the very same characteristics that both James’ sister and her attorney used to describe James as a good mother—her competence and smarts—to instead add to her culpability and confirm that she was a bad mother.
Women who were in some way negligent or inattentive to their children were easily subsumed into the camp of bad motherhood such as Carlotta Brett-Pierce. Media coverage of women such as Brett-Pierce repeatedly stressed and emphasized ways in which they were bad mothers in order to build the narratives of the cases and the stressing of particular details, such as the condition of Brett-Pierce’s daughter when Marchella died, helped to illustrate that the quality of mothering was consistent over time. In her description of the stereotype of mother, Lloyd states: “It’s natural for a women to be good at caring; they are designed for motherhood – it comes naturally to them. So when a woman is a bad mother she is being perverse, unnatural, defying her own instincts: truly wicked” (1994: 47). Lloyd’s description of motherhood, along with the views on motherhood held by largely society, conflate womanhood and motherhood. Even more so, these views on motherhood imply that good motherhood is innate to being a woman. As such, bad motherhood is a gendered construct which identifies the ways in which a mother has not lived up to good womanhood and is a needed construct to have given the innate nature of good motherhood with womanhood.

*Unfit to Mother*

According to an agency report, her mother had a history of drug abuse and seemed incapable of taking care of Marchella. She told investigators that she had tied Marchella to a bed at night to keep her from taking food out of the refrigerator and making a mess. (Associated Press 2010f: lines 29-32).

This opening quote describes Carlotta Brett-Pierce and the way that she treated her daughter, Marchella. MyFOXNY.com further relates that “The skeletal and battered little girl died in September 2010, after enduring a living hell in which she was denied food and strapped with jump-ropes to her tiny SpongeBob bed” (n.d., lines 16-17). The descriptions of the actions
of Brett-Pierce, such as tying up her daughter at night to prevent her from getting in the refrigerator, illustrate that she was unfit to mother Marchella. Additionally, the very specific details included such as being tied with jump ropes and the SpongeBob bed are images that are associated with a happy childhood, not one filled with abuse. As such, these details further move Brett-Pierce into the bad mother camp as items that should be associated with happy memories are instead used as devices of abuse and can further foster a greater emotional response by those reading the story.

The portrayal of Carlotta Brett-Pierce as unfit to mother is further compounded by Marchella’s history of hospitalization and need for extra medical care, such as her need for an oxygen tank. As NBCNewYork.com describes “The girl, who had been born prematurely and with lung problems, had a breathing tube installed. No one... made special notice of Marchella’s medical problems and whether her mother was capable of handling them” (2011b, lines 17-22). Although some responsibility is passed off on to child welfare agencies and other social services that had interactions with Marchella and Carlotta Brett-Pierce, it is still established that it was questionable if Carlotta could successfully care for her daughter and the special needs of her daughter. Furthermore, as NBCNewYork.com relates “[Marchella] was hospitalized with a breathing tube problem seven months before she died. Brett-Pierce took her daughter home before she could be given further training by doctors” (2011b, lines 61-62). As such Brett-Pierce is portrayed as unfit to mother because of her own unusual actions, like tying her daughter up at night, and her lack of knowledge and ability to respond to her daughter’s special, medical needs.

Brandie Nelson failed to mother by not physically checking on her child. Nelson’s son Tanner was sleeping in a converted trailer in July of 2010. “Investigators say 20-year-old Brandie Nelson left her 16-month-old son in a hot trailer and did not check on him for three
hours” (WKOW.com 2010d, lines 3-4). WKOW.com further relates that “Investigators also say Nelson gave contradicting stories through the course of the day” (2010c, lines 22-23) and the Assistant District Attorney was quoted as saying “‘It’s our position that she put the child in the trailer and did not check on him again’” (2010c, lines 31-32). These quotes illustrate the version of events according to police and the assistant district attorney and portray Nelson as an inattentive mother. However, Nelson’s lawyer argued that Nelson did check on her child. Nelson’s lawyer stated in court: “‘She thought she saw her sleeping child. What she knows is she probably saw her dead child. That’s an image that’s never going to be erased’” (Mitri 2011, lines 20-21).

Beyond the actions that day, Nelson was portrayed as unfit to mother through descriptions of her as unprepared to mother. The judge presiding over Nelson’s case was quoted as saying “‘Certainly emotionally- and maturing-wise, you were not prepared to deal with that… ‘You must place the needs of your child as the top priority at all times’’” (Mitri 2011, lines 24-25). Mitri further relates that the judge “says Nelson was too young to have a child” (2011, line 23). Nelson’s youth is a primary concern because it signals that she had a reduced capacity to mother as she was not mature enough for the responsibility. Further, since she was too young to have a child and irresponsible for doing so, she was framed as already on the path to bad motherhood for those very reasons.

Tracy Wright was portrayed as unfit to mother because she failed to provide her child with necessary medical care. As WOWKTV.com reported, “Wright is accused of failing to take her daughter to the doctor. Wright allegedly did not fill her daughter’s prescriptions, although she did fill ones for herself” (2011a, lines 18-19). It was further reported that:
Ashley Wright suffered from cystic fibrosis. To monitor the disease, doctors say Ashley should have been seen every three months, but the criminal complaint indicates she missed several appointments. Plus, the build-up (sic) of fluid found in the lungs during the autopsy indicated Ashley was not getting the proper medication (WOWKTV.com 2011b, lines 5-8).

Additionally, Troy Morgan from WCHSTV.com reported that

Tracy Wright of Hurricane is accused of child neglect causing death by refusing to give her 3 year old daughter proper medical care. Detectives say Wright’s daughter suffered from Cystic Fibrosis and that the child had missed most of her doctor appointments. They also say they found prescriptions that were expired, unopened and unfilled (Morgan 2011, lines 3-6).

Wright, as the child’s mother, is expected to get the necessary medical care for her child. This is especially true given that her daughter had cystic fibrosis and required frequent and routine medical care to ensure a better quality of life.

However, Wright failed to live up to that expectation by not taking her daughter to those doctor’s appointments and otherwise not providing needed medical care. Compounding all of this, as quoted above from WOWKTV.com (2011a), was that Wright did fill prescriptions for herself during this time. As such, Wright is framed in such a way to demonstrate she knew that her daughter needed this medical care and was capable of responding to her own health needs but that she did not do so for her own daughter. As Wright knew of her daughter’s disease and still did not appropriately respond to those needs, she is portrayed as unfit to mother.
As a final example of this theme, Ashley Williams’ son died as a result of starvation. In some of the stories it was reported that Williams’ son suffered from “a genetic disorder. It looks like starvation and causes the child to ‘fail to thrive.’” (Geller 2012a, line 17). Importantly, the suggestion that Williams’ son died because of a genetic disorder was put forth by her family after Williams had entered a guilty “plea to involuntary manslaughter and felony child neglect charges” (Geller 2012a, lines 15-16). Given this conflicting evidence of her own admission of guilt through entering the plea and her family’s argument of a genetic disorder, it is unclear if Williams was responsible for the death or if it was the result of the genetic condition. Regardless, Williams is inadequate in her mothering because she did not prevent the starvation death of her son. The inadequacy of Williams is further compounded by reports of her engagement in other criminal activity. As the Associated Press reported, “Williams pleaded guilty Tuesday in Richmond Circuit Court to possession of cocaine with intent to distribute” (2012, lines 4-5). Further details about Williams’ drug charges are not reported, however through this one association with further criminal activity is evidence that Williams is a bad woman in other ways which only adds to the view of her as a bad mother.

The four mothers who were portrayed as unfit to mother all represent vastly different reasons why they were unfit to mother. Both Brett-Pierce and Wright failed to respond to their children’s medical needs while Nelson was unfit to mother for emotion-based reasons. Lastly, Williams is portrayed as unfit to mother not only for not preventing the starvation of her son but also because of her connection with other criminal activities. Yet, in all of these cases, the mothers were presented as failing to respond to the needs of their children because of a deficiency, real or imagined, that they embodied. Interestingly, out of all four of the mothers,
only Nelson was portrayed in such a way as to suggest that she could overcome this deficiency in some way.

Although these mothers were portrayed as unfit to mother for different reasons, the theme of being unfit to mother builds into bad motherhood because it suggests that some women were never meant to become mothers, despite the naturalization of motherhood. Researchers such as Roberts (1993) have suggested, within society there is compulsory motherhood. In other words, a woman is meant to be a mother and all women are defined as mothers or potential mothers. Thus, by being portrayed as unfit to mother, these women not only are thought of as bad mothers but also as bad women because they could not fulfill what was naturally expected of them as women (Harris 1995). The portrayal of these women as unfit to mother challenges this essential view of motherhood and the simplification that being biologically able to bear children means that one is suited for motherhood. At the same time, because motherhood and mothering are treated as a natural part of being a woman, portraying these women as unfit to mother also fundamentally challenges their femininity. If the logic suggests that all women are meant to be mothers, and these women are unsuitable to be mothers, then their very womanhood has been found to be lacking.

Inadequate at Mothering

Prosecutors say 35-year-old Michelle Lepkowski was jobless, frustrated and unable to cope with the difficulties of being a single mother fatally beat Raelynn Mascal in May 2007 (MyFOXBoston.com 2010a, lines 5-7).

This quote describes Michelle Lepkowski, a mother from Gardner, Massachusetts, who beat her daughter, Raelynn Mascal, to death in 2007. Lepkowski was portrayed in this quote as
overwhelmed with the problems in her life and unable to cope with being a single mother. Lepkowski is portrayed as being inadequate at mothering because of the problems that she faced (i.e. unemployment, frustration), that reporters link to her actions and ultimately the death of her daughter. As such, there is a presumption that if Lepkowski was not jobless, frustrated, or was better able to handle being a single mother, then Raelynn would not have been fatally beaten that day.

Lepkowski was further described as having “become increasingly depressed in recent months. ‘She lost her job. She lost her boyfriend,’ Moulton [a friend of Raelynn’s father] said. ‘She was a very sad person’” (WDHD.com 2007b, lines 19-20). WDHD.com further relates that social workers had visited Lepkowski after “the agency received a report of suspected abuse” (2007b, line 5). As a result, the social workers had drafted “a safety plan for Mascal that barred Malizia [Lepkowski’s boyfriend at the time], who was on probation for an assault and battery conviction, from unsupervised contact with the girl, the newspaper reported” (2007b, lines 14-15). The article further stated that “Social workers also determined that Mascal would live with Lepkowski’s mother” (2007b, lines 15-16). Neither of these recommendations were followed by Lepkowski as the child was living with Lepkowski at the time of her death and “Lepkowski’s lawyer said his client’s former boyfriend was alone with the child for three hours before she was taken to the hospital” (WHDH.com 2010, lines 9-10). Overall, Lepkowski is portrayed as unable to handle the problems in her life as well as not following through on protecting her daughter from potential harms.

Sheterra James is also portrayed as inadequate at mothering, albeit for vastly different reasons. Sheterra James never intended for her children to die. Sheterra and her sister Latisha James lived together in an apartment which had the electricity cut off after they failed to pay the
bill. As a result, “the James sisters had gone outside to charge their cellphone because their electricity had been shut off. The family were using the candles for lighting” (ABClocal.go.com/kgo 2011, lines 19-21). These two details were repeatedly used by reporters to provide context for the case and to explain the fire that ultimately cost four children their lives. Yet, while it is clear that James did not intend for the children to be harmed, portrayals of her emphasized her negligence and that she did not act in the manner of a good mother.

One way that clearly denoted that James failed to mother appropriately was in the descriptions of how she responded to seeing the apartment on fire. Reporters repeatedly stressed “that Latisha James went back into the apartment to try to save the children but suffered smoke inhalation and burns and retreated” (ABClocal.go.com/kgo, lines 26-27). These details position Latisha James as a good mother through her attempt to save the children as well as highlight that Sheterra did not make such an effort. Yet, what further relegated Sheterra James into the category of bad mother was the inference that she lied about her role in the crime. James “withheld the truth because she knew leaving her children alone with candles could be dangerous” (SanFrancisco.CBSlocal.com 2011c, lines 77-78). Thus, not only did James lie to police authorities but she was also cognitively aware of the fact that her decision to leave her children alone with candles lit could result in tragedy; yet, she chose to act the way she did despite this knowledge.

Furthermore, James’ attorney stated that: “‘You really have to believe that Sheterra James was a monster in order to convict her of murder’” (SanFrancisco.CBSlocal.com 2011c, lines 43-46). This quote does not establish James as a good mother but clearly attempts to pull her out of the bad mother camp. The use of the word “monster” in particular demonstrates that James is not as bad as she might seem. While the attorney does not frame James as a good
mother, the apparent dichotomous relationship between good mother and bad mother would thus suggest that James should be viewed as a good mother since she is clearly not a “monster” or bad mother. Additionally, James is described in her sister’s testimony as “smart and a good mother” (SanFrancisco.CBSlocal.com 2011c, line 27) and her attorney “reminded the jury of the defendants’ experience caring for younger children while growing up in her grandmother’s home, parenting classes she had taken and her experience working as a homeless shelter manager” (SanFrancisco.CBSlocal.com 2011c, lines 27-30). As such, James’ attorney attempted to describe James as prepared to be a good mother but because James “has a below-average IQ and suffers from cognitive disabilities that make it difficult for her to multi-task and to respond during emergency situations” (KTVU.com 2011c, lines 15-16), she is portrayed as being inadequate at mothering. It is interesting as well that Lawson’s attorney portrays her as having a low IQ and cognitive disabilities while her sister describes her as smart. This could be two different sides of the same defense as both suggest that Lawson did not intend for the children to be harmed. Legally, this could be achieved through the indication that Lawson suffered from a disorder or disability that impaired her response while her sister attempted to defend her sister in a more positive light while making clear that the consequences of her actions were unintended.

Latisha Lawson was portrayed as inadequate at mothering because of her discipline practices. Although the manner and method of disciplining one’s child can be contested terrain, descriptions of Lawson’s discipline practices frame her as going “beyond acceptable discipline” (Sarvay and Trent 2011, lines 31-2). One often stressed detail that illustrates this is that Lawson attempted to exorcise her son and the other children in the household. As Mespell reports, “the boy’s mother, 31 year old Latisha Lawson, poured vinegar and olive oil down his throat leading to his death in November of 2009. The women said they were performing an exorcism” (lines
As described above, Sarvay (2010b) also reported details about Lawson beating her daughter with a pink belt and extension cord which left visible marks on the child. Altogether, Lawson is portrayed as disciplining her children too severely, at least according to the reporters, which is evidence itself that she was unable to handle disciplining her children. However, when this is coupled with descriptions that Lawson “told police she was tired of Jeziah’s temper tantrums” (Sarvay 2010b, line 16), it becomes even clearer that she was inadequately able to handle the stresses of mothering.

Rosondra Marie Clay, although only discussed in one story, was portrayed as inadequate at mothering, too. Clay’s son, Kevin Baldwin, “had severe spastic cerebral palsy and he has no muscular control” (Associated Press 2011, lines 36-37). Because of his illness, “It was difficult to feed the child because he had no control over his tongue” (Associated Press 2011, lines 37-38). Although this was a situation beyond Clay’s control, she is portrayed as inadequate at mothering because she was “accused of neglecting and starving her disabled son” (Associated Press 2011, lines 1-2) and her son was described as “weigh[ing] just 15 pounds when he died from severe malnutrition at the age of 5” (Associated Press 2011, lines 14-15).

Although Clay was not blamed for the death of her son, she was still convicted in relation to the death of her son. Yet, as her attorney said, “‘It’s one of those cases, there was strong evidence she wasn’t guilty of anything’” (Associated Press 2011, lines 16-19), the overall story still makes it clear that it was due to Clay’s inability to respond to the special needs of her son and provide him with adequate nutrition that he died. Clay’s son might have required additional care and patience because of his medical attention, but there is still the expectation that Clay could have handled those needs of her child if she was a better mother.
Yet, the fact that all of these actions are subsumed under the heading of inadequate at mothering indicates how motherhood is gendered. Women are still expected to be natural nurturers and to be born mothers. As such, there is the assumption of an innate ability to know of and almost predict the needs of one’s family immediately and to do so in ways that are for the best of their children. The mothers of Lepkowski, James, Lawson, and Clay were portrayed as inadequate at mothering for not responding to situations or needs in the appropriate way.

_Evoking of Good Motherhood_

“A mother holds your hand when you’re going through the worst times of your life, and she was completely alone,” Raynes [the prosecutor] says (WSAZ.com News Staff 2012: line 26).

This opening quote comes from a story about Tracy Wright. Wright’s three-year-old daughter, Ashley, died as a result of not getting the necessary treatment and medical attention for her cystic fibrosis. Although Raynes, the prosecutor, does not directly state that Wright was a horrible mother, the inference is there that Wright failed to live up to her obligations as a mother and so let her child suffer and ultimately die. Wright’s divergence from good motherhood is further highlighted in stories that stress the helplessness of her sick daughter. The Putnam County Sheriff spoke about the Wright case and said “‘A three-year-old child is helpless…They have to be cared for, especially if they have a special need like this child had’” (WSAZ.com News Staff, lines 84-85). By discussing the victim and emphasizing how helpless she was, quotes such as these put Wright even more into the bad mother camp. As the Sheriff describes, the child has a special need and in this particular case that special need was the child’s cystic fibrosis which required that the child receive routine medical care. Amber Bernard, a worker
with a child’s service agency, described Ashley and Tracy’s living conditions as: “The house was dirty. The floor was so dirty, Ashley’s feet were black. There was a dog in the house, so there was a dog odor” (WSAZ.com News Staff, line 59). Altogether, these quotes establish what a good mother would do: be there for one’s child, care for that child, and providing a clean home.

Sheterra James was described to be “‘the best mother she knew how to be’” by her attorney (SanFrancisco.CBSLocal.com 2011b, lines 19-21). This phrasing is particularly interesting because it sets Lawson up in such a way that it is clear that she has failed to be a good mother but still recognizes that she made an attempt at good mothering. Furthermore, this clearly establishes that Lawson was not a bad mother. Circumstances might have prevented her from achieving the status of a good mother but that has not cast her into the realm of bad motherhood either as she was attempting to fulfill the role to the best of her ability. As previously discussed, James was also described as a good mother by her sister and described by her attorney as having “experience caring for younger children while growing up in her grandmother’s home, parenting classes she had taken and her experience working as a homeless shelter manager” (SanFrancisco.CBSLocal.com 2011c, lines 28-30). However, while good motherhood is evoked and reporters detail specific ways in which James could be understood as a good mother, she is not portrayed as a good mother. Given that she was responsible for the death of four children and put those children in danger despite all of the details provided by her attorney, the attempts to minimize her bad motherhood is not effective.

Brandie Nelson provides another example of how good motherhood was evoked in comparison to her behaviors. As Mitri reports, the judge was quoted as saying “‘Certainly emotionally- and maturity-wise, you were not prepared to deal with that,’ Evenson said. ‘You
must place the needs of your child as the top priority at all times’” (2011, lines 24-25). The last part of this quote regarding the requirement for mothers to always place the needs of their children as the top priority clearly outlines what a good mother is expected to do. This view that mothers need to always put the needs of others, particular their children, first and foremost plays into the idealized good mother and the endlessly giving and self-sacrificing expectation associated with the idealized concept.

*Gendering and Racialization of Types of Mothering*

These eight cases of maternal filicide demonstrate and build upon the constructions of good and mothering. While these categories are not new when it comes to understanding the construction of motherhood, what this research more clearly establishes is that there are different types of good and mothering and that these different types are gendered. Throughout this chapter, I detailed the numerous ways in which maternal filicidal offenders were portrayed as good or bad mothers. In this next section I more fully address the ways in which good, bad, and mad mothering are gendered and racialized.

Not only were ideas about the role of mother identified and described within the news stories, the concept of good mothering was also reinforced. Even though good mothering has been considered to be only attainable for white mothers and not black mothers (Collins 2009; Fumia 1999; Glenn 1994), the concept is still grounded in understandings of femininity. Importantly, none of the women detailed in this chapter are portrayed as being appropriately feminine, the ways in which they did not meet the expectations of dominant femininity were included in their media portrayals. Much like Ann Lloyd argues, criminal offenders have failed to be appropriately feminine and this failure leads to women being considered “doubly deviant”
as they have not only transgressed the laws of the land but also the laws of nature through their transgressions of the dictates of womanhood. As such, none of the women can truly be described as good mothers because a good mother would never allow herself or her child to be put into a situation where the life of the child is in jeopardy.

As the theme of evoking of good mothering demonstrated, the mothers detailed in this chapter were not thought of as good mothers themselves. Although it was suggested that some of the mothers could have been thought of as good mothers and have their crimes minimized in some way, this was not found in this research. Although others, such as Cavaglion (2008) and Huckerby (2003) both found evidence of filicidal mothers being portrayed as good mothers, none of the mothers discussed here were framed in such a way. Instead, good motherhood was mentioned in these stories as a foil to the behaviors that these women embodied. As the discussion of Wright, James, and Nelson displayed, very specific details could be used to illustrate, through contrast, what a good mother would do. Given the work of Collins (2009) and her analysis of the stereotypes of good and bad black motherhood, it was unsurprising that black women were not typically portrayed in a way to suggest that they could be good mothers.

However, it was more surprising that the good motherhood of white mothers was less strongly evoked by reporters than it was, again given the work of Cavaglion (2008) and Huckerby (2003). Although killing one’s own child is not usually evidence of good mothering, there are instances in which the mother has thought her actions were the best options for her children (i.e. Andrea Yates, Margaret Gardner). As such, some women can still be thought of as good mothers despite being responsible for the death of their children because the real or imagined alternative was thought to be much worse. As Huckerby (2003) did in fact focus on the cases of Andrea Yates and Khoura Her, the portrayals of Yates in a more positive light in
comparison to Her were likely the result of the numerous differences between the two cases rather than evidence of profound racial differences in the portrayals. However, the lack of continued support for more sympathetic portrayals of white mothers as found by Cavaglion (2008) and Huckerby (2003) is likely due to the cases that I focused on and the fact that all of the white mothers were portrayed as fully responsible for their actions with no mitigating factors (i.e. mental illness) to diminish that responsibility.

Much like the concept of good mothering, bad mothering is evident in the news stories relating the crimes of these women. The claim that a mother was bad was made less overtly but much more frequently in these stories. Again, it is unsurprising that maternal filicidal offenders were presented as bad mothers. The fact that they are at least partially responsible for the death of their children puts all of the mothers within the confines of bad motherhood.

Bad motherhood is also a racialized construct. In this project, there were more stories found about black mothers who committed filicide than there were about white mothers. There were 135 stories about the five black mothers, average 27 stories per mother, and 27 stories about white mothers, averaging 9 stories per mother. This disparity indicates that was more attention given to the cases involving black mothers than white mothers. Although race may have been a factor in the amount or extent of media coverage, the great disparity found here is much more likely the result of the cases that I used as the cases about the black mothers included details about an exorcism (Latisha Lawson), four children burning to death (Sheterra James), and to illustrate the problematic handling of cases by child protective services (Carlotta Brett-Pierce) while the cases about the white mothers were much less sensational. Tables 4.2 and 4.3 further illustrate differences between the media coverage of the cases. Within the body of the stories only, excluding the headlines, black mothers were more commonly directly referenced as the
mother of their victim (80.0%) than were white mothers (44.4%). Importantly, this pattern was reversed in terms of looking exclusively at the headlines with 45.1% of headlines directly establishing black mothers as mother and 55.6% of headlines directly establishing white mothers as mother. This disparity could exist for a number of reasons, including differences in how headlines and stories are written. However, it is interesting to note that such a high percentage (80.0%) of the stories involving black mothers clearly and directly established them as the mother of their victim.

Beyond the direct identification of women as mothers of their victims within the headlines or bodies of stories, bad motherhood was clearly racialized given the ways that bad motherhood was constructed in relation to the cases. However, as the themes of the demonization of mothering, unfit to mother, and inadequate at mothering all suggest, bad motherhood was more strongly evoked for black mothers than white mothers through more explicit detailing of the ways in which they were bad mothers. Carlotta Brett-Pierce, Latisha Lawson, and Sheterra James were discussed in more themes than the other mothers. While this was due, in part, to the greater number of stories available about these particular mothers, more explicit and detailed information was reported within the stories about these mothers, too. Again, it is not within the scope of this project to determine why such disparate coverage was given, but it is worth noting that there were clear differences in terms of both the quantity and quality of coverage by race of the offender.

Conclusion

The overarching concepts of good and bad mothering are ones to which mothers are continually compared. Motherhood is a racialized and gendered construct. The descriptions,
quotes, and terms used to understand maternal filicidal offenders make it clear how the construct of motherhood overall is racialized and how this racialization positions black mothers closer to bad motherhood than white mothers, despite being charged with similar crimes. Entangled with racialization of motherhood is the gendering of motherhood. Motherhood is gendered through the constructs of good, bad, and mad mothering. This gendering occurs specifically through descriptions and details about the ways that women “do” femininity, in appropriate or inappropriate ways.

In this chapter I discussed several themes of mothering which were racialized and gendered in particular ways. Overall, the black mothers were more strongly portrayed as bad mothers than were the white mothers as more extensive and evocative details were provided about the black mothers than were provided about the white mothers. While these disparities may be the result of differences in news coverage or because some crimes were more sensational than others, it is still important to note. Furthermore, through descriptions of these women as mothers, motherhood continues to be thought of as a natural part of womanhood and this is true regardless of race. Nonetheless, femininity and being appropriately feminine (i.e. not violent, nurturing) towards one child was stressed more heavily in stories about white mothers than black mothers. As black women are first and foremost black and secondarily women, it is not surprising that femininity was stressed to a lesser degree in their portrayals.

All in all, these cases of maternal filicidal offenders flesh out greatly the myriad ways that a woman can be a bad mother. Although bad motherhood is more clearly described through these cases, much is learned about good motherhood as a contrast or foil to bad motherhood. Individual mothers can be interpreted by reporters, or others, as being the embodiment of good, bad, or mad mothering because individuals can, to some extent, have different expectations
associated with these categories. Furthermore, as more or less explicit detail is provided, a reported fact can support one category or another and then be manipulated to support another. As detailed above, Sheterra James was described by her attorney as a good mother who had “experience caring for younger children while growing up in her grandmother’s home, parenting classes she had taken and her experience as a homeless shelter manager” (SanFrancisco.CBSLocal.com 2011c, lines 28-30). Yet, those very details were also used against her by the prosecution who said “James knew better than to leave her children alone” (SanFrancisco.CBSLocal.com 2011c, lines 33-4). This fluidity and ability to fall from grace, rise above demonization, or move between the categories of sane and insane is entirely accomplished through news stories. Some mothers were most consistently thought of as bad (i.e. Michelle Lepkowski, Carlotta Brett-Pierce), yet others vacillated between these categories (i.e. Latisha Lawson, Sheterra James, Tracy Wright). Boundaries around motherhood still exist and are used to distinguish between good and bad mothering and limit the ways in which racialized and gendered actors can be understood.
Table 4.1 Original Charges, Sentenced Charges, and Sentencing Outcomes for Maternal Offenders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Original Charge</th>
<th>Sentenced Charge</th>
<th>Sentencing Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Moms</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlotta Brett-Pierce</td>
<td>Murder, manslaughter, assault, endangering the welfare of a child, and drug possession</td>
<td>Murder and assault</td>
<td>Incarceration; 32 years to life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosondra Marie Clay</td>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>Involuntary manslaughter</td>
<td>Incarceration; 11 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheterra James</td>
<td>Second degree murder, involuntary manslaughter, and child endangerment</td>
<td>Involuntary manslaughter (4 charges) and child neglect (4 charges)</td>
<td>Felony probation; 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latisha Lawson</td>
<td>Unidentified.</td>
<td>Murder, battery causing death, neglect of a dependent resulting in death, neglect of a dependent resulting in bodily injury, neglect of a dependent with the dependent put in a situation endangering the dependent’s life, and battery resulting in bodily injury</td>
<td>Incarceration; 62 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley C. Williams</td>
<td>Murder and child neglect.</td>
<td>Child abuse and involuntary manslaughter</td>
<td>Unidentified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Moms</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Lepkowski</td>
<td>Assault and battery on a child, reckless endangerment, and murder.</td>
<td>Involuntary manslaughter</td>
<td>Unidentified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandie L. Nelson</td>
<td>Child neglect resulting in death.</td>
<td>Felony child neglect.</td>
<td>Incarceration; 10 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy Wright</td>
<td>Unidentified.</td>
<td>Murder of a child by a parent and child neglect resulting in death.</td>
<td>Incarceration: Life with mercy plus 3 to 5 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 4.2  Headline and Story Distribution of Direct and Indirect Parental References, Black Mothers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Carlotta Brett-Pierce</th>
<th>Rosondra Clay</th>
<th>Sheterra James</th>
<th>Latisha Lawson</th>
<th>Ashley Williams</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Stories</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headlines directly reference offender as parent</td>
<td>15 (35.7%)</td>
<td>1 (100.0%)</td>
<td>22 (62.9%)</td>
<td>13 (30.2%)</td>
<td>10 (66.7%)</td>
<td>61 (45.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headlines indirectly reference offender as parent</td>
<td>3 (7.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.9%)</td>
<td>2 (4.7%)</td>
<td>1 (13.3%)</td>
<td>7 (5.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headlines do not establish parental relationship</td>
<td>24 (57.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>12 (34.3%)</td>
<td>28 (65.1%)</td>
<td>3 (2.0%)</td>
<td>67 (49.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-headlines directly reference offender as parent</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-headlines indirectly reference offender as parent</td>
<td>1 (2.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (1.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-headlines do not establish parental relationship</td>
<td>8 (19.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.9%)</td>
<td>8 (18.6%)</td>
<td>1 (6.7%)</td>
<td>18 (13.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Sub-headline</td>
<td>33 (78.6%)</td>
<td>1 (100.0%)</td>
<td>34 (97.1%)</td>
<td>34 (79.1%)</td>
<td>13 (93.3%)</td>
<td>115 (85.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories directly reference offender as parent</td>
<td>40 (95.2%)</td>
<td>1 (100.0%)</td>
<td>30 (85.7%)</td>
<td>27 (62.8%)</td>
<td>10 (73.3%)</td>
<td>108 (80.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories indirectly reference offender as parent</td>
<td>1 (2.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>5 (14.3%)</td>
<td>16 (37.2%)</td>
<td>4 (26.7%)</td>
<td>26 (19.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories do not establish parental relationship</td>
<td>1 (2.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (0.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.3  Headline and Story Distribution of Direct and Indirect Parental References, White Mothers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Michelle Lepkowski</th>
<th>Brandie Nelson</th>
<th>Tracy Wright</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Stories</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Headlines directly</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reference offender as parent</td>
<td>2 (25.0%)</td>
<td>8 (80.0%)</td>
<td>5 (55.6%)</td>
<td>15 (55.6%)</td>
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CHAPTER 5: RACIALIZATION AND GENDERING OF FATHERHOOD

While mothering has been conceptualized as a natural part to being a woman, fatherhood has been postulated as something that is learned (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin 2005). This may seem like a minor difference, but the conceptualization that fatherhood as a learned behavior instead of a naturalized part of manhood hints at the gendered nature of fatherhood. The gendering of fatherhood is an issue that is in need of continued exploration and is a focus of this chapter. Through media portrayals of filicidal fathers, I illustrate how fatherhood is racialized and gendered in specific ways and further how fatherhood is continually compared to and found to be lacking in comparison with motherhood.

The themes that I discuss in this chapter are the minimization of the fathering role, father as caretaker, demonized fatherhood, and the importance of mothering. For this first theme I discuss the ways in which the role of father was not a focal point in the media portrayals of the men and how that is reflective of fatherhood as being devalued in comparison to motherhood. The next theme, father as caretaker, I continue to stress how fatherhood is compared to motherhood and when fathers take on caretaking roles how this is not treated as a natural part of the fathering role. The third theme, demonized fatherhood, I discuss the myriad ways that the fathers are portrayed as bad fathers. Finally, in the importance of mothering, I focus on how the mothers of the victimized children are emphasized and used to stress the value of mothering.

Within this chapter I address hypothesis three which postulates that unlike the cases of mothers who commit filicide, filicide committed by fathers will say less about the men as fathers and more about the men as masculine beings. Aggressive or violent behavior is more expected of men (Adler 1975; Thornton, Graham-Kevan, and Archer 2010), yet the killing of one’s child
is still considered to be unacceptable behavior. Given that violence is thought of as a masculine behavior, filicidal acts committed by fathers will be more informative on them as men than as fathers. In comparison to mothering, fathering is still not defined by a close and nurturing bond to a child (Gavanas 2004; Gillis 2000). Instead, fathering is still largely defined as an economic-based relationship in which the father must provide food, shelter, and other basic needs for his family. Since it is the presumed bond between parent and child that makes filicide so difficult to understand, fathers who commit filicide will not be as strongly and directly construed as bad fathers; rather the portrayals of their crimes will be used to inform on their masculinity. This is so, I argue, because fatherhood as a social status is continually devalued and the true mark of a man is not his ability to parent but in his ability to measure up in regards to being appropriate masculine. This is contrary to the experiences of women who are thought of much more in terms of their ability to mother and to mother properly.

As in this chapter I focus on fathers who have killed or been responsible for the deaths of their own children, part of the aim here is to identify bad fatherhood as a meaningful category in its own right and not just as the opposite of good fatherhood. Yet, the crimes and the media representations of these fathers are also informative on good fatherhood, although to a lesser degree. For the most part, the fathers that I describe in this chapter are not viewed by others as good fathers. However, the stories about these fathers do give indications of what is expected of good fatherhood in both overt and covert ways, mainly by constructing good fatherhood as the opposite of bad fatherhood.
The Cases

The news stories that detail the acts of filicide of nine fathers, four black and five white, serve as the data source for this chapter. To help place all of the themes that emerged from the stories within the context of the case, in the following section I provide a brief description of each case. In all there were nineteen stories that detailed the crimes of black fathers and sixty stories that detailed the crimes of white dads. Table A2 shows how the stories are distributed across the cases.

Black Dads

The four black dads who were covered in the news stories that serve as the data source for this chapter are Ryan Bennett, Thomas Brown, Tyrone Hamber, and Stephen Todd Nelson. In some cases, more details about the offender, victim, and the crime are known than are known in other cases. However, there was very limited coverage of each of the cases when compared with all other types of parents as there was an average of 4.8 stories per black father compared with an average of 8.9 for all of the paternal offenders combined and an average of 14.9 cases for all of the twenty-five offenders discussed within this project.

Ryan Bennett (2007). In White Oak, Pennsylvania, Ryan Bennett had a thirteen month old son, Tymere Poth. In June 2007, Bennett was said to have been roughly playing with Tymere and squeezed the child between his arms. Tymere died later that day with nine broken ribs and a lacerated liver. Bennett pled guilty to involuntary manslaughter and child endangerment and was sentenced to one to three years for the death of his child.

News coverage of Bennett came from Pittsburgh-area local television affiliates. Three stories detailed the case of Bennett and I found all of these stories from the local NBC affiliate.
Thomas Brown (2010). Thomas Brown from Panama City, Florida, had a nineteen-month old son, Peyton, and a seven-month old daughter, both of whom he was accused of abusing. In August 2010, Brown called 911 and the responding paramedics found Peyton face down on a couch, cold and clammy to the touch. An autopsy revealed that Peyton’s liver had been cut in half by the abuse by his father and that he had suffered for at least an hour. Brown was found guilty of murdering his son although the exact sentence that he received was not mentioned in any of the stories that I found which discussed his case.

I found four stories that discussed the case of Thomas Brown. Three of those stories came from the local ABC affiliate at http://www.wmbb.com and the fourth story came from the joint site from local CBS and NBC affiliates at http://www.wjhg.com. Although there is a local FOX television affiliate in Panama City, there is no associated website so I could not search it for more stories.

Tyrone Hamber (2010). In Baltimore, Maryland, Tyrone Hamber was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for the death of his two-year old daughter, Melonie. Hamber called police after he claimed to have found his daughter unresponsive on the bathroom floor. He later admitted that he had beaten his daughter until she was unconscious with a leather belt after she had failed to listen to him and let dogs into the house. Hamber was originally charged with first degree murder, assault, and child abuse. He pled guilty to the charge of child abuse resulting in death and was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison.

Stephen Todd Nelson (2008). Also in Baltimore, Maryland, Stephen Todd Nelson threw his three-year-old son, Turner, off of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in February 2008. The body of the child was not found until five months after the crime. Nelson attempted to drink cleaning chemicals in a suicide attempt after throwing his son off the bridge. While Nelson did attempt to plead not criminally responsible, a plea similar to that of not guilty by reason of insanity, this did not succeed. Nelson pled guilty to second-degree murder and received a sentence with a maximum term of fifty years in prison.

I searched the websites of the local affiliates of Baltimore, Maryland, for stories about the case of Stephen Todd Nelson. In all, six stories came from these affiliates. One story came from the local ABC affiliate of http://www.abc2news.com, three stories came from the local CBS affiliate at http://baltimore.cbslocal.com, and two stories came from the FOX affiliate of http://www.foxbaltimore.com. Although the NBC affiliate at http://www.wbaltv.com was searched, no stories were found on this site about Nelson.

White Dads

The white fathers who are discussed in this chapter are Robert Babcock, Thomas Huge, Jonathan Katan, Steven Nicholson, and Jericho Wright. These fathers, too, were held
responsible for the deaths of their children. Beyond this similarity, the exact details of the cases do vary greatly across cases.

Robert Babcock (2011). Robert Babcock had a four-year-old son, Chance Jones, in Clarendon, Texas. A Child welfare agency had placed Chance with his father at the request of his mother, who was being investigated for abuse and neglect. Three weeks after being placed with his father, Chance died from severe head and torso trauma after suffering through what police believed to have been more than one beating. Babcock was charged with capital murder and domestic violence injury to a child. While the death penalty could have been sought, Babcock was found guilty of murdering his son and was sentenced to the maximum sentence of life in prison.


Thomas Huge (2010). In Cincinnati, Ohio, Thomas Huge was accused of strangling to death his fifteen-month-old daughter Kayli Bates. In September of 2010, Huge was caring for Kayli and her two-year-old sister, Karli. Huge and his attorneys attempted to blame Karli for the death of her sister but Huge was found guilty of felony murder and child endangerment. Huge was sentenced to twenty-three years in prison and could have faced the death penalty.

I found ten stories on the websites of Cincinnati, Ohio, local television news affiliates about the case of Thomas Huge. Four stories were gathered from the local ABC affiliate website
of http://www.wcpo.com, three stories were collected from the local FOX affiliate of http://www.fox19.com, and the final three stories were gathered from the local NBC affiliate of http://www.wlwt.com. I also searched the local CBS affiliate of http://www.local12.com, however, no stories were found that discussed the case of Huge.

Jonathan Katan (2010). In Montgomery, Alabama, Jonathan Katan was arrested for capital murder in the death of his two-year-old son, Preston. Katan called 911 for his unresponsive son and told investigators that he had found Preston wedged between the mattress and the bumper guard. These claims were refuted by an autopsy which revealed that Preston died from multiple blunt force injuries to the head. Katan was convicted of murdering his son but the sentence that he received for his crime was not identified by the news reports on his case.

I collected eight stories from two local affiliate websites of Montgomery, Alabama. Two stories were found on the ABC affiliate site of http://www.wncftv.com and the remaining six stories were found on the local NBC affiliate site of http://www.wsfa.com. CBS and FOX affiliate sites of http://www.waka.com and http://www.wcov.com, respectively, were also searched but no stories about Katan were found on those sites.

Steven Nicholson (2010). Steven Nicholson had a thirteen-month-old son, Johnathan, and a fifteen-month-old daughter, Ella. In October 2010, Johnathan and Ella were found drowned and scalded in the bathtub in Nicholson’s apartment in Allen Park, Michigan. Nicholson claimed that the children climbed into the bathtub and turned on the water themselves while he was sleeping; however, the judge presiding over his case disagreed and instead found Nicholson guilty of second-degree murder in the death of Johnathan and first-degree murder in the death of Ella. The judge concluded that Nicholson accidentally drowned Johnathan and then intentionally
drowned Ella to cover up the death of his son. Nicholson was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

I found stories about Steven Nicholson on local television affiliate websites for the city of Detroit, Michigan. In all, there were sixteen stories about Nicholson that were found. Three stories were found on the website of http://www.wxyz.com, the local ABC affiliate. I found six stories were found on the local CBS affiliate website of http://detroit.cbslocal.com. The remaining seven stories were found on the FOX affiliate site of http://www.myfoxdetroit.com. I also searched the NBC affiliate website of http://www.clickondetroit.com but no stories about Nicholson were found on that site.

*Jericho Wright (2008).* From Dos Palos, California, Jericho Wright was the father of a three-year-old girl. Wright called 911 for help for his daughter after he found her unresponsive upon coming home from work. Police claimed that Wright was upset by his daughter’s behavior and threw her against the shower wall and then left her unattended for several hours while he delivered newspapers. Wright was originally arrested on neglect charges but was eventually charged with murder of the child. The sentence that Wright received was not reported in any of the stories about his case.

I found coverage of the case on the local affiliate sites for Fresno, California. In all, there were seven stories that discussed the case of Jericho Wright which I complied from three websites. Three stories were found on the local ABC affiliate website of http://abclocal.go.com/kfsn, three stories were found on the local FOX affiliate website of http://www.kmph.com, and one story was found on the local NBC affiliate site
of http://www.ksee24.com. I also searched the local CBS affiliate website of http://www.chbs47.tv but no stories about Wright were found on the site.

Themes

From the seventy-nine stories which discussed the cases of filicide perpetrated by these ten fathers several themes emerged. These themes highlight the ways in which good, bad, and mad fatherhood are constructed as well how these constructs are racialized and gendered. Some of the themes speak more directly to the gendering of these constructions of fatherhood while other themes speak more to the racialization of the constructs. The themes that emerged from this data are: the minimization of the fathering role, father as caretaker, the demonization of fatherhood, and the importance of mothering.

Minimization of the Fathering Role

1-Year-Old’s Suspected Killer in Court: 13-Month-Old Found Unresponsive in White Oak Home (WPXI.com 2007b)

The men that I focused on in this chapter were men who committed filicide. Although news media accounts do not label these murders as filicides, the stories do, for the most part, establish that these men were the fathers of their victim. Yet, the ways and extent to which parenthood was established for these fathers did differ greatly depending upon the race of the father and the specific details of the crime that were provided. As I discuss in more detail below, stereotypes about black men, particularly in regard to criminality, as well as the differing expectations associated with black and white fatherhood were evident in the ways these fathers were portrayed in the media. Taken together, these cases demonstrate how fatherhood is minimized for those men who do not fulfill the expectations of good fatherhood. The men that I
discuss in this section were relegated by reporters into positions of babysitter rather than father, demonstrating the continued view that fathers fill in, much like a babysitter, when a mother cannot satisfy all the demands in her life.

While the stories for the most part established that the killer was the father, it was less common for headlines to identify the offender as a father. Often, headlines would use generic terms such as man, killer, or use the name of the offender rather than terms such as dad or father. In all of the seventy-nine headlines, thirty-three of the stories had no parental identifier in the headline. Only two of the fathers were identified as the parent of their victim in all of the headlines about their case and those fathers were Thomas Huge and Tyrone Hamber. All of the other fathers were not identified as the father in at least one headline.

While not every headline about a filicide case needs to firmly establish the parental relationship between offender and victim, the frequency whereby headlines do not establish this relationship is notable and minimizes the importance of the fathering role in these cases. In all, there were sixty stories about the white fathers and nineteen stories about the black fathers. In regards to the headlines of these cases, twenty-seven (45.0%) of the headlines about white fathers and six (31.6%) of the headlines about the black fathers did not establish the men as father. Tables 5.2 and 5.3 show the distribution of stories and headlines in the establishment of the men as fathers directly, indirectly, or not at all. Direct identification was measured through the inclusion of the words dad or father while indirect identification was measured through the use of phrases such as his child, son or daughter.

The quote to open this section was a headline for one of the stories about Ryan Bennett. In June 2007, Bennett killed his son Tymere Poth. He was sentenced for his crime in August
2010. While the stories and headlines about his case provide details about the crime that Bennett committed, they also reinforce ideas about fatherhood generally and black fatherhood in particular. Furthermore, the emphasis on Bennett, as well as the other black fathers, as an offender continues to reinforce the stereotypical depictions of black men in the media as criminals. As Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton (2012) describe, black men are typically portrayed in the media within a narrow range of specific, negative contemporary stereotypes like criminal and irresponsible father. While these stories could have played into the irresponsible father stereotypes, the criminality of Bennett is emphasized much more. As such, he is thought of as less of as a father of his victim and instead just as a criminal.

Even within the body of the stories about Bennett and his offense, there is only one reference to the relationship between offender and victim. The only time that the relationship between Bennett and Poth is clearly established is in the following statement: “A Pittsburgh-area man has been sentenced to one to three years in prison in the death of his 13-month-old son three years ago” (WPXI.com 2010, lines 1-3). This description is notable not only because it does not directly call Bennett the father of the child but also because in no other way is Bennett directly established as the father of the child. In a second story, Bennett was described as “accused of killing his girlfriend’s baby” (WPXI.com 2007b, lines 2-3). This description, even more so than the previous description of Bennett, truly minimizes the fatherhood role. In this story, Bennett comes across as a temporary figure in the child’s life because of the relationship he has with the child’s mother is emphasized more strongly than the relationship he has with his son. The
identification of Bennett as the accused killer of his girlfriend’s baby demonstrates not only the
of fatherhood but even more clearly the minimization of black fatherhood. 1

The identification of the victim as the child of Bennett’s girlfriend gives no identification
 whatsoever that Bennett is the father of the child. While the child does not have the markers of
patriarchy as the victim does not bear his father’s last name, it is possible that Bennett really is
the father of the child despite the lack of solid evidence establishing this relationship. Bennett
and his actions are framed in such a way that Bennett does not seem to display any of the
characteristics, rights, or responsibilities associated with the fathering role. As Bennett has
perpetuated violence against his own child and he is not clearly established as the father of the
child, the characteristics, rights, and responsibilities of fatherhood are not heaped upon him,
either.

The descriptions of Bennett and his crime readily label him as the killer of his victim.
One headline describes Bennett as the “Man Charged with Killing White Oak Infant”
(WXPI.com 2007a) while another labels him “1-Year-Old’s Suspected Killer” (WXPI.com
2007). In WXPI.com (2007b), too, Bennett is twice described as having “allegedly” (line 1) or
having been “accused of” (line 2) killing the victim within the entire four line story. It is
undeniable that Bennett caused the death of the child and so calling him a “killer” is not an
inappropriate description. However, the fact that Bennett is more commonly referred to as
“killer” than “father” is evidence of the fact that his role as father has been superseded by his role
as killer.

1 As there are differing reports on whether or not Bennett was the father, the exact relationship between Bennett and
the child cannot be clearly determined from these news reports. However, the ambiguity to which this relationship
is reported does indicate that for reporters the story was not one of fatherhood but one about a black man hurting a
child.
Less common but still important, a few of the stories, written about these paternal filicidal offenders did not establish that there was a parent-child relationship between offender and victim. As mentioned above, two of the stories about Ryan Bennett did not establish that he was the father of his victim. The only other man also not identified as the father of the child in some of the stories written about their cases was Robert Babcock. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 show the distributions of all of the stories about each individual father and indicate whether they were directly, indirectly, or not identified as a father in headlines and stories.

It was in only one story that Robert Babcock was not established as the father of his child. Importantly, this story was a part of another later, updated story that did establish Babcock as the father of his son. In the original story from January 5th, 2011, Babcock was never identified as the father of his son. The only description of Babcock was that “38-year-old Robert Babcock of Claredon has been charged. A young boy was beaten Tuesday morning” (Nichols and Bennett 2011, lines 42-44). Notably, when the story was updated later the next day, Babcock was established as the father of the child.

The fatherhood role was also minimized in ways beyond the omission of the terms of dad and father or other such parental identifying term or phrase. As these men were responsible for the deaths of their children, it is not surprising that they were frequently labeled as killer or murderer. But, the labeling of the offender as murderer or killer overrides all other aspects of the offender. Through this labeling, the father becomes thought of as just a murder or just a killer. Thus, the role of father is entirely forgotten and the past fathering behaviors that they exhibited are minimized in light of the overarching label of killer. In two instances, the men were directly referenced as accused or suspected killers. In a story about Ryan Bennett the headline begins with “1-Year-Old’s Suspected Killer in Court” (WXPI.com 2007b). This headline does not
establish the relationship between parent and child because it stresses the role of the offender as killer. The other instance occurred in a story about Steven Nicholson where it is said that “The accused killer is their 27-year-old father” (MyFOXDetroit.com 2011b, lines 7-8). In this instance, Nicholson is referenced as both killer and father in the same line. As the use of the term killer becomes the dominant label for these offenders, the fact that they are the fathers of their victims becomes less important.

As these men are in the news for killing another, the fathers are thought of as first and foremost criminals. Although this is true for white and black fathers, the link between black men as criminals, particularly in regards to the criminality that typically makes the news, is much more firmly established in the public conscience than are views of white men as criminals. This reinforces ideas about black masculinity as violent and crime-prone and makes these black men into caricatures whose actions can only be understood under the one lens of black criminality. This also denies that other roles, such as being a father or an employee, could have some bearing on their actions.

And yet, the fact that these men were the fathers of the children positions them and their crimes differently than if the men were unrelated or a stranger to the child. Since the men were the fathers of the children, they were experiencing stresses related to parenting that could influence their crimes. For example, in the case of Jericho Wright, “Wright admitted to throwing the little girl into a cold shower as a discipline for wetting her pants” (KMPH.com n.d., lines 6-7). KSEE 24 News further elaborates that “he admitted that around 3:00 p.m. Sunday, his daughter wet her clothes for the second time. Frustrated, Jericho threw her into the shower, causing Liadan to hit her head” (2010, lines 14-15).
Tyrone Hamber also had this behavior explained as occurring because of stresses of parenting. Two of the six stories about Hamber explained why Hamber beat his daughter with a leather belt until she was unconscious. It was detailed that his daughter “misbehaved” (FOXBaltimore.com 2010a, line 5) and that “she didn’t listen to him when he told her not to let dogs in the house” (FOXBaltimore.com 2010c, line 4). While far from excusing Hamber’s actions, these details nonetheless provide a context for the beating. And that context is one of parenting.

The ability to subsume father under another label, like caretaker, demonstrates furthermore that fatherhood can be minimized. Unlike motherhood, the role of father is not so overarching that it is thought to be encompassed in everything that a man does. For example, popular phrases such as “working mom” and “military mom” exist to emphasize that a woman takes on the roles of worker and mother or soldier and mother while equal phrases for fathers either do not exist or are not as commonly invoked. However, just because society does not see fatherhood as an equally encompassing role as motherhood does not mean that parenting done by men is intrinsically less valuable because it is performed by a man rather than a woman. Although this chapter focuses more heavily on bad fatherhood than good fatherhood, good fatherhood is also minimized because it is not motherhood. Thus, regardless of whether the fathers embody good or bad fatherhood, fatherhood is minimized because gender expectations for men are not as deeply engrained in parenthood as they are for women.

Many of the stories about these fathers describe them in such ways as to suggest that they were merely babysitting their own children while the normal, primary caretaker (usually the mother) was unable to watch the child. As will be discussed later in this chapter, this framing of
the father more as a caretaker and less as a parent continues to reinforce how caretaking is still thought to fall more within the domain of mothering than fathering.

Thomas Huge serves as one of the clearest examples of a father who was described as only a temporary caretaker. Importantly, Huge is clearly established as the father to his daughter. In the headlines of seven of the ten stories about his case Huge is directly called father or dad and is established as a father either directly or indirectly in every story. However, while it would seem like such clear framing and labeling of Huge as a father would mean that his fatherhood is not being minimized, this is not the case. Although Huge is clearly and consistently portrayed and described as a father, his fatherhood is minimized because it is suggested that he does not truly embody the caretaking role of father.

Huge is presented more as a babysitter or temporary caretaker than a father. This is so because stories repeatedly stress the presence of two women in his life and their roles in taking care of Huge’s daughter. Firstly, the mother of the child is established as not being able to care for the child because she “served a prison term on drug charges” (WLWT.com 2012c, lines 13-14). The last section of the chapter will explore more in detail how these details demonize and blame the mother; but for this discussion the important point is that such details also establish that if the mother had not been incarcerated she would have been the primary caretaker. However, while the child’s mother was incarcerated, another woman, Tracy Armstrong, “testified that she cared for Kayli… but the child was returned to her father” (WLWT.com 2012c, lines 13-14). Prosecutors further minimized Huge’s fathering role by arguing that “Huge smothered the toddler because he thought she was not his biological daughter” (Kettler and Hensley 2012, lines 15-16). The argument that Huge’s action was influenced, at least in part, by his questioning of the paternity of the child also reinforces other ideas about fatherhood. This
emphasis placed on biological fatherhood reinforces the idea that only biological fathers have caretaking responsibilities and that if a man is not biologically the father of the child then he is excused from caretaking duties for the child. Huge is relegated to the position of babysitter, and a poor one at that. Other people had cared for the child, like her mother and Armstrong, and the child had apparently been fine. Yet, a couple of months with her father resulted in “torture” (WCPO.com 2010) and ultimately her death.

Robert Babcock was also described as though his caring for his child was meant to be only a temporary situation. Although having temporary custody is different than being a babysitter, it is still clear that Babcock was thought of as less than an ideal caretaker and only became the primary caretaker because the child’s mother was being investigated by child protective services. The explanation of why the child was placed with Babcock by child protective services illustrates how fatherhood is both valued and minimized by child protective services. The decision to place the child with his father was based on the fact that he had “no major red flags in his criminal record and discovering Babcock did not have a history with CPS” (Guilfoos 2011a, line 17). Thus, it is clear that CPS would prefer to place children with their parents rather than foster parents when there are “no major red flags” to indicate that the child should not be placed with their parent. As such, the organization is valuing both motherhood and fatherhood by attempting to keep families together.

The fact that the only real “tests” that the father had to pass were not having any major violations on his criminal record and not having a record with CPS suggest that there are very few requirements for a father to be thought of as an acceptable parent, echoing the findings of Dwyer (2008). Furthermore, the agency did not conduct child welfare checks on Chance Jones because he was placed with his biological father and the agency only conducts child welfare
checks if custody is granted to anyone besides a biological parent (Guilfoos 2011b). The agency privileges biological parenthood as if a biological relationship promises a particular level of care. As this biological relationship has an influence on the treatment by the child welfare agency, stories about Babcock often stress that he is the biological father of the child. Importantly, out of all of the fathers, only Babcock has his biological connection emphasized. In three different stories, Babcock is explicitly described as the biological father of the child (Bennett 2011; Guilfoos 2011c; Nichols and Bennett 2011). Overall, it is interesting that only Babcock has his biological fatherhood stressed. Again, this occurs because of the involvement of child protective services and is used to explain why the child was placed with Babcock rather than some other guardian. Given that none of the other fathers had their children placed with them by such an agency, an explanation for why the fathers were the (temporary) caretakers was not needed. However, beyond the logic of placing a child with his/her biological parent, the stressing of Babcock as the biological father of the child, not just as the father of the child, does raise interesting questions about what is expected of a biological parent.

A man may be a father but the extent to which he takes on that role and the extent to which society expects him to take on that role can differ. This differs not only from man to man but is also influenced by the race of the father. This theme illustrates some of the gendered nature of caretaking, but race influences those views, too. For example, on the one hand both Babcock and Huge, two white fathers, are framed as temporary caretakers rather than fathers but they are still referred to regularly as fathers. Yet, in the case of Ryan Bennett it is unclear what his relationship is to the child that he is caring for. As such, while Bennett is a temporary caretaker, just like Babcock and Huge, reporters do not stress the relationship between Bennett and his victim as strongly as they do with Babcock and Huge. This difference suggests that
reporters did not feel the need to firmly establish the relationship between Bennett and his victim because Bennett is first and foremost an offender and whether or not he is the father of the child is of less importance. While, with Babcock and Huge, reporters clearly establish the relationship of offender and victim as much as father and child.

Father as Caretaker

“I know I ain’t a perfect parent… but that’s one thing I wouldn’t do,” he said (Speigner 2011b line 16).

Changes in the conceptualization of fatherhood have led to the view that fatherhood can encapsulate caretaking roles, too. The view of father as caretaker has been, in some respects, glamorized by its association with good fatherhood. Good fatherhood does encompass caretaking responsibilities. So, when men do take care of their children that engagement portrays the men as good fathers. Yet, caretaking has been so highly gendered and thought to be natural for mothers, while almost unnatural for fathers to do, that it is difficult for men to be truly thought of as caretakers. However, when fathers do take on these caretaking roles and do not live up to the expectations of that role they can be cast as bad fathers.

The details about these cases also portrayed these fathers as though they were incapable of caretaking precisely because they are not mothers. Thus, it is not that men are actually incapable of caretaking but that they cannot “mother” as they are not women. The privileging of mothers as the best caretakers simultaneously reinforces ideas about mothers’ “natural” caretaking abilities and fathers’ incompetence. In some respects, the view that fathers are incapable of caretaking is a part of bad fatherhood. Furthermore, the two build upon one another as men who cannot take care of their children are bad fathers and bad fathers are conceptualized
as being incapable of caretaking (Parke and Brott 1999). The representation of fathers as incapable of caretaking invokes the image of fathers as “in reserve” to mothers, to use Davids’ phrase (1972). Caretaking and other day-to-day duties associated with parenting are equated with mothering; fathers are truly only expected to take on these roles if the mother is incapable of doing so for a particular reason that is deemed necessary.

Historically, and to a slightly lesser degree still today, custody of children has been awarded to mothers more than fathers (Dowd 1996). Research, such as that by Coles (2001), indicates that when men are the primary caregiver, they do take on the necessary parenting roles. Yet, even men who do take on the necessary parenting roles still view themselves as less able to parent than women. As one of Coles’ subjects states: “I guess I’m saying that some women I feel are built to be more nurturing, to be more sensitive, to be more loving to her children. Whereas as a man I felt like I was as nurturing and as loving as I felt I could be” (2001: 107). Beyond the fact that women are socialized to take on the role of mother earlier in life than men are (e.g. Coles 2001; Gillis 2000), the sanctity of motherhood is so pervasive that it affects the view of larger society and fathers themselves in thinking of fathers as less capable of parenting.

Thomas Brown and the quote from him at the beginning of this section illustrate that he is not thought of as a “perfect” parent, even by himself. Brown’s crime, furthermore, was thought to have occurred because “‘The child may have vomited on the living room furniture in the 24 hours preceding the child’s death and it’s possible that may have been what triggered this series of events,’ said Colbert (a deputy chief)” (Rakow 2010, lines 16-17). Prosecutors argued that “Brown was overwhelmed with his parental duties” (Speigner 2011b, line 9). This vague description of Brown as being overwhelmed by parental duties also hints that he was incapable of parenting. Although the exact defense strategy was not reported, Brown did testify on his own
Brown “took the stand in his defense, claiming he never laid a hand on his 19-month old son, Peyton Brown” (Speigner 2011b, line 2) and that “Brown believes Porchia (the child’s mother) caused the injuries, even though she claims she was at work at the time of death” (Speigner 2011b, line 17). As he was the primary caretaker of the child at the time of the crime, Brown would have been responsible for the day-to-day care of his son. Mothers are expected to be able to handle taking care of the day-to-day needs of their children; yet, when a father is the primary caretaker, like Brown, these responsibilities are so numerous and daunting that he can be understood to be “overwhelmed.”

Importantly, while the construction of father as caretaker and not as a parent does minimize the role of father, it is also speaks to motherhood. The positioning of father as caretaker reinforces the view that primary caretaking is done by mothers and the fact that fathers can be described as caretaker places actions such as watching one’s own child outside the normal realm of fathering. At the same time, mothers become a blameworthy object as they relinquished their natural and primary role of caretaker and further gave that great responsibility to someone unprepared for the task. I discuss the blame placed on mothers in more detail later in the chapter under the theme of the importance of motherhood, but the representation of fathers as caretaker is distinct from that discussion. This view of fathers’ caretaking positions the caretaking of fathers as a chore or additional burden rather than a natural part of fatherhood as the next paragraphs will illustrate. Given that the construction of fatherhood has changed to encompass more of a parenting and caretaking role (i.e. Gavanas 2004), news media portrayals might have been expected to reinforce this construction of “new” fatherhood. This is not what I found, however. Rather, it seems the view that caretaking is a feminized role is still pervasive
and that influences how men who take on caretaking roles, especially when they are unsuccessful in doing so, are viewed. The case of Steven Nicholson illustrates this point.

Descriptions of Steven Nicholson demonstrate the framing of caretaking of fathers as not a typical part of fatherhood and so unprepared for that role. Nicholson’s two children both drowned in the bathtub when they were under his watch. The death of the children was described in two vastly different ways with Nicholson’s lawyer arguing that “Steven Nicholson, fell asleep and the children made their way into the bathroom, turned the hot water on themselves and subsequently drowned” (Craig 2010, lines 17-19). However, WXYZ.com reported that “Nicholson was arrested and charged with placing the children in scalding hot water in a bathtub back in October of 2010. The children were found with severe head-to-toe burns by neighbors when water came flooding out of the apartment” (2011, lines 10-14). Although these stories suggest two different sequences of events, in both Nicholson is a bad caretaker albeit in different ways. Nicholson is portrayed as negligent for either not supervising the children or for placing the children in a bath that would be noticeably too hot. Regardless, the caretaking of Nicholson is portrayed as less than ideal as his caretaking actions resulted in the children being harmed.

Although, Nicholson was engaging in a common parenting practice, that of giving their children a bath, he came across as being a temporary caretaker instead of being regularly engaged in such caretaking tasks. But beyond the portrayal of Nicholson as a temporary caretaker, it is the negligence he displayed in relation to these caretaking duties that truly portrays him as bad father and as a father who was unable to provide basic care for his children. It is possible that all of the men I discuss did partake in the caretaking and nurturing of their
children that is called for in “new” fatherhood, but in these portrayals the emphasis is placed on their failure to properly take care of their children.

_Demonized Fatherhood_

The concept of bad fatherhood is one that is oft discussed but rarely thoroughly described. While bad fatherhood encompasses myriad ways in which men are viewed as not good fathers, the actions and behaviors of fathers themselves are seldom the focus. In this theme, demonized fatherhood, I focus on the ways in which the actions and characterizations of fathers leads to the view of men being bad fathers. As such, in the following sections, I detail three different labels that are applied to fathers that relegate the men to bad fatherhood.

The demonization of fatherhood has three sub-themes: father as criminal, father as mad, and father as heartless. In the first of these sub-themes I focus on the criminality of the fathers before they were charged with a crime or crimes associated with the death of their child. While in next sub-theme I highlight the construction of mad fatherhood with a brief comparison with mad motherhood. The final sub-theme, father as heartless, I focus on the violence exerted by these men towards their children and how that violence demonstrates a lack of care towards the children.

_Father as criminal._

He had an arrest history in Washington County for aggravated battery on a pregnant woman in 2008, but that charge was reduced to battery. In 2009, he spent three months in jail for another battery charge and in 2010, Brown was involved in a battery case that was dropped at the victim’s request. He now faces an aggravated child abuse charge and an open count of murder. (Rakow 2010, lines 23-26).
The above quote concludes a story about Thomas Brown and stresses the prior criminality of the father before the death of his son, Peyton. This story differs from the other three about Brown not only because it details Brown’s criminal history but also because it mentions that Brown abused not only Peyton but his daughter, also. Such emphasis on Brown’s prior criminal history, especially as it is unrelated to the case at hand, paints Brown as a violent figure, particularly as all of the charges that Brown faced were battery, or unlawful physical contact. As such, it seems almost as though another violent act by Brown was bound to happen; that is, his current act is, in part at least, explained by these prior acts.

Beyond stressing Brown’s violent past, other stories focused on Brown’s behavior in relation to the death of his child. In another story, Speigner reports that the prosecutor “urged jurors not to believe Brown because he lied 31 times in his statement to police. He (the prosecutor) impeached him (Brown) on the witness stand” (2011b, lines 12-13). Coupling together the facts that Brown repeatedly lied to police about the events of his crime and had a history of violence against other persons, including, notably, a pregnant woman, Brown is positioned first and foremost as a violent criminal.

Tyrone Hamber similarly had his prior criminal history emphasized in one of the stories about him. According to FOXBaltimore.com 2010a, “Court records show a restraining order was filed against Hamber in 2009, but the case was later dismissed by a judge due to lack of evidence” (lines 6-7). Like in the case of Brown, the stories also stress that Hamber was not entirely truthful with police regarding the death of his child. As WBALTV.com states: “Hamber initially told investigators he found the child unresponsive on the bathroom floor, but he later admitted to beating the girl unconscious with a leather belt before calling for help” (2012; lines
Robert Babcock was another father that had his prior criminal history brought up in the stories about the death of his child. Unlike Hamber and Brown, the criminal record of Babcock is not discussed in relation to his crime. As Babcock was given custody of his child by child protective services, the agency conducted background checks on Babcock, including his criminal record. The country sheriff described Babcock’s criminal record as: “Maybe a misdemeanor or two. No violence” (Nichols and Bennett 2011, line 30). Although the lack of details about Babcock’s criminal history could have painted him in a similar light to Hamber, his criminal history is clarified to include “No violence.” More importantly, the clarification about his criminal history as not being a violent one is not to portray Babcock in a more positive light. Rather, the emphasis that Babcock’s record was non-violent was a strategic move by the sheriff to protect his department, and possibly others, from harm. As Babcock was given custody of his son from child protective services, any known record of violence against others could have jeopardized the agency and other social services agencies as it would be evidence that the agencies were not performing their duties and protecting the child from harm.

In most cases, the criminal activity that was detailed had occurred prior to the men’s filicidal crime. However, one father made the news again after the death of his son for attempting to commit more crime during his incarceration. While Jonathan Katan was in jail on the capital murder charges related to the death of his son he allegedly attempted to hire someone to kill an acquaintance of his outside of the jail (Hightower N.d.). Although it is unclear if the murder for hire and the death of his son were related, by discussing both of these crimes in stories about Katan he is portrayed as a serial criminal. However, this was not the only instance
in which Katan’s criminality was discussed. McKinney (2010a) reports that “Montgomery Police say there is a history of domestic violence between Katan and his former wife” (line 17). Taking all of these crimes together, Katan is positioned as an individual with a pattern of violence.

While the stereotype about black, male criminality is common in the media, the stressing of criminal history that occurred in this research also demonstrates the effects of race on the portraying men as violent. Although the exact details and events that lead to any of these men facing other criminal charges are largely unknown, only with Babcock is there explicit mention that his criminal history is not a violent one. For example, a person can be granted or petition for a restraining order without being the subject of violent or physical harm. But, without knowing why someone attempted to get a restraining order against Hamber, the stereotype about black criminality is primed and Hamber is thought of as having a prior, violent criminal history without that being factually established. In other words, the implicit and explicit stressing of a prior, violent criminal history for the black fathers but not for the white fathers portrays black fathers as more criminal. While research has clearly indicated that the stereotype of black criminality is a part of the news media (e.g. Chiricos and Eschholz 2002; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000), it is surprising, therefore, that there are actually more stories written about the white fathers than the black fathers. Breaking down the seventy-nine stories about paternal filicide by race, sixty (75.9%) of the stories focused on white fathers while only nineteen (24.1%) focused on black fathers.

While previous research has suggested that news media coverage of crime, and in particular violent crimes (e.g. rape, murder), disproportionally shows black offenders (Klite Bardwell, and Salzman 1997), it would seem counterintuitive that more stories focused on the
crimes of white fathers than black fathers. However, by the same token, the smaller quantity of stories about black fathers, 4.8 stories per black father compared to 12.2 stories per white father, could be indicative of the fact that black criminality is thought to be so commonplace that such stories stop being newsworthy more quickly. In other words, crimes by white men generally, and white fathers against their own children in particular, are thought to be more unusual and thus more newsworthy than crimes committed by black fathers given the devaluing of black fatherhood and the perceived pervasiveness of black criminality.

Father as mad.

Prosecutors said the man had been arguing with the boy’s mother over a transfer of custody, and after killing his son, he tried to commit suicide by drinking cleaning chemicals…. A Johns Hopkins neuroscientist testified that Nelson was depressed and often hallucinated during the time of the murder. … He will be referred to the Patuxent Institution with the state corrections department for possible mental health treatment (Jiang 2011, lines 27-33, 40-42, 51-53).

The construction of mad fathering has garnered very little research in comparison with mad mothering. While Cavaglion in his research on mothers (2008) found that Israeli newspapers labeled women from the dominant group as mad and so excused them from blame, in his research on fathers (2009) that same pattern was not found. Thus, regardless, of the race/ethnicity of the fathers that were discussed in the stories that he reviewed, fathers were not cast as insane but always as rational actors who intentionally killed their children.

Stephen Todd Nelson, was father to a three-year-old boy named Turner. In February 2008, Nelson threw his son off of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, Maryland. Nelson
admitted to throwing his son off the bridge and claimed that “‘demons’ made him do it” (FOXBaltimore 2009, line 4). The claim that demons made him do it was only discussed once as was the above mentioned testimony by the neuroscientist that Nelson was depressed and hallucinating. In the six stories about Nelson, three of them mention that Nelson had or could have entered a plea of not criminally responsible, an equivalent plea to the more commonly known insanity plea. DeMetrick reported that “Nelson had originally been confined under the equivalent of an insanity plea. Successful treatment returned him to court” (DeMetrick 2010, lines 30-31). This is important because the fact that Nelson was treated and thought of as well enough mentally to proceed with the case frames his “madness” as temporary. The temporariness of his “madness” in no way changes his crime, but it is indicative of the ways that “madness” is viewed within terms of both masculinity and fathering. This point is one that I return to later in this section.

Beyond Stephen Todd Nelson, there was very little mention of the mental health status of these fathers. This is similar to the findings of Cavaglion (2008, 2009) that were mentioned above. The only other father who had his mental health status even remotely discussed was Jericho Wright. Importantly, for Wright the discussion of his mental health status was not a question of his sanity due to any type of mental illness but instead focused on his emotional response which called into question his sanity. However, as Pugliesi (1987) has noted, displays of inappropriate or extreme emotionality can lead to the conclusion that a person is mentally ill.

Wright threw his daughter against the shower wall and then left her unattended for hours. When Wright was arrested, he was described as “so distraught that he was placed under observation” (ABClocal.go.com/kfsn 2008b, line 8). In two of the seven stories about Wright the fact that he had to be placed under observation for his emotional response is brought up.
However, it is not established if this was a sort of psychological break, the result of guilt because of his crime, or if his emotional response was just outside of the range of what would be considered to be normal for a man. Regardless of the exact reason for his strong reaction, Wright’s reaction was portrayed in such a way to suggest that he was not in a normal state of mind. In two other stories, Wright was further described as having attempted to commit suicide. As KSEE24.com reported “Jericho told investigators he tried to commit suicide by drinking a bottle of wine and a bottle of champagne and taking some pills” (2010, lines 21-22). Altogether, Wright is portrayed as being emotionally disturbed, at the very least, and these details lead to the view that Wright could be mentally ill.

This positioning of emotionality as or similar to mental illness clearly shows how mental illness is gendered. As Thoits describes, emotional deviance is “socially inappropriate feelings or feeling displays” (1985: 225). Thus, a strong emotional response by a woman would be considered a natural response while a strong emotional response by a father requires some explanation. One such available explanation would be to portray him as mentally weak as if he was unable to properly or appropriately regulate his emotional response.

Mental illness and the labeling of someone as mad are gendered experiences. The construction of mad fathering, thus, further demonstrates how madness is gendered. Although the definition of mental illness remains the same, mental illness is not as strongly invoked to explain the behavior of fathers as it is for mothers (i.e. Cavaglion 2009). In some respects, the failure to invoke mental illness as an explanation for the actions of the fathers ties back into ideas about the violent “natures” of men and women. A biological deterministic view of gender and violence positions men as more violent than women thanks to naturally occurring differences in strength and hormones (for a good review refer to Archer 2004). However, from a sociological
point of view, observable gender differences in violent behavior are primarily the result of differential socialization and gender distinct expectations (i.e. Björkqvist 1994). Yet, while this biological deterministic view has been refuted by sociologists, the ability to reduce a complicated chain of social events down to the simplistic statement that men are more violent than women lends itself well to media portrayals of crime.

*Father as heartless.*

“It looked like he had been tossed around like a rag doll and thrown under an 18-wheeler… I would have never though Robert would have done anything like this. Ever. Obviously I was very wrong,” Brown said (NewsChannel10.com 2011b, line 15-17).

The last subtheme of the demonization of fatherhood is father as heartless. In some respects, this theme builds upon the earlier discussion of the labeling of fathers as killers or murderers. However, father as heartless differs from this earlier theme because within this theme, the framing of a father as a heartless was entirely dependent upon the violence inflected on their child. All of the men discussed in this chapter could be labeled as killers because they were responsible for the death of their children but not all of the fathers were considered heartless.

Robert Babcock was thought of as a heartless by the mother of his child, as it is her words that open this section. Considering that she was victimized by Babcock’s actions, too, through the loss of her child, and given her description of the child after suffering abuse at the hands of Babcock, it is understandable why she would view Babcock as a heartless. As Guilfoos reports, the child’s mother, “Nancy Brown says she has nightmares about what happened to her son in a home Southeast of Claredon” (2011b, lines 4-6). Furthermore, “Texas Rangers say the
young boy had been beaten sporadically since Christmas Eve” (Guilfoos 2011b, line 21). The
description of the injuries experienced by the child in such graphic ways, including Brown’s
description of her son being thrown around like a ragdoll, demonize his fatherhood and the
description that the violence against his son was ongoing build up the portrayal of him as a
callous, uncaring man. NewsChannel10.com further reported that when Brown saw her son at
the hospital, “She says he was covered in bruises and already brain dead when she arrived”
(2011b, lines 4-6). Although more descriptive details of the crime could have been provided,
these few details demonstrate that the actions of Babcock were extreme and portray Babcock as
heartless for hurting his child in such a brutal way.

Thomas Huge was similarly described in demonized terms and was explicitly called
heartless by a woman who cared for his daughter. “He is a heartless, soulless, cowardly man
who has ripped a family apart forever.” (Tracy Armstrong, WLWT.com 2012c, lines 9-10). The
description of Huge as a “heartless, soulless, cowardly man” demonstrates that he is not thought
of as a father. Huge can be called “heartless” and “soulless” because he did not demonstrate any
sort of paternal bond with his daughter and instead was capable of inflicting great harm upon her.
Additionally, the terms “heartless” and “soulless” portray Huge as an individual who lacks the
capacity to care.

Huge was described in other ways too that painted him as heartless. A prosecutor in his
case, Dave Prem, was reported as saying, “He’s dissatisfied with the child, what she’s doing,
and acted in that rage to silence her”” (WLWT.com 2012b, lines 11-12). Another member of the
prosecutorial team, Jocelyn Chess, described Huge and his actions as: “He put his bare hands on
her throat and strangled her and he put his hand over her mouth to cover her nose, her mouth, her
airway, to stop her breathing; that is purposeful” (WLWT.com 2012a, lines 5-7). An
unidentified member of the prosecutorial team told reporters “‘I felt the only person who wasn’t emotional about this is Mr. Huge because I think even to this day sadly he just doesn’t really care about this child and has no remorse for what he has done’” (Kettler and Hensley 2012, lines 21-23). These quotes, particularly the last one, continue to highlight the lack of care demonstrated by Huge. The description of Huge as the only person who was not emotional is especially telling about his heartless nature. There is the societal expectation that he, as father, does care for his child and that he should have been emotional that his daughter was dead. Instead other people who were unrelated to the child exhibited more of an emotional response to her death than her own father.

Similarly, Steven Nicholson was also portrayed as heartless. This is most clearly seen in the prosecutorial argument that Nicholson’s crime was “‘torture’” (Detroit.CBSLocal.com 2011b, line 19). To back up this claim, the Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Carl Schmidt testified during Nicholson’s trial and described elements of the deaths which lead to the conclusion that the deaths were homicides rather than accidental drownings. According to Detroit.CBSLocal.com

Schmidt (the medical examiner) said that both children would have been physically able to get away from the water by themselves. He noted that Johnathan Sanderlin was submerged in water for more than a few minutes. He also found unusual burn marks on Ella Stafford which indicated that she was already dead when she was immersed in the hot water (2010b, lines 20-24).

Although Nicholson and his attorneys attempted to portray the deaths as accidents and the result of the children climbing into the tub on their own, such details like those provided by the medical examiner make those claims difficult to believe. Nicholson is portrayed as heartless by the very possibility that he willfully submitted his children to such torture and did so by his own hands.
Nicholson was also portrayed as heartless through descriptions of him as a father. The grandmother of Ella, Windy Moritz told reporters “‘I have only seen him cry fake tears for Ella and Johnathan. Now, it’s his turn to suffer’” (MyFOXDetroit.com 2011c, line 24). This description implies that Nicholson’s displays of emotion are not legitimate representations of his feelings for his children. As his emotional response is described as false, he is portrayed as heartless for faking like he cared for the children but also because he did not legitimately cry over the children as he would have been expected to do.

The testimony of neighbors as well as their descriptions of Nicholson and his behaviors as told to reporters emphasized his heartless nature. According to Detroit.CBSLocal.com “Steven Nicholson took notes and, at times, shook his head as witnesses from this (sic) apartment complex described him as an abusive dad. Neighbors testified that Nicholson often cursed and rushed this (sic) kids along, and repeatedly left them in his van alone” (2011c, lines 6-11). WXYZ.com further reported: “At the time of the children’s deaths a neighbor told Action News that she has called the police on Nicholson a few months before because he left them in his van, alone and crying. Another neighbor said that Nicholson was mean and rude to the children” (16-19). Although these descriptions are less graphic than the ones from the medical examiner, they help illustrate an image of Nicholson as being “abusive” and uncaring about his kids. The descriptions of him being mean and rude as well as repeatedly leaving the children alone emphasize his heartless nature and detail that he should callous disregard towards the children on multiple occasions.

This theme of father as heartless is an important facet of bad fatherhood that has been previously unexplored. Even in previous research that discusses bad fatherhood, the definitions of the concept have been vague (e.g. Furstenburg 1998; Jordan 2009) and although describing
someone in such a way that they are viewed as a “heartless” is still not very descriptive, it does further illustrate that bad fatherhood, like bad motherhood, is multifaceted. This view of father as heartless adds to bad fatherhood by emphasizing that emotional care for and towards children is an expectation associated with fatherhood, too.

Getting back to the theme of demonized fatherhood more generally, fatherhood was not stressed to the same degree for black fathers as it was for white fathers. Instead, black fathers were primarily represented in terms of their criminality, not their failures as fathers, as has been previously discussed in this chapter. White fathers, conversely, could be thought of as heartless because it was clear that they were the fathers of the children and at the same time had acted in unreasonable or unnatural ways towards those children and as a result of those actions could be thought of as heartless.

To illustrate this point, there were clear differences in the treatment of the white fathers and the black fathers. Only one out of all of the stories about the black fathers, one about Thomas Brown, includes a quote directly from the father himself and four other stories include quotes from the mothers of the victims. Yet, when it comes to stories about the white fathers, the fathers themselves and people who personally knew the father were quoted more often. Four stories included quotes from the fathers themselves (1 from Thomas Huge and 3 from Steven Nicholson) while twelve stories included quotes from other people who personally knew the victim, such as relatives.

Although there are few quotes from the fathers themselves for both white and black fathers, the quotes that were reported are telling. The only black father who was quoted in any of the stories about him was Thomas Brown. In an article by Speigner (2011), Brown was quoted
three times. Brown was reported as saying: “I never hit my son. He’s my only son” (line 3), “I wasn’t being all the way honest” (line 14) and his previously mentioned quote of “I know I ain’t a perfect parent… but that’s one thing I wouldn’t do” (line 16). Brown’s quote about not being honest gives further weight to the reporting that “he lied 31 times in his statement to police” (Speign 2011, line 12). However his other two direct quotes were in response to the murder charges that he faced for the death of his son. Brown’s quotes thus were an attempt to explain himself and to proclaim his innocence but given his own admission of being less than truthful, the veracity of his claims that he did not harm his son are severely undermined.

While Thomas Brown was the only black father who was directly quoted, Thomas Huge and Steven Nicholson were the only white fathers who were quoted in the stories about them. Thomas Huge, like Brown, was only quoted once in the stories about him. Huge was quoted as saying “The truth will come out. God knows the truth” (WLWT.com 2012b, line 14). While Brown’s quotes are attempts to portray himself as innocence, Huge appeals to a higher authority as knowing “the truth.” Importantly, in appealing to this higher authority, Huge suggests that the findings by the court are not the truth and that he will eventually be redeemed with the truth comes to light. Both Huge and Brown thus claim innocence, albeit in very different ways, but there are no additional details to undermine the claim that Huge makes.

Also like Brown, Steven Nicholson attempts to portray himself as not responsible for the deaths of his children. As Detroit.CBSLocal.com reports “In his first court appearance, Nicholson was emotional and unable to say his name. He declared ‘I did not hurt my babies’” (2010a, lines 20-25). This quote is unique in that the quote is placed within the context of his court proceeding as well as the emphasis that Nicholson was in an emotional state. The description that Nicholson was unable to state his own name but able to articulate that he did not
harm his children is telling to the importance that Nicholson places on his own innocence. Nicholson was also able to read a statement to the court in which he further proclaimed his innocence. Nicholson was reported as saying “‘Don’t judge me wrongly for charges I’m not guilty of,’ Nicholson read Friday from a statement in court. ‘Understand my pain and my current situation. I don’t want pity, only understanding of the real proof’” (MyFOXDetroit.com 2011b, lines 11-13).

It is not surprising that all of the fathers who were quoted attempted to proclaim their innocence. However, only Thomas Brown further had his own words used against to undermine his attempts to prove his innocence. This reinforces the view of black criminality that is often a part of news coverage of crime. The quotes from the white fathers only spoke to their allegations of innocence while the quotes from Brown first spoke to his innocence and then undermined the honesty of his claims.

Beyond differences in regards to quotes from the fathers themselves, the descriptions of characteristics of the black fathers are curtailed by the stereotype of black criminality. For example, stories about Tyrone Hamber focus almost entirely on the status of the criminal proceedings and describing the beating death of his daughter without any additional descriptors, positive or negative, about Hamber himself. As WBALTV.com reports, “Hamber initially told investigators he found the child unresponsive on the bathroom floor, but he later admitted to beating the girl unconscious with a leather belt before calling for help” (2012, lines 5-6). FoxBaltimore.com further specifies that “He allegedly beat her with a belt because she didn’t listen to him when he told her not to let dogs in the house” (2010c, lines 4-5). Through the provision of such details, Hamber’s motive for his actions and what occurred are known but few other details about the man himself are reported.
As a point of comparison, the stories about the white fathers were much more detailed in terms of humanizing the fathers. As mentioned above, there were more quotes from people who knew the fathers, as opposed to prosecutors or defense attorneys, included in the stories about the white fathers. While this might seem like a minor point, quotes from people such as the victim’s mother or their own relatives show that there are other people who are affected by this crime and who care about the offender and what happens to them. Beyond this, details about these white offenders are provided that were not mentioned in connection with the black fathers. For example, in stories about Jericho Wright there are descriptions of his job as a newspaper deliveryman such as “the 26-year-old told investigators he did not realize his daughter was hurt, so he put her to bed and went on his paper route at 3:30 Monday morning” (Yuriar and Lee 2008, lines 12-14). While KSEE24.com (2008), as mentioned above, relates of his suicide attempt. Such details provide a context for understanding Wright outside of that as criminal and killer of his child. This more multi-faceted depiction allows for Wright to be understood as an individual while the less descriptive stories about the black fathers, such as Hamber position them first and only as criminals.

The stereotype of black criminality is so overarching that the character of the actual offenders gets lost; it is as if all black, male criminals are the same. Conversely, the character of the white fathers is not limited by a stereotype by about white criminality. It is thus possible to discuss white men as individuals rather than as a representation of a deeply entrenched stereotype.
The Importance of Mothering

Armstrong testified that she cared for Kayli while the girl’s mother served a prison term on drug charges, but the child was returned to her father (WLWT.com 2012c, lines 13-14).

The focus of this chapter is on fathers who have killed their own children. That does not mean, however, that mothers were invisible in the stories. On the contrary, stories often focused on the role of the mothers in the life of these children, too. Therefore, the final theme concerning fatherhood that I discuss is the importance of mothering. In short, some mothers are held responsible for leaving the father in charge of the caretaking duties, since that role is thought to be the natural domain of women. This stands in stark contrast to the coverage of mothers who kill their children, as discussed in chapter four. When mothers were the offenders, details about the father were very seldom provided. As this theme is focused on motherhood, quotes about the mothers or from the mothers themselves will be the focus here.

Even though these cases were concerned with fathers who had committed filicide, mothers were also discussed within the stories and in some cases were portrayed in a negative light. In some of these cases, the mothers of the children were blamed for indirectly causing the deaths of their children by leaving them under the care of their fathers. This theme is related to the notion already discussed that fathers are incapable or improper caretakers. Yet, this differs because the mothers are being held responsible for the actions of others and blamed for placing their child with a caretaker who was unsuitable for the job. As the quote above indicates, the blaming of mothers could take on different forms. Yet the common thread is the view that the
mother was unable to care for the child herself or willingly relinquished some of her caretaking responsibilities and therefore was at least partially responsible for the death of the child.

The case of Thomas Huge provides a good illustration of how motherhood is implicated in the crimes of fathers. As Kettler and Hensley report “Armstrong (Kayli’s cousin) took care of Kayli for the first year of her life while her biological mother was in prison on drug charges” (2012, lines 26-7). Kayli’s mother is never quoted in any of the stories about the case, but when she is discussed it is always mentioned that she was incarcerated, as was the case in the previous quote. In four of the ten stories about Huge’s crime, it is mentioned that the mother of the child is incarcerated while the other six stories make no mention of the mother at all. This repeated mentioning of her incarceration and the drug charges that lead to her incarceration reinforce ideas that the mother should have been the primary caretaker. She is painted as a blameworthy figure by being incarcerated and thus being separated from her children but also because her actions led to Huge becoming the primary caretaker.

The case of Peyton Brown also illustrates how a mother could be blamed for the actions of the child’s father and killer. “Brown was overwhelmed with his parental duties and frustrated with his girlfriend, Brittany Porchia’s, lack of affection…Brown believes Porchia caused the injuries, even though she claims she was at work at the time of death” (Speigner 2011b, lines 9-10, 17). This quote highlights Brittany Porchia, the mother of Peyton Brown who was beaten to death by Thomas Brown. Although the quote above does not clearly identify Porchia as the mother of Peyton, she is later described as “the child’s mother Brittany Porchia” in an article by Speigner (2011c, line 11). Porchia was the most overtly blamed of all the mothers as Brown and Brown’s defense attempted to argue that she caused the injuries that lead to Peyton’s death as mentioned above. As Speigner reported “Brown told the jury, the child’s mother Brittany
Porchia, stopped by the morning Peyton died when he wasn’t home” (2011c, line 11) and Rakow had reported that “The child’s mother… lives in Chipley” (2010, line 20), both of which establish Porchia as the mother of the child and as not living with them. Thus, it is unclear if Brown was the primary caretaker or if Brown was only temporarily watching Peyton, but it is clearly known that Brown and Porchia were not living together. All of these details taken together can lead to the conclusion that if Porchia had been taking care of Peyton that day that the death would not have occurred.

The mothers of the children of Steven Nicholson were also blamed. Unlike any of the other fathers described, Nicholson was held responsible for killing two of his children and those two children had different mothers. The mothers of Nicholson’s children are both blamed for not being the primary caretakers of their children. In MyFOXDetroit.com (2010d), the reporter writes: “Johnathan and Ella had different mothers who did not live with Nicholson, although Tayler Stafford said she saw her daughter almost every day” (lines 22-23). Stafford’s statement that she saw her daughter almost every day is an attempt to portray herself not as a bad mother even though she was not the primary caretaker. In another story, the household is described as: “The children had different mothers. Nicholson had custody of Johnathan and took care of Ella” (MyFOXDetroit.com 2011c, line 19). Thus, Nicholson was Johnathan’s primary caretaker and the day-to-day caretaker of Ella. Nicholson is not portrayed negatively for having children by different women; however the mothers are presented in a negative light for having Nicholson be a primary caretaker in their children’s lives. Sarah McGee, the mother of Johnathan, told the court that “she received an email from Ella’s mother, warning her that Nicholson was abusing the children” (Detroit.CBSLocal.com 2011c, lines 28-32). This quote is telling in a number of ways. Firstly, Johnathan’s mother had to be told that her son was being abused thus
demonstrating that she was not checking up on her son and his physical well-being often enough to be aware of the abuse. Secondly, this abuse was known by Ella’s mother and instead of removing her daughter from the situation, she notified Johnathan’s mother of the abuse and has her daughter remain in Nicholson’s care. Although the story further reports that McGee “contacted Allen Park police who accompanied her to Nicholson’s apartment” (Detroit.CBSLocal.com 2011c, lines 33-34), this did not prevent the deaths from occurring.

Furthermore, these women are seen as representing the importance of motherhood because the portrayals of these women and the ways that they did not live up to good motherhood become examples for other women. As such, these women are not thought to be good mothers themselves but rather they illustrate why mothers needs to be active in the caretaking and nurturing of their child, because the fathers are incapable of successfully and safely doing so.

Importantly, the mother of the child was mentioned in at least one story for all of the white fathers but in the coverage of black fathers the mother of the victim was only discussed in a few of the stories about Thomas Brown and Stephen Todd Nelson. This finding suggests that white motherhood was found more important to be stressed in cases of paternal filicide than black motherhood was. Although this greater mentioning of white mothers may have been the result of the greater number of stories available about the white fathers, this racial difference also could be the result of the differing expectations for white and black mothers, as chapter four discussed. In other words, given that good motherhood is only achievable for white mothers (Fumia 1999; Harris 1995) white mothers were mentioned more in the stories about filicidal fathers to illustrate the ways in which white mothers could be seen as bad mothers because of the actions of their child’s father.
Conclusion

Most prior research has focused on good fatherhood and how fathers conceptualize good fatherhood. In this chapter, in contrast, I have addressed how bad fatherhood is constructed in a gendered and racialized fashion. Given that the fathers discussed in this chapter have killed their own children, it is not surprising that the men are portrayed as bad fathers rather than good fathers. That being said, the construct of bad fatherhood does inform on the construct of good fatherhood. This is done through the implicit construction of good fatherhood as the opposite of bad fatherhood.

The minimization of fatherhood and in particular the minimization of bad fatherhood stands in sharp contrast to the treatment of bad motherhood. While bad fathers have their role as father minimized or completely ignored, when a woman is framed as a bad mother, her mothering identity becomes even more crucial to the story, as I described in a previous chapter. A comparison of bad fatherhood, bad motherhood, and bad parenthood falls outside of the scope of this chapter. However, it is important to note here that there is a disparity between bad fatherhood, bad motherhood, and bad parenthood. The fact that bad fatherhood can be minimized demonstrates how fatherhood is still viewed as less important than motherhood. As just discussed, motherhood was evoked in several of the stories about these filicidal fathers. These two issues together illustrate the gendered nature of parenting. Parenting roles that are associated with fatherhood are de-emphasized in comparison to those associated with motherhood.

The themes of the minimization of the fathering role, father as caretaker, demonization of fatherhood, and the importance of mothering define fatherhood as that which is not motherhood.
Parenting, and in particular caretaking, remains an activity that falls more within the domain of mothering than fathering. All of these themes highlight that motherhood and fatherhood are two vastly different constructs and that fatherhood is still thought of as less than motherhood.

Yet, what this chapter has established even more firmly is that black fatherhood is especially devalued. Fatherhood as a concept is itself devalued, but black fatherhood is so negatively viewed that black fathers are relegated to little more than sperm donors and this view is so pervasive that being a father is thought to have little effect on the lives of black men. While the ability of black men to be involved fathers has been restricted by historical factors and black fatherhood has been severely negatively impacted by reports (i.e. Moynihan 1965) and media portrayals of stereotypical views of black fathers such as “deadbeat dads” and “irresponsible fathers” (i.e. Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton 2012), this does not mean that black men cannot be involved fathers.

The themes that I discussed in this chapter raise several interesting points about the racialization and gendering of fatherhood. Although I discuss both black and white fathers, the portrayals of these men more firmly establish the white men as fathers to their victims than is done in the portrayals of the black men. This suggests that black fatherhood is less stressed in media portrayals of the crime of filicide and this continues to perpetuate the stereotype of black criminality. As such, these black men are thought of as criminals first and to a much lesser degree as fathers while fatherhood is more greatly emphasized for the white men. That being said, these portrayals also reflect that fatherhood is a lesser type of parenting than mothering. Through the continued stressing of the importance of mothers and motherhood coupled with portrayals of the inadequacies of these men to father, fatherhood is continually being compared with motherhood and in this comparison fatherhood is found to be lacking. This also reinforces
the gendering of parenthood as mothers are being portrayed as better and more naturally suited for caretaking while fathers are portrayed as the secondary and lesser parent waiting on standby, if needed.

As the terms of mother and father are highly gendered, the expectations and responsibilities associated with those are also highly gendered. Society and culture have created the constructs of fatherhood and motherhood and these constructs have changed over time. Thus, there is nothing inherent to being a man that uniquely disadvantages him from being a parent, regardless of the distinctions of good and “bad.” However, the highly gendered nature of parenting, especially the view that mothering comes naturally while fathering needs to be learned (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin 2005), does limit the ability of men to father and to be thought of as good parents in comparison with mothers.
Table 5.1 Original Charges, Sentenced Charges, and Sentencing Outcomes for Maternal Offenders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Original Charge</th>
<th>Convicted Charge</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Fathers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan Bennett</td>
<td>Homicide, involuntary manslaughter, and child endangerment</td>
<td>Involuntary manslaughter and child endangerment</td>
<td>1-3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Brown</td>
<td>First degree murder and aggravated child abuse</td>
<td>First degree murder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrone Hamber</td>
<td>First degree murder, assault, and child abuse</td>
<td>Child abuse resulting in death</td>
<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Nelson</td>
<td></td>
<td>Second degree murder and child abuse leading to death</td>
<td>50 years in prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Fathers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Babcock</td>
<td>Capital murder and domestic violence involving a minor</td>
<td>Capital murder</td>
<td>life in prison without the possibility of parole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Huge</td>
<td></td>
<td>Two counts of murder, one count of felonious assault, and two counts of endangering children</td>
<td>23 years to life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Katan</td>
<td>Capital murder</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven Nicholson</td>
<td>First degree murder, felony murder, and first degree child abuse</td>
<td>First degree murder and second degree murder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jericho Wright</td>
<td>Murder and neglect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Table 5.2 White, Paternal Filicidal Offender Stories and Headlines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Robert Babcock</th>
<th>Thomas Huge</th>
<th>Jonathan Katan</th>
<th>Steven Nicholson</th>
<th>Jericho Wright</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>referenced</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as parent</td>
<td>(21.0%)</td>
<td>(70.0%)</td>
<td>(12.5%)</td>
<td>(56.3%)</td>
<td>(28.6%)</td>
<td>(38.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headlines</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>only indirectly referenced as parent</td>
<td>(5.3%)</td>
<td>(30.0%)</td>
<td>(37.5%)</td>
<td>(12.5%)</td>
<td>(14.3%)</td>
<td>(16.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headlines</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not referenced as parent</td>
<td>(73.7%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(50.0%)</td>
<td>(31.2%)</td>
<td>(57.1%)</td>
<td>(45.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
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<td>referenced</td>
<td>(84.2%)</td>
<td>(20.0%)</td>
<td>(37.5%)</td>
<td>(75.0%)</td>
<td>(57.1%)</td>
<td>(61.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>only indirectly referenced as parent</td>
<td>(15.8%)</td>
<td>(80.0%)</td>
<td>(62.5%)</td>
<td>(25.0%)</td>
<td>(42.9%)</td>
<td>(38.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories not</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>referenced</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(-0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
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<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.3 Black, Paternal Filicidal Offenders Stories and Headlines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ryan Bennett</th>
<th>Thomas Brown</th>
<th>Tyrone Hamber</th>
<th>Stephen Todd Nelson</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headlines referenced as parent</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (25.0%)</td>
<td>3 (50.0%)</td>
<td>2 (33.3%)</td>
<td>6 (31.6%)</td>
</tr>
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<td>1 (25.0%)</td>
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<td>3 (50.0%)</td>
<td>7 (36.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headlines not referenced as parent</td>
<td>3 (100.0%)</td>
<td>2 (50.0%)</td>
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<td>1 (16.7%)</td>
<td>6 (31.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories referenced as parent</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (50.0%)</td>
<td>1 (16.7%)</td>
<td>2 (33.3%)</td>
<td>5 (26.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories only indirectly referenced as parent</td>
<td>1 (33.3%)</td>
<td>2 (50.0%)</td>
<td>5 (83.3%)</td>
<td>4 (66.7%)</td>
<td>12 (63.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories not referenced as parent</td>
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<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (10.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Stories</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
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</table>
CHAPTER 6: RACIALIZATION AND GENDERING OF PARENTHOOD

In this chapter I discuss mothers and fathers who were both found responsible for the death of their children. After the previous two chapters and the focus on motherhood and fatherhood, this chapter adds to those discussions as well as addressing the concept of parenthood. Although my intent was to explore parenthood more in depth, the themes that I discuss illustrate motherhood and fatherhood more than parenthood.

In this chapter I describe three major themes. These themes are the shifting of responsibility, requirements of care, and the importance of motherhood. In shifting of responsibility my discussion illustrates how parents were framed as blameworthy or blameless, to varying degrees, and the ways in which mothers and fathers are differentially framed as responsible in connection with the death of their children. In the theme of requirements of care I focus more broadly on parenting and the specific expectation of caretaking that is associated with parenting. Finally, in the theme of the importance of motherhood, I discuss how mothers are portrayed as especially important figures in these stories despite the fact that the cases are ones involving both parents. This last theme in particular highlights the ways in which parenthood and parenting are so heavily engendered.

As I focus on mothers and fathers who were both found criminally responsible for the death of their children in this chapter, I address hypothesis four here. Hypothesis four argues that cases of filicide, whether committed by a mother alone, a father alone, or a mother and father acting together, will be used to construct good and bad parenthood. Previous research has typically focused either on mothers only (Cavaglion 2008; Sadoff 1995; Stanton, Simpson, and Woudes 2000) or fathers only (Campion, Cravens, and Covan 1988; Cavaglion 2009; Cavanagh, Dobash, and Dobash 2007). In this chapter, as well as in the previous two, I examine the extent
to which cases of filicide, regardless of the gender of the offender, are used to construct good and bad parenthood. My starting assumption is that, from these cases, one can learn not only what is expected of mothers and fathers but also of parents more generally. This hypothesis holds that even though there are clear constructions of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood, these constructions can also be used to understand something about good and bad parenthood. In other words, regardless of the gender of the parent, good and bad parenthood are constructs, just like good and bad motherhood and fatherhood, and hence are also constructed in the media portrayals of cases of filicide. There are clear expectations associated with good and bad motherhood but less clear expectations of good and bad fatherhood. Like Grabe et al. (2006) has found, gender does affect the portrayal of offenders. Specifically, Grabe et al. highlight that when women do “unfeminine” acts they are treated more harshly in the media than women whose crimes “conforms to the ‘standards’ of womanhood” (2006: 139). Because of the gendering of parenthood, I believe that the expectations will be similar in the conceptualization of good and bad parenthood. In other words, good parenthood will be more easily achieved by fathers than it will be for mothers and this is the result of the gendered nature of the concept but also because of the boundaries and expectations that are set through the other, related constructs of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood.

Parenthood has largely been thought of in terms of just motherhood or just fatherhood by researchers. However, filicide when it is compared between mothers, fathers, and mothers and fathers acting together should demonstrate what is expected of all parents regardless of their gender. Although there are specific expectations associated with mothering and fathering, there are also expectations associated with parenting. In other words, there are some roles and expectations that are associated with a parent regardless of whether that person is a mother or
father. As such, with this hypothesis I explore those very expectations and examine the extent to which the construction of parenting is influenced by race and gender.

Furthermore, I expect that the social construction of parenthood will result in the continuation and creation of stereotypical images of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. As Collins (2009) has described, there are images such as the mammy and matriarch which influence the views of black motherhood. Images such as the ones described by Collins (2009) as well as the ideas of the “good enough” father that Jordan (2009) has described will continue to be found. But with the construction of good and bad parenthood, as well as the continued perpetuation of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood, new images associated with good and bad parenthood may also be created. For example, the story from Greek mythology of Medea is still widely known and calling a woman Medea is a quick way to portray her as a bad mother, yet with changes that have occurred in the expectations of motherhood and fatherhood new images will also emerge.

In this chapter I detail cases in which both parents were held responsible for the death of their children. In some cases, one parent is portrayed as more responsible for the death of the child than the other while in other cases both parents are thought to be equally responsible for the death. This first point is an important consideration for this chapter, particularly in comparison with the prior two chapters in which I focused on a mother or a father acting alone. As will be discussed later within this chapter, some of the parents are held to be more responsible for the death of their child or children than others. In the previous two chapters there was a clear perpetrator of the crime, or, at the very least, only one parent was found legally responsible for the death of their child. The cases discussed in this chapter involve parents who were jointly
responsible for the death of the child because they both played a role in the death of the child, albeit not always an equal role.

Thus far, I have looked at mothers and fathers who acted alone and how their actions came to inform media constructions of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood. Motherhood and fatherhood are social constructs that are highly racialized and gendered. The racialization and gendering of motherhood and fatherhood will be further discussed in this chapter but I will also discuss the construction of parenthood. Importantly, as mentioned throughout this chapter, the gendering of parenthood is so pervasive that the concept of parenthood is underdeveloped. Instead of parents being able to be discussed within the gender-neutral concept of parenthood, parenthood is so heavily gendered that motherhood or fatherhood are continually invoked either implicitly or explicitly.

Parenthood, as a role that all parents provide regardless of gender, is an understudied construction. In fact, most research on parenthood is only concerned with motherhood or fatherhood, not on what it means to be a parent and how parenthood as a construct is defined. This lack of research on parenthood as a construction is influenced by several factors. Firstly, this is largely due to the fact that specific roles within parenting, such as caretaking, are thought to be more a part of mothering and less a part of fathering by those being studied. Thus, it is difficult to build the concept of parenting when the subjects discuss roles specifically as a part of mothering or fathering. Secondly, the roles associated with mothering and fathering are so embedded with gender that thinking of parenting as less of a gendered and gender-specific concept makes it more difficult to define. I find, as have prior researchers, even when parents do not live up to the roles associated with parenting (i.e. providing food and protection for one’s
child), these roles are still thought of as more under the domain of mothering or fathering and this affects the portrayals of these filicidal offenders.

The Cases

The following eight cases serve as the data for this chapter. The cases include three black parents and five white parents who were held responsible for the death of their child. Although the intent was to have five cases of both black parents and white parents, I found three cases of a black mother and a black father charged with some crime related to the death of their child. These cases are unique in that both mother and father were held responsible for the death of their child. Notably, in some instances one parent was as more blameworthy or blameless for the crime while in others, both parents were thought to have been equally to blame. The parents discussed in this chapter were charged with and ultimately convicted of crimes related to the death of their children. As these parents were found to be criminally responsible, their actions, or sometimes lack thereof, resulted in these deaths and were blamed for the roles that they held in connection with the death of the child.

Black Parents

Three black couples were held responsible for the death of their children. These couples were William Davis and Sade King, Jerald Hicks and Chisa Hughes, Markanthony and Jovita Ibeagwa. In some cases more details were provided than in others and the final sentences received by one or both parents were not always made available in news coverage.

Davis and King (2010). Sade Shamon King and William Thomas Davis III from Warner Robins, Georgia were parents to two-year-old D’Shawn Davis. The couple was accused of starving their son to death after he was found dead by paramedics. D’Shawn had been isolated
and neglected for a year and at the time of his death he weighed only 12 pounds 6 ounces. William Davis was charged with murder and cruelty to children and was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Sade King pleaded guilty to murder and cruelty to children and was sentenced to life with the possibility of parole for the murder charge and an additional twenty years for the cruelty to children charge.

I found thirteen stories from the local affiliates of Macon, Georgia that discussed the case of King and Davis. Six stories came from the website shared by local ABC and FOX affiliates at http://www.newscentralga.com, six stories came from the CBS affiliate of http://www.13wmaz.com, and one story came from the NBC affiliate of http://www.41nbc.com. All thirteen stories discussed both parents and their involvement in the crime.

Hicks and Hughes (2008). From Nashville, Tennessee, Chisa Hughes and Jerald Hicks were parents to 17-month-old Jerald, Jr. Hughes and Hicks did not live together and their son lived with Hicks in his apartment. Jerald, Jr. died in January 2008 from hypothermia and starvation. At the time of his death he weighed only ten pounds and his body temperature was so low that it did not register. Chisa Hughes pled guilty to second-degree murder and was sentenced to 30 years in prison, a sentence that she must completely serve as laid out by the terms of her plea agreement. Jerald Hughes, Sr. was charged with first degree murder, aggravated child abuse, and two charges of aggravated child neglect but the final outcome of his court proceedings was not reported.

I found ten stories that discussed Hughes and Hicks. These stories came from the local television affiliates of Nashville, Tennessee. Eight stories came from the local CBS affiliate
of http://www.newschannel5.com, one story came from the ABC affiliate of http://www.wkrn.com, and one story came from the FOX affiliate of http://www.fox17.com. I also searched the local NBC affiliate of http://www.wsmv.com but no stories were found about Hughes and Hicks on that site. Out of the ten stories, two discussed only the father, Jerald Hicks, but all of the other eight stories identified or described both parents.

Ibeagwa (2010). Markanthony and Jovita Ibeagwa had two children, Gerrard and Blessing. They lived in Jacksonville, Florida. Gerrard and Blessing drowned in a neighbor’s pool after being left alone at their home while their parents worked. Both Markanthony and Jovita were originally charged with aggravated manslaughter and child neglect. Markanthony was found guilty of child neglect with great bodily harm and sentenced to one year of incarceration. Jovita was found guilty of aggravated manslaughter of a child and was sentenced to one year of incarceration.

The stories about the Ibeagwa’s came from two websites for the affiliates in Jacksonville, Florida. I found nine stories about the Ibeagwa’s, with one coming from the joint website for the ABC and NBC affiliates at http://www.firstcoastnews.com and the other eight coming from the joint website for CBS and FOX affiliates at http://www.actionnewsjax.com. All of the stories about the Ibeagwa’s discussed both parents either directly or indirectly.

White Parents

The following five white couples were charged with crimes related to the deaths of their children. These couples were Rebecca Christie and Derek Wulf, Christopher and Stephanie Dunham, John and Susan Griffin, Stanley and Colleen Rimer, and Herbert and Catherine
Schaible. Like in the cases of the black parents, in some cases more details about the case and the final sentencing outcome for one or both parents were more readily available than in others.

*Christie and Wulf* (2006). Near Alamogordo, New Mexico, at Holloman Air Force Base, Rebecca Colleen Christie and Derek Wulf lived with their three-year-old daughter. Their daughter, Brandi Wulf, died from malnutrition and dehydration after her mother did not give her food or water while she played video games for eleven days. Christie’s former husband, Derek Wulf was deployed overseas when the death occurred but was charged in connection with the death. Wulf pled guilty to child abuse not resulting in death but his sentence was not reported. Christie was convicted of second degree murder and child abuse and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison.

I found five stories that discussed the case of Christie and Wulf. These stories were found on the local affiliate websites serving Las Cruces, New Mexico. I found one story from the local CBS affiliate’s website of [http://www.krqe.com](http://www.krqe.com), while two stories were found on the local FOX affiliate of [http://www.kfoxtv.com](http://www.kfoxtv.com), and the final two stories were found on the local NBC affiliate of [http://swnewmexico.kob.com](http://swnewmexico.kob.com). I also searched the local ABC affiliate site of [http://www.koat.com](http://www.koat.com) but no stories were found on that site that discussed the case of Christie and Wulf. All of the headlines for these five stories focused either directly (4) or indirectly (1) on Christie. None of the headlines were specifically about the father, Derek Wulf. Within the body of the stories, two of the stories indirectly reference both parents but the other three stories mention Wulf but did not establish the relationship between him and the victim.

*Dunham* (2011). Christopher and Stephanie Dunham from Del City, Oklahoma, had three children: Christopher, Crystal, and Kaylee (sometimes spelled as Kailey). In 2011, the
three children died after the RV the family was living in caught fire. Drugs and drug paraphernalia were also found on the scene leading to additional charges filed against both parents. Christopher was convicted of child neglect, possession of marijuana, possession of drug paraphernalia, and possession of methamphetamine. Stephanie was convicted of child neglect and drug possession. Both parents were sentenced to eighteen years in prison and to pay a fine of $5,000 per child.

A total of fifty-eight stories discussed the Dunham’s and the deaths of their children. U collected these stories from the local affiliate websites serving Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Twenty-four of the stories came from the local ABC affiliate site of http://www.koco.com, twenty-seven stories came from the local CBS affiliate of http://www.news9.com, and the remaining seven stories came from the local NBC affiliate of http://kfor.com. I also searched the local FOX site of http://okcfox.com but no stories about the Dunham’s were found on the site. Of the fifty-eight stories, twelve headlines and eleven stories only discussed Stephanie Dunham and ten headlines and three stories only discussed Christopher Dunham.

Griffin (2007). John and Susan Griffin were parents to two-year-old Andrew. They lived in Rodgers Forge, a suburb of Baltimore, Maryland. Andrew starved to death in December 2007, weighing only thirteen pounds at the time of his death. Both John and Susan were convicted of second-degree murder and child abuse resulting in death. The sentences received by the parents were not reported, however.

I searched local television affiliate websites for Baltimore, Maryland for stories about the Griffin’s and a total of four stories were found. All four stories came from the local ABC affiliate at http://www2.abc2news.com. I also searched the CBS, FOX, and NBC affiliate sites
of http://baltimore.cbslocal.com/, http://foxbaltimore.com/, http://www.wbaltv.com, respectively, but no stories about the Griffin’s were found. All of the stories discussed both John and Susan and identified them as the parents of their son.

*Rimer (2008).* Stanley and Colleen Rimer from Las Vegas, Nevada, had a son, Jason. Four-year-old Jason suffered from a genetic disease, myotonic dystrophy, that rendered him unable to walk properly. Jason was left alone in the family car for seventeen hours and died from heat stress. Colleen was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and child abuse and received a sentenced of five to twenty years in prison. Stanley, too, was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and child abuse as but was sentenced to eight to thirty years in prison.


*Schaible (2009).* Herbert and Catherine Schaible from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania had a two-year-old son, Kent. Kent was sick with pneumonia and died after his parents attempted to heal him through prayer. The Schaible’s religious beliefs precluded them from utilizing medical care. Both Herbert and Catherine were convicted of involuntary manslaughter and child endangerment and both were sentenced to ten years of probation. The Schaible’s were also required to seek routine and emergency medical care for their other children during their period of probation.

I searched the local television affiliate websites for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania stories about the Schaible’s and I found a total of 16 stories. One story was found on the local ABC site

Themes

The themes that emerged from these cases were shifting of responsibility, requirements of care, and the importance of motherhood. As evident from the previous two chapters, good and bad motherhood are more clearly defined than good and bad fatherhood. In some respects, good and bad motherhood do inform what is expected of parenthood. Yet, parenthood is less strictly constructed and defined than motherhood as both mothers and fathers are parents and the expectations associated with fathering are less than the expectations associated with mothering.

Shifting of Responsibility

The theme of shifting of responsibility extends beyond just holding a parent or both parents responsible for the death of their child. As I discuss in more detail below, shifting of responsibility refers to the ways in which responsibility is constructed, both in terms of people’s own actions and the actions of others. Importantly, the shifting of responsibility was not a uniform experience. By that I mean that there was no pattern to explain who was deemed responsible for the crime and who was able to shift responsibility onto their co-parent. In some cases the parents were deemed equally responsible for the death of their child and in other cases one parent was deemed to be more responsible than another. The portrayal and descriptions of the parent greatly affected the view of the level of responsibility that each parent bore in respect to the death of their child or children as I discuss.
The theme of shifting of responsibility encompasses three different responsibility constellations, some pursued by the parents themselves and some by observers and officials: denial of responsibility, being held responsible for one’s actions, and being held responsible for the actions of a co-parent. Denial of responsibility captures parents’ attempt at portraying themselves as not completely or not at all responsible for the death of their children. Some parents attempted to mitigate their responsibility and degree of guilt, but in their attempts to do so it backfired. So instead of coming across as less guilty, they were portrayed as guilty parties who were unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions. The second theme focuses on the ways in which parents were held accountable for their own actions and how this accountability demonstrates what is expected of parents. The final sub-theme addresses parents who were held responsible for the actions of their co-parent and thus demonstrates how parents are one unit. This construction of parents as one unit is indicative of co-parenting in which both parents are thought to be jointly involved in decision making and the raising of children. As such, if one parent is deficit in some way, the slack is expected to be picked up by the other parent and if this does not occur the second parent is blamed.

This theme of shifting of responsibility illustrates more than just how blame is accorded differently across portrayals of offenders. Within the larger theme of shifting of responsibility, it is clear that parenting is a highly racialized and gendered experience and this racialization and gendering emerges through the different manifestations and understandings of blame. In the cases of the Rimer’s and the Ibeagwa’s, that I discuss in detail below, at least one parent blamed their co-parent for the death of the children. When a parent failed to acknowledge or failed to fully acknowledge their role in the death of the child or children they were portrayed more negatively for denying their share of responsibility.
Denial of responsibility.

Mrs. Ibeagwa's testimony was fiery and frantic. Jovita Ibeagwa angrily blamed her husband for her children's death. She said he promised he would be home to watch them, so she could go to work…. “I don't claim full responsibility of their deaths, I did not want that,” said Mrs. Ibeagwa. “I was going for their future to take good care of them. I never intended in my life that they were going to die” (McLaren 2012a, lines 7-9, 25-27).

Jovita Ibeagwa blamed her husband for not coming home, as promised, and the subsequent deaths of their unattended children. The case of Markanthony and Jovita Ibeagwa is unusual in that both parents so adamantly blamed each other and took no responsibility for their role in the deaths. Jovita and Markanthony Ibeagwa had two children, Gerrard and Blessing, who died after drowning in a neighbor’s pool after their parents left them unattended. Jovita left the children home alone while she left for work, believing that her husband would be home in a few minutes as the opening quote describes. However, “Marcanthony acted negligently when he made the decision to stay three hours late at work, without telling his wife. She left home, leaving their two toddlers to fend for themselves” (Sell 2012, lines 14-16). The decision by Jovita to leave the home before her husband was home and the decision by Markanthony to stay at work for longer were sources of contention for the trials of both parents. These facts were further used by both parents to place responsibility onto their partner and deflect it off of themselves.

As the quote above illustrates, Jovita made it clear through her testimony that her husband was responsible for the deaths of their children. Yet, while Jovita placed the blame
squarely on her husband, Markanthony similarly deflected the blame off of himself and onto his wife. During Markanthony’s trial, the state prosecutors described Markanthony as negligent for staying at work late while his attorneys blamed Jovita for leaving the children alone to begin with as the quote from Sell shows. As his attorney Refik Eller states: “‘He didn’t leave his kids home, his wife did’” (ActionNewsJax.com 2012a, line 21). Thus, for both parents, attorneys attempted to place one or the other as the one to blame. As ActionNewsJax.com, the shared website for local CBS and FOX affiliates, reported:

State attorneys say Ibeagwa acted negligent when he made the decision to stay three hours late at work, without telling his wife. She left home, leaving his two toddlers to fend for themselves. But in a shocking twist, Ibeagwa’s defense team says his wife, Jovita, is to blame for the children’s drowning (2012a, lines 16-20).

The attempts by both parents, the prosecutors, and defense attorneys to describe Markanthony’s failure to come home when promised and Jovita’s decision to leave the children unattended all mark one parent as individually to blame.

In many respects, even though Markanthony’s attorneys deflect blame off of Markanthony and onto Jovita, it is Jovita who most clearly refuses to admit her role in the deaths of the children. Referring to the quote at the beginning of this section again, Jovita believed that her husband was going to be home shortly and then chose to leave their children unattended. Jovita was further quoted as saying “‘I don’t claim full responsibility of their deaths, I did not want that,’ said Mrs. Ibeagwa. ‘I was going for their future to take good care of them. I never intended in my life that they were going to die’” (McLaren 2012a, lines 24-26). Jovita attempts to frame herself as working to improve the future for her children, and thus tries to frame herself
fulfilling the needs of her children, but in doing so blames her husband for the deaths of their children.

Although Markanthony and Jovita Ibeagwa both had defense teams which portrayed their spouse as the one more to blame for the death of their children, other parents more explicitly faulted their co-parent while minimizing their own role in the death of the child or children. Stanley Rimer, for example, refused to accept responsibility for his role in the death of his son and instead attempted to place all responsibility upon his wife, Colleen. As LasVegas.CBSLocal.com reports, “Prosecutors put the couple’s inattentiveness as parents in the spotlight, while Stanley Rimer’s attorney blamed Colleen for their child’s death” (2011b, lines 11-16). In two of the stories, Stanley is taken to task for placing blame on his wife. It was reported that “District Judge Doug Herndon lashed out at Stanley Rimer after he blamed his wife, Colleen, for what happened” (LasVegas.CBSLocal.com 2011h, lines 9-13). Unlike the Ibeagwa’s, it is clear that Stanley and his attorneys both attempted to portray Colleen as the one responsible for the death of Jason. Although the exact methods employed in court to blame Colleen were not reported, the fact that such a strategy was utilized at all was something that did anger the judge presiding over the case.

Portrayals of Colleen and Stanley Rimer were vastly different, particularly given the judge’s understanding that Colleen was manipulated by her husband. Stanley and Colleen were both seen in court before the same judge, thus Judge Herndon heard the accusations from both sides. As mentioned above, Judge Herndon scolded Stanley for attempting to blame his wife for the death of their child. Colleen, however, “tearfully apologized in court for the death of her 4-year-old disabled son, who was found dead after 17 hours in a hot vehicle” (LasVegas.CBSLocal.com 2011i, lines 2-4). Despite this apology, “the judge said that while he
felt her remorse was sincere, she had to be held responsible for her actions” (KTNV.com 2011b, lines 14-15). Altogether, Stanley is portrayed as a bad father who neglected not only their son who died but victimized his other children and his wife. Colleen, with her apology and the recognition that she was remorseful, was less demonized than her husband but still portrayed as a responsible party in the death of her son.

Two other parents were also portrayed as reticent to accept responsibility for the deaths of their children. While these two fathers did not outright blame the co-parent of their children like Stanley Rimer and the Ibeagwa’s did, they still attempted to position themselves as less blameworthy figures. William Davis and John Griffin both described themselves as busy with work and unaware of the issues faced by their children, and so attempted to deny responsibility for the death of their children, while playing into gendered expectations of parenting which denote the father’s role as one of financial provider.

Sade King and William Davis had a two-year-old son who starved to death. King was described as a stay-at-home mom while Davis was said to have told police that he “worked long hours and didn’t know the child’s condition” (O’Donnell 2010 lines 34-35). Lewis, a reporter for 13WMAZ.com, further highlights that “Davis hadn’t seen his 2-year-old son for about three weeks because he had been working longer hours” (2012, lines 13-14). As such, Davis is portrayed as busy and unaware of the condition of his son. Thus, there is an attempt to deflect blame off of Davis so that he would not be held as criminally responsible for the death of D’Shawn.

However, while attempts were made to deflect blame off of Davis, additional details reported demonstrate that the neglect experienced by his son was of longer duration. Police
reports stated that “D’Shawn Davis had been isolated and neglected for nearly a year inside his home” (Lewis 2012, lines 18-19) and that “the child hadn’t received medical attention in at least ten months” (O’Donnell 2012a, line 11). Such statements strongly suggest that D’Shawn had been maltreated for longer than the time that Davis had been working long hours and hence that Davis ought to have been aware of the maltreatment of his son.

Like Davis, John Griffin also argued that he was too busy to notice his son’s demise. John Griffin “testified Tuesday that he was too busy with his job to notice anything was wrong with his son” (ABC2News.com 2009a, lines 17-18). John and his wife Susan had a two-year-old son, Andrew, who died in December 2007 weighing thirteen pounds. The Griffin’s argued “the child had a flu-like illness and lost weight because he couldn’t hold down his food” (ABC2News.com 2007, line 49). Andrew did not receive medical care for his illness as ABC2News.com reported that Griffin stated: “what did you want me to do, pay four hundred dollars to have my child seen by a doctor and work out the details with the insurance company later?” (2007, lines 36-37). These quotes from John Griffin himself, indicate that he did know what was going on and that he did know that his son was ill. However, while he knew that his son was ill, this was not the only delay that Andrew received in getting medical care. It was further reported that “The Griffins told Police they found Andrew unconscious and they tried C-P-R, but they did not bring him to the hospital right away because they had to decide what to do with their other children” (ABC2News 2009b, 12-14). Altogether, these details outweigh John’s attempt to excuse himself from responsibility for being too busy.

At the same time, the justifications that John provides do hint at good parenthood and fatherhood. For example, by detailing that he was busy with work, he is portraying himself as a provider for the family and so is making an attempt to portray himself as a good father, as
William Davis mentioned above also did. Further, the details about spending money when they could not afford to on healthcare and not wanting to leave the other children alone without a parent both suggest a measure of responsibility. However, while these details should be evidence that he was looking out for his family, all of these factors came at the cost of his son’s life. Thus, those mitigating factors and his own attempt at being since as fulfilling his role of father do not excuse the death of his son as it was preventable.

The denial of responsibility by Markanthony Ibeagwa, Stanley Rimer, William Davis, and John Griffin is informative on the construction of parenting. Although Jovita Ibeagwa was vocal in blaming her husband for the deaths of her children, she was the only woman to do so. The fact that four of the eight fathers attempted to deny their role in the deaths of their children indicates that when it comes to parenting the primary responsibility for the health, well-being, and life of a child is still thought, by these men, to be mostly in the hands of mothers. Thus, it is possible for these fathers to deny their responsibility in the death of their children because they are not the ones with the primary responsibility for the health and well-being of their child.

*Being held responsible for one’s actions.*

Detectives said Hicks had little to no food in the Herman Street apartment. But they claim they found evidence to prove the father did not go hungry…Police also found a food stamp card with $218 on it. Hicks couldn’t explain why his son hadn’t eaten on a regular basis for at least three months (NewsChannel5.com 2008e, lines 24-26, 33-35).

Jerald Hicks and Chisa Hughes had a son, Jerald Hicks, Jr., who died from starvation and hypothermia in January of 2008. Jerald and Chisa did not live together and Jerald was the primary caretaker of Jerald Jr. and another child. As the Associated Press reported, “Police said
the baby’s father, Jerald Hicks Sr., did not have electricity, heat or food in his apartment” (2010, lines 9-10). Beyond the fact that Hicks had food stamps that he did not use to feed his children, as the opening quote states, news reports stressed that Hicks made sure that he did not go hungry and additionally emphasized that people had offered Hicks help. NewsChannel5.com further stated that “Police said Jerald Hicks fed his son from time to time, but made sure he didn’t starve himself” (2008e, lines 5-6) while the condition of his son was described by detective Sarah Bruner as “‘His cheeks were sunk in, every rib on his body was exposed, I mean there was no visible body fat’” (2008e, lines 8-9). Given that Jerald Jr. died at seventeen months of age and weighed only ten pounds it is clear that Jerald Jr. had not been fed or fed regularly for an extended period of time, as the quotes also illustrate. The juxtaposition of such details with the information that the father was eating at fast food restaurants add up to a portrayal of Hicks as a selfish and incompetent father. The stories stress that Hicks could and did care for himself; but, even with the assistance of food stamps, was not able or did not care enough to feed his children.

Beyond failing to feed his child, Hicks was also blamed for the living conditions in his apartment. As NewsChannel5.com describes, “The electric was off in the home. The temperature inside the apartment where Hicks lived with his son and 2-year-old daughter was 38 degrees the night the boy died. Detectives said Hicks had little to no food in the Herman Street apartment” (2008e, lines 21-25). Making these living conditions and the lack of food in the household even less understandable were the reports that multiple people offered help to Hicks, which he refused. As a neighbor, Kalita Vincent, was quoted telling NewsChannel5.com, “‘He has friends around here, Vincent said. ‘I don’t know why he didn’t ask for help’” (2008a, lines 32-33). A quote from police spokesperson, Don Aarons, additionally highlights how it is the fault of the parents for failing to seek help in order to care for the children. As Aaron stated:
“There are too many social service agencies. There are too many caring people in this city to ensure that a child will not starve, that a child will receive sustenance and the assistance needed to thrive” (NewsChannel5.com 2008f lines 33-35). Although Aaron’s quote applies equally to both mother and father in this case, a quote such as this indicates that starvation as an issue that is easily remedied provided that parents, or other caretakers, ask for help. This statement implies that if a parent cannot adequately provide for their family, they are expected to get any and all help to remedy that inadequacy.

Although Jerald Hicks was blamed for the numerous ways in which he failed to provide for the basic necessities for his son, Chisa Hughes was also clearly blamed for her failure to remove the children from the situation or to otherwise protect the children from the depraved conditions that they were living in. NewsChannel5.com reported that “The toddler’s mother did not live with Hicks, but she saw the children in January” (2008f, lines 28-29). This description suggests that Hughes should have been able to see that something was wrong. This is made even clearer from a quote from police spokesperson, Don Aaron, who states: “‘He was extremely malnourished. He was in very, very poor condition and the mother should have known that condition existed and should have done something about it’” (NewsChannel5.com 2008f lines 20-22). Thus, Hughes is portrayed as a responsible party because she failed to take any action when it should have been clear to her that some type of action was warranted.

The case of Hughes and Hicks is interesting furthermore because it demonstrates the continued gendering of parenting. Stories repeatedly stress the fact that the children are under the care of Hicks, the father, and that Hughes visits them but is not their primary caregiver. The repeated mentioning that Hughes did not live with the children illustrates a facet of the ideals of motherhood, including the expectation that a mother is still expected to be the primary caretaker.
There could be any of a number of reasons why Hughes is not the primary caregiver but it is unclear if the parents decided upon this household arrangement or if it was necessitated by some other factors (e.g. unavailable childcare, inflexible working hours). The quote by Don Aaron mentioned above highlights this, too. Despite the fact that Hicks was the primary caretaker, Hughes was explicitly called out for her failure to take any action to correct the “poor condition” that her child was in. This is not to say that Hicks was not held responsible or blamed for his own inaction in getting help for Jerald Jr. However, the stress placed upon Hughes’ not living with her children does illustrate that a situation where a child is not living with its mother is noteworthy, especially when it is not accompanied by a reasonable explanation for why the “natural” bond of mother and child is thus disrupted.

While vastly different than the case of Hughes and Hicks, Herbert and Catherine Schaible as well as John and Susan Griffin were also held responsible for their own actions. The Schaible’s, like the Griffin’s, did not get medical care for their sick children, albeit for different reasons. Although in both cases children died because their parents did not get them medical care, the differences in rationale for this failure to get medical care had a great influence on the representation and treatment of these parents as offenders.

Herbert and Catherine Schaible were parents to two-year-old Kent who died in January 2009. The Schaible’s were members of the First Century Gospel Church in Philadelphia, a fundamentalist group that shunned medicine as it was “seen as a lack of faith in God” (Matheson 2011 lines 13-14). So, when Kent became ill his parents turned to prayer to heal him. Both Catherine and Herbert were thought to be responsible for the death of Kent as it was their joint decision that Kent did not receive medical attention. Although, as Matheson reported, the Schaible’s decision to not get medical care could be portrayed as a result of their religious
beliefs, that decision was also framed as occurring for different reasons, too. For example, “Defense attorneys argued that their clients did not know how sick the child was, and their beliefs played no role in their decision” (NBCPhiladelphia.com 2011, lines 15-16). The Schaible’s were said to have told police that as their son’s “condition worsened they called their pastor and then a funeral home” (MyFOXPhilly.com 2010d lines 40-41). Testimony by social worker, Kenneth Dixon, who questioned Herbert after the death, also has a religious element to it. Dixon testified that Herbert had said to him, “‘we tried to fight the devil, but in the end the devil won’” (Bayliss 2010, line 16). Even though the attorney argued that their religious beliefs were not influential, reporters consistently stressed the religious element of the case.

Beyond religious beliefs, there is also evidence the Griffin’s did not get medical care for their son because of financial constraints. John explained to police that his son Andrew had not received medical attention despite the fact that he was ill and could not keep food down for months because, as an earlier quote details, John did not want to pay for the medical care and fight with the insurance company about it later (ABC2News.com 2007). To further elaborate on the financial issues faced by the family, ABC2News.com reported: “Federal court records show that John Griffin filed for Chapter Seven bankruptcy in 1999. And Susan Griffin was on probation in Howard County for depositing forged checks in a credit union account” (2007, lines 11-13). Importantly, only in one of the four stories about the Griffin’s are financial constraints mentioned as a reason for why they failed to get Andrew medical attention for several months. In two other stories, the delay in getting medical care was explained as occurring “because they had to decide what to do with their other children” (ABC2News.com 2008, lines 13-14).

The rationale for not getting medical attention for these children was greatly stressed in the stories about both cases. To some extent, the attempt by the news reporters to place the death
of these two children within the larger context of religious or financial concerns was an attempt to provide a reason for why the deaths occurred. In the cases of the Griffins’ and the Schaibles’ the parents responded to the situations that their children were in and made choices that ultimately resulted in the death of said children. As such, these parents were held accountable for the death of their children but the crimes of which they were convicted demonstrate differences in regards to this accountability. The Schaible’s were convicted of involuntary manslaughter and child endangerment and were sentenced to ten years of probation during which time they were required to get routine and emergency medical care for their remaining children. Although the exact sentences for the Griffin’s were not reported, both John and Susan were convicted of second degree murder and child abuse resulting in death, both charges which carry maximum sentences of thirty years. It cannot be said with certainty that the Griffin’s were punished more harshly than the Schaible’s but most likely they were.

Beyond this, though, media portrayals of these two couples were widely different and were impacted by details about the cases. The Schaible’s were described as “upstanding citizens and pillars of their community” and that “Herbert Schaible teaches school at church while his wife stays at home” (Matheson 2011, line 33, 34). In fact, the judge presiding over their case, Judge Carol Engel Temin, was said to have “wrestled with the sentence, noting that prison would not address the problem or serve the needs of the community” (Matheson 2011, lines 31-32). MyFOXPhilly.com reported that “The city judge who upheld involuntary manslaughter, child endangerment and conspiracy charges in October 2009 called the parents loving but misguided” (2010a, lines 22-23). The Schaible’s were portrayed as loving, involved, and religious people who never intended for their son to die. All of these factors make the Schaible’s more
sympathetic as offenders and hint at the possibility that the Schaible’s truly were unaware of the severity of their son’s illness and that they should have taken steps to better care for their child.

Yet, while these quotes and descriptions of the Schaible’s allow for the possibility that they did not know the extent to which their son was ill, it is still clear that more attentive and responsive care is expected of a parent, regardless of whether s/he is a mother or father. Furthermore, as will be discussed in more detail later, there was also the expectation that the Schaible’s should have foregone their religious beliefs in order to protect the life of their child. As the judge presiding over their case, Judge Carolyn Engel Temin was quoted as saying, “The welfare of the child is more important than the religious freedom of the parents” (Matheson 2011, lines 16-17). Overall, the Schaible’s might have been portrayed in a sympathetic light, but their parenting is still portrayed in a negative way because their son’s life was put in danger which is even less understandable given all of the positive descriptors of the Schaible’s as “upstanding citizens” (Matheson 2011, line 33).

While the Schaible’s were portrayed in a sympathetic light with the understanding that the death of Kent was unintentional, the Griffin’s are portrayed as demonized figures who willfully engaged in behaviors that harmed and eventually killed their son Andrew. This demonization of the Griffin’s becomes especially clear as ABC2news.com reports that “the toddler from Rodgers Forge died after being tortured by his parents” (2009b, lines 5-6). ABC2news.com further reported that “An emergency room doctor testified during the trial that Andrew looked like ‘a Holocaust victim’” (2009a, 14-16). The words torture and Holocaust victim are vivid and greatly color how the Griffin’s are understood. Furthermore, while Andrew might have died due to starvation there was evidence that more was going on. It was also reported that “Police said he weighed 13 pounds and had bruises, cuts and a black eye”
Coupling the imagery of a bruised and battered child with the description that he was tortured by his parents, John Griffin’s claim “that his son suffered from flu-like symptoms, but he didn’t take him to the doctor because of billing dispute” does not make Andrew’s death any more understandable. Instead, they become demonized figures who deliberately hurt their child. The demonization of John and Susan Griffin can occur because their actions led to the death of their child. Moving beyond this, however, the framing of the Griffin’s in such a demonized way occurs because parents are expected to nurture and protect their children, not be the ones who victimize them.

*Being held responsible for the actions of their co-parent.*

Prosecutors asked jurors to convict Christopher Dunham because he knowingly left his children in the care of Stephanie Dunham, who’s accused of using meth and falling asleep from medication she took to treat her bipolar disorder. The state explained to jurors that Christopher Dunham was put on notice at least six times about his wife’s behavior (KOCO.com 2012g, lines 25-30).

While blame was assigned to parents for their own actions, some parents were also blamed for the actions of their co-parent. The blaming of one parent for the actions of the other parent did not occur in all cases. In fact, parents were only blamed for the actions of their partner when the partner was constructed as defective or unfit in some way. Thus, in some respects, some parents were doubly blamed for their role in the death of their child and again for the role of their co-parent. Other parents, however, were not thought of as deserving of blame for their own actions but because they did not prevent their co-parent from harming the child.
Christopher Dunham, the husband of Stephanie Dunham and who was detailed in the quote introducing this sub-theme, is a prime example of this type of shifting of responsibility. Christopher and Stephanie Dunham had three children who all died after a space heater set their RV on fire. When the fire broke out Christopher was not home. Stephanie, who was a stay-at-home mom, had been with the children in the RV but apparently was unable to rescue the children from the fire. While in some cases the parent present at the time of the accident would have been legally more responsible for the death of his or her children, in the case of Christopher and Stephanie Dunham that was not the case. The charges that Christopher faced illustrate this precise issue. Christopher Dunham was charged with child neglect and enabling child neglect. This second charge of enabling child neglect is the result of the fact that he left his children with their mother and her actions were neglectful in nature. Thus, because Christopher had been previously informed that his wife’s behavior was neglectful and endangering the welfare of the children, as the opening quote illustrates, he was held accountable for leaving his children in such a situation. Additionally, Christopher had been in contact with the child welfare agency and told Angela Newman, a child welfare specialist, that he “had concerns about his wife’s health. Newman said that (Christopher) Dunham reported concerns that his wife, Stephanie, was using methamphetamine (KOCO.com 2012f, lines 13-15). As such, there was evidence that Christopher knew that his wife had issues that threatened her ability to properly care for their children.

Although Christopher Dunham was clearly being portrayed as responsible for his wife’s behavior, both Christopher and Stephanie Dunham were ultimately handed down the same sentence of eighteen years of incarceration. As shown in table 6.3, Christopher and Stephanie were convicted of the same charges of three counts of child neglect and drug possession.
Stephanie also faced an additional charge of obstructing an officer, which meant that she prevented an officer from attempting to perform their duty. Given that Christopher was not present at the time of the fire, it may seem strange that he was convicted of similar charges and sentenced for the same time period as his wife. However, since he had been informed about this wife’s behavior and still left the children under her care, he can be thought of as responsible since he made the choice to continue to have Stephanie care for the children when he had been instructed to not do so.

Chisa Hughes was also blamed for the actions of another, her estranged husband Jerald Hicks, and his failures to properly care for their children. As described above, Chisa Hughes was held accountable for failing to remove her children from the living situation that they were in with their father. However, Hughes was also held accountable for the actions of Hicks because she knew of the conditions that Hicks and the two children were living in. News stories make it clear that Hughes was not living with Hicks and the children, as previously discussed; however, it is unclear why the children were not living with their mother, the more typical primary caregiver. The repeated mention that Hughes was not living with the children but had seen them shortly before Jerald Jr. died clearly hints at the expectation that Hughes should have intervened and removed the children from the care of their father since he was not adequately prepared for that task.

To a lesser extent, Derek Wulf can also be thought of as having been blamed for the actions of his former wife, Rebecca Christie, in the death of their daughter Brandi. Christie neglected Brandi for eleven days while she played video games and was on the internet. Given that Wulf was deployed at the time of the death, he was not directly responsible for the death of his daughter. Yet, Wulf was still held responsible for the death of his daughter because he
“neglect[ed] his daughter’s health and [was] not adequately monitoring her medical and nutritional needs” (KFOXTV.com 2011a, lines 10-11). Christie might have been the only parent present during those eleven days and so the one that should have been providing food, water, and attention to her daughter rather than playing video games but Wulf is still thought to be a responsible party because he should have played a more active role in making sure that those basic needs were being met. Furthermore, as KFOXTV.com states, “Brandi Wulf had gained just a pound and a half in the last year of her life and weighed 23 pounds when Christie called 911” (2011b, lines 8-9). Thus, while those eleven days of being ignored by her mother did not help the situation, there is evidence that the neglect was occurring over a longer period of time than just those eleven days. As such, it is much more reasonable to position Wulf as responsible for the death of his child and the actions of his former wife given that this neglect was occurring over a longer time frame.

Although only these three parents out of the total sixteen subject parents fell into this category, these three parents do represent the dual sides of the gendering of parenthood through the very different expectations associated with women as parents and men as parents. The differences in the depictions of Chisa Hughes and her former partner Jerald Hicks, Christopher and Stephanie Dunham, and Rebecca Christie and Derek Wulf demonstrate some of the ways in which good and bad motherhood and fatherhood are gendered. The ability of women to “naturally” mother is still very much a part of the construction of motherhood. As such, there are clear expectations that a mother should know the needs of her children and respond quickly to those needs. However, there are not nearly as stringent or demanding expectations for fathers.

For Chisa Hughes, the details that she had seen her children and failed to improve their living situation and remove them from the harms posed by their living situation portray her as a
bad mother. As she was aware of the living situation and did not remove the children from it or otherwise protect them from the conditions, Hughes is cast into the role of bad mother. In many ways, even though Hicks should have been a better caregiver and utilized available resources (i.e. food stamps, help from friends and family), it is Hughes who portrayed as more blameworthy. Hughes, conversely, is thought of as a bad mother because she failed to step in and make sure that all of the needs of her family were being met. Hughes did visit the children only a few days preceding the death of Jerald Jr. and presumably would have been cognizant of the issues threatening her children. As NewsChannel5.com reports, “Investigators said the mother, Chisa Hughes, saw her kids just days before her son’s death and did nothing” (2008g, lines 12-13). Thus, it is Hughes’ lack of action to remove her children from the situation that resulted in her facing criminal charges and also resulted in her being portrayed as blameworthy.

Stephanie Dunham was also portrayed as a bad mother, in particular given the abundance of references to accusations of drug use. As Iwasinski reports “Prosecutors say she was high on meth when her three children… died in the fire. Fire investigators testified that the children had been locked inside the RV. During the investigation, drugs and drug paraphernalia were found inside the burned vehicle” (2012h, lines 7-9). While the portrayal of the mother of one’s children as a bad mother does not typically become a reflection upon the father, in the case of the Dunham’s, Christopher is cast into the role of bad father because he left his children in the care of his wife who had a known and diagnosed mental illness. Even though the actions of the mother typically do not influence views of the father, it is important to note this unique occurrence as it gives insight into another facet of parenting. KOCO.com, for example, reported that “Christopher Dunham neglected his children and exposed the children to an unsafe environment where drugs were present” (2012h, lines 10-11). The article continues,
“Prosecutors asked jurors to convict Christopher Dunham because he knowingly left the children in the care of Stephanie Dunham, who’s accused of using meth and falling asleep from medication that she took to treat her bipolar disorder” (KOCO.com 2012h, lines 18-21). Thus, even though Stephanie is his wife and the mother of their children, Christopher is blamed for the fact that because she did not provide their children with a safe environment. Again, even though this case is unique even within this data, the myriad ways that Christopher was held accountable for his wife’s actions illustrates that there is the expectation that if one parent is lacking in some regard that the other parent will see that those needs are still met for their children.

Finally, Rebecca Christie is portrayed as a bad mother because she willingly and willfully neglected the needs of her child for eleven while she played video games. As KRQE.com reported “A mother, who murdered her daughter by not giving her food and water while she played video games, is heading to prison” (2011, lines 1-3). “They (investigators) said she spent 11 days playing World of Warcraft at their home on the base while ignoring her 3 year-old daughter” (2011, lines 10-12). Like Christopher Dunham, Wulf is cast as responsible for his wife’s actions for failing to curb the dangers that Christie posed. Certainly, part of the reason that Wulf is not portrayed as a bad father is the result of some of the facts that are provided about him. For example, as KRQE.com reported that “Investigators said it happened while Christie’s husband, who was stationed at Holloman Air Force Base, was deployed overseas in 2006” (2011, lines 7-9). But, KOB.com Staff further related that “Wulf acknowledged neglecting his daughter’s health and not adequately monitoring her medical and nutritional needs” (2011a, lines 7-8). As such, he was unable to directly monitor the behavior of his then wife, and fully admitted his failure to properly take care of his daughter.
Thus, as these cases illustrate, there are still gendered expectations when it comes to parenting and these gendered expectations are manifested within the constructs of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood as well as in mad motherhood. There are a range of behaviors and actions that are encompassed within bad motherhood as well as bad fatherhood. However, an act that would cast a woman as a bad mother would not necessarily cast a man as a bad father and vice versa. At the same time, the fact that both mothers and fathers can be held responsible for the actions of their co-parent illustrates that there are expectations associated with being a parent, regardless of gender. As such, this subtheme illustrates that there is an expectation that a parent will intercede when her or his co-parent places their child in harm’s way. This suggests that there is some expectation of co-parenting. Yet, through this subtheme it is evident that co-parenting is prized but that co-parenting does require that the parents both monitor each other’s behaviors so that the well-being of the child is always met. The conclusion that co-parenting requires monitoring may be the result of the focus on filicide and on parents who did harm their children. Given evidence that a parent can be held criminally responsible even when physically absent at the time when a child is harmed, there is the idea that a parent needs to protect the family as a whole from threats, even internal ones.

Requirements of Care

“If you are a parent you have a tremendous responsibility, not just for the physical care of your child but for the emotional, mental, and intellectual care of your child,” (Smith and Jones 2012, lines 23-25).

Many of the cases that I describe in this chapter deal with the issue of a parent or both parents providing their children with the necessities for them to continue to live and thrive. This
is notable for several reasons. Firstly, in comparison with the mothers or fathers who acted alone, there were more cases in which both parents were thought to be responsible for the death of the child or children in which the basic needs of survival were not being met. Thus, when comparing these two groups, children who were killed by one parent acting alone typically suffered a more violent death than children whose deaths were thought to be the result of the acts of both parents. This is not to suggest, however, that when only one parent is held responsible for the death of a child that the crime must be a violent one nor to suggest that when parents are both held responsible for the death of their child that the death could not be a violent one. What is more likely to be true is that cases in which the death is more the result of neglect or failure to provide one’s child with the basic necessities needed for survival, both parents are thought to be responsible for that death since both parents are responsible for the care of their children.

This theme, to some extent, identifies what is expected of a good parent. Thus, in many respects, the portrayals of parents in this section become symbolic representations of what a parent should not do and illustrate the bare minimum requirements for the caretaking responsibilities of a parent. Altogether, these cases illustrate that good parenthood requires sacrifice and the awareness to respond to a child’s needs, or at the very least that there is the expectation of providing a positive environment for one’s children.

The expectations of parenting have changed over time. Some researchers have traced the history of parenting and identified the shifts in ideology and expectations in the roles of mothering, fathering, and parenting. Numerous scholars have demonstrated how the 1950’s nuclear family with the stay-at-home mom and bread-winning father was a historical fluke and was never attainable for certain segments of the population (i.e. Coontz 2000). Importantly,
what particular items and actions are necessary aspects of care do undergo change and can vary depending upon cultural expectations.

When it comes to caring for a child and fulfilling the needs of a child, most of the responsibilities associated with that care fall squarely within the confines of mothering. Regardless of the fact that some fathers have taken on greater caretaking roles, when it comes to caretaking, this continues to be defined by both researchers and parents alike as more within the realm of women and mothering (i.e. Arendell 2000; Olmstead, Futris, and Pasley 2009; Scott and Alwin 1989).

In this project I posit that good parenthood is constructed in cases of filicide by emphasizing the failures of specific parents with the intent of making these parents into representations of what a good parent would not do. By the same token, cases of filicide can also emphasize the level of care that should be provided by parents through demonstrates of parents not providing an adequate level of care. Thus, most of the cases that I detail in this chapter inform what parents should do when it comes to caring for their children by highlighting all the ways that these eight sets of parents have failed. Importantly, parenting is so deeply gendered that the actions of these sixteen parents are representations of motherhood and fatherhood more so than parenthood. As such, good motherhood and fatherhood are strongly reinforced by the depictions of these parents while parenthood continues to be a more nebulous concept.

Stanley and Colleen Rimer serve as a prime example of what a good parent does not do when it comes to caring for their child or children. The Rimer’s had eight children, one of whom died after being left in the car for seventeen hours. Yet beyond the fact that their son died after being left in the car, numerous other details about the household were provided that paint a
picture of the multitude of ways in which the Rimer’s were not good parents. “Prosecutors put the couple’s inattentiveness as parents in the spotlight” (LasVegas.CBSlocal.com 2011b, lines 11-13) and “statements made by the couple to police indicated that it wasn’t the first time they had forgotten about the child, who suffered from a genetic disorder that rendered him unable to walk properly and perform other functions” (FOX5Vegas.com 2011a, lines 13-15). Additionally, the judge presiding over the case was repeatedly spoken of as saying that Jason, their son, died “because no one in the family cared to go find him” (LasVegas.CBSLocal.com 2011i, lines 11-12). Altogether, these details suggest that the Rimer’s were neglectful parents who could forget about their disabled child.

Beyond descriptions of their parenting, details about the Rimer’s home were also provided that portrayed them not as good parents. Testimony during the course of the trial revealed details about their home that called into question their ability to care for their children. LasVegas.CBSLocal.com, for example, reports of testimony which described the condition of the home as “often dirty” (2011e, line 18) and that the children had lice problems while a later story details that the parents were physically abusive and that they “lived in squalor” (2011i, line 17). Furthermore, one of the Rimer’s own children, Crystal Davis, testified about the deplorable condition of the home as well as detailing a history of Stanley employing “a boat oar, paint stirrers and his fists to strike the children” (LasVegas.CBSLocal.com 2011a, lines 14-15). Thus, the living conditions for their children were not ideal, but this coupled with the descriptions of Stanley physically abusing the children illustrates how unsafe the home environment was for the children.

Between the Rimer’s being portrayed as inattentive and providing abusive and unclean living conditions for their children, it is clear that the Rimer’s are being portrayed as bad parents.
They become examples of what a good parent should not do, such as: abuse one’s child or forget about one’s child. Importantly, the characteristics of the Rimer’s and their household as being dirty and that they lived in squalor indicate that good parenthood requires not only nurturing and caring for one’s child but to do so in a clean, safe environment.

The Rimer’s were not the only parents whose behavior and household were discussed in detail. The behaviors of Sade King and William Davis were also greatly discussed and used to emphasize all the ways in which the parents failed to live up to the expectations of parenting. However, while specific behaviors of the Rimer’s were detailed to illustrate the ways that they failed as parents, the lack of action on behalf of King and Davis were discussed to demonstrate their failures. JoAnn Smith, a neighbor, was quoted by O’Donnell as saying “‘Believe it or not. There’s food in the back for the animals,” she says, pointing to two healthy-looking pit bulls in the couple’s backyard” (2010, lines 13-16). As a member of the county juvenile justice department, Sargent Darin Meadows, stated: “If you know you’re not feeding someone I don’t know it would be unintentional especially with a two year old. You’re not talking about a teenager who can go in and fix some food and do for themselves” (Quesada 2010, lines 7-11). Additionally, Quesada reports that “Neighbors say the only time they ever saw 2 year old D’Shawn Davis was the day the family moved into the home. They also say that William Davis had recently brought his 5-year-old daughter to live with them in August and when they saw the little girl on Saturday there were also visible signs of neglect” (2010, lines 22-25). These quotes demonstrate that Davis and King knew to care for their pets but that they did not extend that care to their children. As such, Davis and King are portrayed as bad parents as they could not extend the same basic level of care that they provided for pets to their children and further, as they did successfully care for their pets, they knew that such care was necessary.
Rebecca Christie is another parent that failed to meet the basic requirements of care for a child. Only sparse details are provided about this case yet these details make it clear that Christie failed to live up to the expectations of parenting, and mothering in particular, in very basic ways. Christie’s daughter, Brandi Wulf, “withered away from malnutrition and dehydration while the mother chatted and played World of Warcraft online” (KOB.com Staff 2011b lines 2-3). Although it is clear that Christie neglected her daughter during this eleven day time period, there is some evidence that this was part of a larger pattern of neglect. KOB.com Staff reports that “Brandi Wulf had gained a pound and half in the last year of her life and weighed 23 pounds when Christie called 911” (2011b, lines 6-7). Beyond these reports, very little is known about the living situation that Christie provided for her daughter. Furthermore, while there are only a few details known about this case, these few details decidedly cast Christie as a bad mother. It might be unrealistic for a mother to constantly be catering to the needs and desires of her children. However, as KRQE.com reports that Christie “spent 11 days playing World of Warcraft at their home on the base while ignoring her 3 year-old daughter” (2011, lines 10-12), Christie’s behavior was clearly described as example of extreme neglect.

Although there are less detailed descriptions of the condition of the homes and methods of parenting experience by D’Shawn Davis and Brandi Wulf, their parents still become examples of what a good parent would not do. As the quote from their neighbor illustrates, King and Davis were capable of feeding and caring for their dogs while the same could not be said for their son, D’Shawn. This detail actually portrays King and Davis more solidly as bad parents because it does indicate that they knew how to care for their pets. Rebecca Christie, the mother of Brandi Wulf, similarly has few explicit details about her mothering provided, but the report that she neglected to provide food and water to her daughter for eleven days is enough to see her
as a bad mother. Although these cases are both extreme in that the children died from lack of proper nutrition, both cases do illustrate that a good parent does, at the very least, make sure that her or his child is fed.

Rita Swan, a spokesperson for Children’s Healthcare Is a Legal Duty (CHILD), an Iowa-based organization, was quoted as saying “A child is not just property of his parents, and parents must do everything within their power to safeguard the lives of their children” (Dima 2010, lines 34-35). Swan said this in response to the death of Kent Schaible who died at the age of two from bacterial pneumonia after his parents, Herbert and Catherine, refused to get medical care for him as their religious beliefs precluded the use of doctors. Ultimately, both Herbert and Catherine were sentenced to ten years of probation and required to get routine and emergency medical care for their other children during this ten year period. The judge, Common Pleas Court Judge Carolyn Engel Temin, presiding over the case was quoted as saying: “The welfare of the child is more important than the religious freedom of the parents” (Matheson 2011, lines 16-17). Freedom of religion is guaranteed by The Constitution but it is clear from the quote from Judge Temin, the ruling handed down, and by laws in many states that the life and safety of a child trumps such guarantees when the behavior of the parents puts the child in jeopardy. However, what the judge and others fail to account for is their own bias that favors medical experts over that of the parents. The assumption is made that if doctors had seen the child they would have known how gravely ill he was and proper medical attention would have saved his life. Yet, as Dima reports, “his parents thought it was just a bad cold or flu” (2010, lines 12-13). As such, the judge and the representative from SWAN both privilege the expertise of the medical community over that of parents as knowing what is best and needed for a sick child.
Although the quote from Swan does speak directly to the case of the Schaibles’, the sentiment expressed in the quote is still applicable to a wide range of parenting behaviors. When it comes to parenting there is a clear expectation that steps should always be taken to protect the life of the child, even if that takes away some of the rights of the parents. With this expectation in mind, Stanley and Colleen Rimer, Sade King, William Davis, and Rebecca Christie are all bad parents because they did not do all that they could to save the lives of their children.

While the Schaible’s were be the only parents whose religion was implicated in the death of their child, their case, like the others, still builds into the idea of good parenthood. From the Schaible’s it becomes clear that a parent’s right to religious freedom, at the very least, is less important than a child’s life. Although these cases of filicide illustrate what happens when parents do not respond to the needs of their children, it is in precisely this cases that parenthood is most strongly invoked. The Schaible’s became symbolic of the larger issues of religious freedom, medical care, and the intersections of the two. Their case alone demonstrates the privileging of expert knowledge over that of parents while parsing out that medical care and heeding legitimate, expert advice is a part of being a parent.

Other cases highlight different aspects of what is expected to be provided for children. For example, the Rimer’s who were previously discussed were portrayed as bad parents because of the household environment that the children were being raised in. Through descriptions such as the children living “in squalor” (LasVegas.CBSLocal.com 2011i, line 17), and that the home was “often dirty” (LasVegas.CBSLocal.com 2011e, line 18), and “that Jason and his siblings lived in unsafe and unsanitary conditions” (LasVegas.CBSLocal.com 2011a, lines 9-10), there is the expectation that parents will provide a home that is conducive to their children’s health and well-being.
Similarly, the living arrangements of the Dunham’s were often stressed to emphasis the less than desirable situations that they put their children in. As I previously described, stories about the Dunham’s often discussed drug use and drug paraphernalia in their home. These descriptions illustrate two different things: the expectation that parents do not engage in such drug-abusing behaviors and further that parents do not knowingly expose to drug-rich environments. However, beyond the issue of drugs, stories about the Dunham’s often discussed the actual place of residence of the Dunham’s. The home of the Dunham’s was described in numerous different ways such as “recreational vehicle” or RV (KOCO.com 2012h, lines 12-13), “trailer” (KOCO.com 2011k, line 15), and “mobile home” (KOCO.com 2011f, line 2). Beyond being a clear indication of the socioeconomic status of the Dunham’s, these terms give indications of cramped and crowded conditions for a family of five. Yet these conditions are further described in such a way to detail that the parents were not providing their children with a safe living environment. Instead, as KOCO.com reports “the parents would smoke meth in the mobile home while the children were home and locked them inside the camper with the space heater running as a ‘day care’” (2011f, lines 4-6). The description that the parents would lock the camper and leave the children alone, unattended, and with the space heater running all illustrate the dangerous conditions in which the children were placed. As such, the case of the Dunham’s becomes a cautionary tale of the disasters that can result by exposing children to such hazardous conditions.

**Importance of Motherhood**

[T]he judge told Colleen Rimer at sentencing Thursday that she failed as a mother, and that Jason Rimer died in June 2008 because no one in the family cared to go find him (LasVegas.CBSLocal.com 2011i, lines 10-12).
Throughout this project, I find that motherhood has been stressed to a greater extent than fatherhood. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that in all of the cases in which the mother, father, or both parents were both held responsible for the death of their children there has been a theme that emphasized motherhood and, in particular, good motherhood. In the chapter on mothers, the importance of motherhood was evident in the demonization of women when they failed to live up to the expectations of good motherhood. In the chapter on fathers, the importance of motherhood was evident when the mothers of the children the fathers killed were blamed even though they were not legally implicated in the death of the children. In cases when parents are both held responsible for the death of their children, the focus of this chapter, motherhood once again emerges as a distinct theme. Not all judges or stories were as blunt as the quote that opened this theme, but there were still many instances in which motherhood was explicitly stressed. This stressing of motherhood, in particular stressing the ways that these mothers did not live up to good motherhood, reinforces the construction of good motherhood and the high value accorded to motherhood.

Colleen Rimer is the only mother who is explicitly called a failure. Other mothers discussed in this chapter had more active roles in the death of their children but were not described as failed mothers as explicitly as Colleen was. It is a bit strange that Colleen was portrayed as not intentionally having caused harm to her child but was called a failure while other mothers who had a more active role in the death of their children were not similarly called out. Seemingly, those who were more directly responsible for the death of their children should have been treated in such a manner rather than only Colleen being labeled a failure. Jason died after being left in the car after the family had come home from church. As FOX5Vegas.com reported that “statements made by the couple to police indicated that it wasn’t the first time they
had forgotten about the child, who suffered from a genetic disease that rendered him unable to walk properly and perform other functions” (2011a, lines 13-15). Furthermore, as LasVegas.CBSLocal.com reported “They left the little boy in the family SUV for 17 hours” (2011g, line 7). Taking all of these elements together it becomes clear why Colleen was called a failure but in comparison with some of the other mothers discussed in this chapter or in this overall project it is still surprising that such a clear invocation of bad motherhood was not more present given prior research on media portrayals of filicidal offenders (Cavaglion 2008; Meyer and Oberman 2001). The relative lack of bad motherhood being clearly evoked may have been the result of the fact that these crimes were ones in which both parents were held responsible for the death of the child rather than just ones in which the mother acted alone. As both Cavaglion (2008) and Meyer and Oberman (2001) focused solely on filicidal mothers who acted alone, the emphasis on bad motherhood may have been more strongly evoked in those stories as an attempt to explain why the mothers acted in this manner. Yet, in these instances, as both parents were responsible, the evocation of bad motherhood would less aptly explain the cause of the crime.

Stephanie Dunham was also described as not being a good mother. One of the firefighters, Zion Williams, who responded to the RV fire that killed the Dunham children interviewed both parents and testified in their cases. During Williams’ testimony he told jurors that Christopher Dunham described his wife as not a good mother and that she “hit and slapped the kids” (KOCO.com 2012f, line 52). Additionally, her husband Christopher “voiced concerns about his wife doing drugs, specifically meth” (Iwasinski 2012e, lines 19-20). Iwansinski further reported that a neighbor, Pam Peeler, testified that “she observed Stephanie Dunham pulling on the arms of her children, that she felt it was too rough” (2012f, lines 8-9). News9now.com reported that “Another (DHS) report made in November 2009 claimed Stephanie left the children
with an inappropriate caretaker. Following an investigation, DHS recommended the children “be supervised by a responsible adult when in this home,’’ but no immediate action was taken by the agency” (2011j, lines 26-28). Stephanie Dunham was constructed as a bad mother in these ways and her ability to parent was questioned often by her husband, neighbors, and even reporters.

Other women were also called out in regards to their ability to parent, albeit in less overt ways than being described as a failure or not a good mother. As O’Donnell reported, police described King as “unemployed, a stay-at-home mom” (2010, line 34) in the stories about the starvation death of her son. O’Donnell further reported that “Medics say they found the boy dead on her bedroom floor, clearly malnourished. He weighed 12 pounds, 6 six ounces…. The pictures show the boy’s skin was raw in some parts—from laying in his own filth, according to investigators” (2010, lines 24-25; 32-33). This poignant imagery relates not only the boy’s starvation but further indicates that he was physically neglected and suffering due to the neglect. Yet the description of King and her mothering does not conclude there. As their neighbor JoAnn Smith was quoted as saying, “‘They can feed their dogs, but they can’t feed a child,’ Smith says incredulously” (O’Donnell 2010, lines 46-47). These two quotes together demonstrate that King was capable of providing care but that did not extend to her own visibly malnourished son, despite her ability to care being evident for the family pets.

The discussion of Colleen Rimer, Stephanie Dunham, and Sade King illustrate the numerous ways in which women can fail to live up to the high expectations of good motherhood. Depictions of women such as these and the ways in which they did not meet the requirements of good motherhood continues to stress the value of motherhood, especially good motherhood. These women become representatives of bad motherhood, much like the more well-known accused maternal filicide offenders such as Andrea Yates, Casey Anthony, and Susan Smith.
These depictions do not make good motherhood any more easily obtained but they do illustrate that other women who are considered to be bad mothers for other reasons are not nearly as bad as these news-making mothers.

Additionally, the stressing of motherhood continues to illustrate how parenthood is so heavily gendered. In comparison with the two previous chapters, the news stories of focal interest here do utilize the word parent. However, this occurs because these cases do involve both a mother and a father together as responsible for the death of their child. Thus, it is not as though parent is being used as a gender-neutral term. Instead, reporters are describing these cases as ones in which the parents of a child were responsible for said child’s death. It might be a minor point that parents are labeled by gender-specific terms of mother and father, but this is indicative of a larger issue at the same time.

Mother and father, as terms, are not used primarily to establish the gender of the offender; but, instead, are used because of the symbolism of those terms. As mentioned earlier the terms “mothering” and “fathering” have vastly different connotations and are rife with specific role expectations. Referring to the parents together as parents does not evoke the same imagery or meaning as would referring to the parents as mother and father or mom and dad. This is, of course, greatly influenced by the fact that mothering and fathering are gendered concepts and parenting as a gender-neutral term has not been imparted with the role expectations of mother and father.

Furthermore, the stressing of motherhood in cases in which both parents were held responsible for the death of their child or children draws attention to the differences between motherhood and fatherhood and the expectations associated with those roles. The expectations
associated with motherhood are greater than and more childcare intensive than the expectations of fatherhood. I find that bad motherhood is more strongly portrayed than good motherhood but the portrayals of bad motherhood still provide clear ideas of what is expected of good motherhood. Conversely, fatherhood and good fatherhood are not as clearly evoked in the discussions of fathers. As I discussed in the previous theme, good parenthood was emphasized through illustrations of the ways in which both mothers and fathers did not live up to the expectations of good parenthood. Yet, fathers, individually, were not as clearly portrayed as examples of bad fatherhood as mothers were of bad motherhood.

Conclusion

In scholarship, parenting and parenthood are underdeveloped concepts. This is likely linked to the fact that parent is a gender-neutral term and the act of being a parent is not. Gender is deeply embedded in mothering and fathering. Although there is some movement towards an understanding of mothering as something capable of being performed by both men and women, the reliance upon the same term indicates that parenting is gendered.

While parenting is a gendered construct, it is also a racialized construct. To some extent, bad parenting is more quickly associated with black parenting than white parenting, as even when it comes to parenting there are expectations that blacks are less prepared to take on this role than whites. When it comes to racialization of parenting, this racialization is more clearly evident within the confines of mothering or fathering rather than within parenting.

Even though my original intention was to learn more about parenthood specifically rather than motherhood and fatherhood, this chapter more solidly demonstrates the concepts of motherhood and fatherhood. I find that motherhood is more heavily stressed and emphasized in
these cases despite the fact that both parents were held responsible for the death of their child. While this is true regardless of the race of the parent, there were still clear racial differences. For example, black mothers, in particular Chisa Hughes, were portrayed more negatively than white mothers. Additionally, white mothers, such as Colleen Rimer and Catherine Schaible, were able to be portrayed as less blameworthy than were other parents. However, this is only true when the mothers did in some way manifest that they did embody at least some of the nurturing and caretaking characteristics associated with motherhood. When mothers did not, such as in the cases of Rebecca Christie and Chisa Hughes, the status of being a mother no longer helped to portray them as more sympathetic figures but rather demonized them as mothers more greatly.

Given the overwhelming gendered nature of the concepts of motherhood and fatherhood, part of the aim of this chapter was to identify that there are distinct constructs of good and bad parenthood. There is the construction of good and bad parenthood. There are behaviors and actions that are expected of mothers and fathers alike because they are parents. Importantly, the constructs of good and bad parenthood are both vague, particularly in comparison with the construction of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood. Overall, it is not surprising that parenthood as a concept is so vague. As the constructs of motherhood and fatherhood are deeply gendered, the expectations that are associated with being a parent are more general and in the most basic terms require that a parent respond to the needs of the child so that the child can survive.

Yet, what is rather surprising was the lack of racialization of parenthood. Given that it is known that race and gender are influential on the way a person does parent (Collins 2009; Drakich 1989; Glenn 1994; Harris 2002; Risman 1998), it was expected that parenthood would be racialized just like motherhood and fatherhood are. However, again, as parenthood is
constructed in such general terms, the lack of racialization may be because of the vague nature of the construct.
Table 6.1  Headline and Story Distribution of Direct and Indirect Parental References

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Hughes-Hicks</th>
<th>Ibeagwa</th>
<th>Christie-Wulf</th>
<th>Dunham</th>
<th>Griffin</th>
<th>Rimer</th>
<th>Schaible</th>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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Table 6.2 Charges and Sentences for Black Filicidal Offenders

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<th>Offender</th>
<th>Original Charge</th>
<th>Convicted Charge</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William Davis and Sade King</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Davis</td>
<td>Murder, cruelty to children, battery</td>
<td>Involuntary manslaughter and reckless conduct</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sade King</td>
<td>Murder, cruelty to children, battery</td>
<td>Murder and cruelty to children</td>
<td>Life possibility of parole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerald Hicks and Chisa Hughes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerald Hicks</td>
<td>First degree murder, aggravated child abuse,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chisa Hughes</td>
<td>aggravated child neglect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First degree murder and aggravated child neglect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markanthony and Jovita Ibeagwa</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markanthony Ibeagwa</td>
<td>Aggravated manslaughter and child neglect</td>
<td>Child neglect with great bodily harm</td>
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<td>Jovita Ibeagwa</td>
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<td>Aggravated manslaughter of a child</td>
<td>1 year</td>
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Table 6.3 Charges and Sentences for White Filicidal Offenders

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<th>Original Charge</th>
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<th>Sentence</th>
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<tr>
<td>Derek Wulf and Rebecca Christie</td>
<td>Derek Wulf: child abuse resulting in death</td>
<td>child neglect</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rebecca Christie: second degree murder and child abandonment</td>
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<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher and Stephanie Dunham</td>
<td>Christopher Dunham: Child neglect (3), possession of drug paraphernalia</td>
<td>Child neglect (3), possession of marijuana, possession of drug paraphernalia, and possession of methamphetamine in front of a child under 12 years of age</td>
<td>18 years, $15,000 fine</td>
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<td>Stephanie Dunham: Child neglect (3), possession of drug paraphernalia, and obstructing an officer</td>
<td>Child neglect (6) and drug possession</td>
<td>18 years, $15,000 fine</td>
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<tr>
<td>John and Susan Griffin</td>
<td>John Griffin: first degree murder and felony child abuse</td>
<td>second degree murder and child abuse resulting in death</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Susan Griffin: first degree murder and felony child abuse</td>
<td>second degree murder and child abuse resulting in death</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley and Colleen Rimer</td>
<td>Stanley Rimer: second degree murder</td>
<td>involuntary manslaughter and child abuse</td>
<td>8 to 30 years</td>
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<td>Colleen Rimer: second degree murder</td>
<td>involuntary manslaughter and child abuse</td>
<td>5 to 20 years</td>
</tr>
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### Herbert and Catherine Schaible

<table>
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<th>Name</th>
<th>Charges</th>
<th>Charges</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Involuntary manslaughter and child endangerment</td>
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<td>Catherine Schaible</td>
<td>Involuntary manslaughter, child endangerment, and conspiracy</td>
<td>Involuntary manslaughter and child endangerment</td>
<td>10 years of probation</td>
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CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Based on current understandings of childhood and parenthood, filicide, or the murder of a child by its parent(s), is a crime that can be difficult to understand. While this crime occurs across cultures and time periods, the reality of a parent killing his or her own child seems to be counterintuitive to what is expected of a parent. As the crime is outside the realms of both normal parenting and normal criminal behavior, filicide is a crime that garners media coverage. However, even though filicide, generally speaking, attracts extensive media coverage, there is still considerable variation in newsworthiness across different cases. The most pervasive variation refers to the gender of the perpetrators, with mothers attracting far more news attention than fathers. By looking only at the cases that garner wide-spread attention, it would seem as though filicide is only perpetuated by mothers when, in fact, mothers and fathers commit filicide in roughly equal numbers (Goetting 1988; Kunz and Bahr 1996).

In this work, I have focused on twenty-five cases of filicide committed by mothers, fathers, and parents who together were held responsible for the death of their children. From these twenty-five cases we can learn much about the social construction of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood, including how these social constructions are racialized and gendered. Given that I focused on parents who killed their children, this research primarily informs understandings of bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood, in particular; however, the media portrayals of filicide are also informative on the construction of good motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood.

As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, views on parenting are influenced by the social context in which the parenting occurs. Thus, what is expected of parents can differ depending upon the historical and cultural contexts in which that parent-child relationship is
taking place. Because parenting is culturally and socially informed, the expectations of parents are articulated and disseminated through the constructs of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. These expectations are derivatives of the larger cultural and social context, including the social position that the parents occupy. In other words, parenting, mothering, and fathering are all constructs that are racialized and gendered\(^2\). The ways in which these constructs are racialized and gendered are, at times, very similar, but, that is not always the case.

Parents who kill their own children may not seem like the most obvious choice to learn about good parenting, but, in actuality, the stories of these offenders are informative on the constructions of good and bad parenting, mothering, and fathering. The thirty-three parents that I discuss are not thought of as good parents, at the very least because they were held responsible for the death of their child, but their crimes reinforce good parenting through that contrast. In other words, coverage of the crime of filicide, at the bare minimum, reinforces the idea that good parents do not harm or kill their children.

**Major Findings**

Motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are all social constructions. At the same time, all of these social constructions are informed and influenced by race and gender. While scholars have analyzed stereotypes and controlling images associated with mothering or fathering, such as Collins’ (2009) discussion of the mammy and the matriarch, the attention paid to parenting as a social construct has been very limited. The themes that I elucidate illustrate the controlling images and ideas that are a part of the construction of mothering, fatherhood, and parenthood.

\(^2\) The constructs of mothering, fathering, and parenting are also classed. However, class was not a focus of this study, in large part due to the fact that the class of the offenders would have been very difficult to determine given the information available about the offenders.
The themes that I discussed in chapters four, five, and six and briefly summarized again here, illustrate that motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are racialized and gendered in unique ways. By definition, motherhood, especially good motherhood, is associated with women and femininity (Glenn 1994) and fatherhood is associated with men and masculinity (White 1994). Yet, recently, some scholars have discussed the ability of men to “mother,” thus suggesting that mothering is not necessarily an activity done only by women (i.e. Drakich 1989; Olmstead, Futris, and Pasley 2009; Risman 1987). This ability of men to take on mothering roles raises a number of questions about what it means to mother, to father, or to parent. Furthermore, if a new fatherhood role encompasses responsibilities and privileges that were typically associated with motherhood, the lines that define and separate motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are becoming increasingly blurred.

However, as I have shown in this dissertation, blurring the lines of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood does not detract from the gendered nature of these constructs. The fact that new versions of fatherhood also involve “mothering” illustrates this. If certain roles, such as caretaking or nurturing were not already associated with mothering, then new fatherhood would not be described as including more of a “mothering” role. Furthermore, the very fact that we distinguish between mothering and fathering, rather than describing actions of parents, regardless of their gender, under the umbrella term of parenting illustrates the embodiment of gender into these constructs.

Similarly, although the lines of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are being blurred by the recognition, and sometimes expectation, that parents can take on both mothering and fathering roles, the men that I discussed were especially demonized when they could not handle the caretaking and nurturing behaviors that are often within the realm of mothering. As
such, while “new” fatherhood calls for men to take on more “mothering” roles, when men do not successfully take on these roles it reinforces ideas about fathering as something that needs to be learned (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin 2005).

Themes of Motherhood. The themes of motherhood that emerged from the analysis include the demonization of mothering, unfit to mother, inadequate mothering, and, as an antithesis, the evoking of good mothering. Importantly, while filicidal mothers are consistently portrayed as bad mothers, their individual failures were used by various actors (e.g., prosecutors) and observers to reinforce what is expected of good mothers. The evocation of good mothering highlights both specific actions that are expected of good mothers and vague platitudes that illustrate the lofty ideals of good mothers.

The demonization of mothering illustrated bad motherhood and the numerous ways that women could be thought to be bad mothers. For Latisha Lawson it was her use of punishment, but for Carlotta Brett-Pierce and Sheterra James, it was through attempts to portray them as good mothers that it was identified that they did not live up to the label of good mother. The two themes of being unfit to mother and being inadequate at mothering both stress bad motherhood but in two different ways. The theme of unfit mothers point to the ways in which these mothers should not have become mothers, while being inadequate at mothering focuses on the weaknesses of individual mothers that limit their ability to mother. These two themes suggest that some women should never become mothers or have issues fully mothering because of specific limitations and/or bad decisions that they have made. As such, even though there are ideas that all women are born to be mothers (Harris 1995), these themes highlight that not all women should be mothers. For some women, they should not be mothers because they are not
prepared or ready to be a mother while for other women it is suggested that they should never be mothers.

The idea that all women are meant to be mothers occurs because of the view that all women have the innate and natural ability and desire to be mothers and that all mothers have the same capacity to be good mothers. However, as the women that I describe indicate, not all women have the same tools to be successful at motherhood and some women have particular limitations that hinder their chances to be a good mother. The naturalization of motherhood glosses over the reality of being a mother and all that entails physically, financially, and emotionally. As such, when women are portrayed as being unfit to mother it becomes a reflection of their individual weaknesses as overpowering their destiny to be a mother. As such, the institution of motherhood can remain unchanged. This can occur because it is the women’s individual failures that set them up to not succeed or be prepared for motherhood.

The naturalization of motherhood implies that are women are equally prepared and suited for motherhood. However, in reality, this is not the case. Yet, it is precisely because motherhood has been essentialized that we do not need to recognize that individual women are differentially prepared and able to mother. Through the essentialization of motherhood all women should be suited to handle whatever motherhood throws at them because they are naturally suited for the task. Importantly, the naturalization of motherhood attempts to treat all women the same because they are women. However, as I have discussed, motherhood is also racialized. This is important because there are different expectations and realities associated with motherhood depending upon the race of the woman. As such, the naturalization of motherhood glosses over these racial differences and neglects to understand the profound ways that race affects and influences the practice and ideology ofmothering.
The covert and overt references to the ways in which these mothers were unsuccessful in their mothering that I describe lay the framework for expectations on other mothers. Thus, by pointing out the ways in which these women were bad mothers the value of motherhood, especially the value of good motherhood, is reinforced. The reinforcing of good motherhood is very much a part of the media coverage of filicide. Good motherhood does not become any more easily attainable, though. Instead, to some respect, the ideal of good motherhood actually becomes even more difficult to achieve because a wide range of flaws and weaknesses are used to portray women as unfit or inadequate mothers. Given the high regard that good motherhood is held in, mothers have high standards to live up to in order to be considered a good mother. However, through portrayals of women who did not live up to these high standards it becomes clear how difficult it is to achieve good motherhood which then reinforces the value of the construct. As such, women who are portrayed as flawed or bad mothers become not only representations of what a good mother should not do but also remind other mothers that the achievement of good motherhood is still a worthy goal.

The fourth theme from chapter four that I discussed calls attention to the ways in which the media specifically reference good mothering. The individual stories about each case of a maternal filicidal offender are not portraying these specific mothers as good mothers; rather, these women serve as contrasts to what the ideal or good mother should do. In other words, these women become foils to good motherhood and through illustrating all of the ways that women can be bad mothers the requirements of good motherhood becomes clear. However, beyond these women serving as examples of what a bad mother does do, and so by extension what a good mother does not do, the reference to good mothering provides specific actions that a
good mother would do. For example, and as discussed in more detail in chapter four, good mothers do care for their children with patience and devotion.

Importantly, although these filicidal mothers become examples of bad motherhood, and by extension provide examples of what a good mother would not do, these constructions do not change the construction of good motherhood to be any more easily obtained. As has been repeatedly discussed, the characteristics of good motherhood are difficult for most women to obtain. However, the clear construction of bad motherhood evident here illustrates the numerous ways that women can be bad mothers.

Furthermore, both good and bad motherhood are highly racialized constructs. Good motherhood was not obtained by any of the mothers discussed, but for black mothers good motherhood was still framed in such a way that it was almost impossible for them to obtain. This was especially clear given the portrayals of Carlotta Brett-Pierce and Sheterra James. Attempts were made to portray these mothers as good mothers, but it was through these very suggestions that the portrayal of them as bad mothers was even more strongly made.

Chapters four, five, and six in which I focused on, respectively, mothers, fathers, and parents who together were held responsible for the death of their children, all share a common theme, that of motherhood. The fact that motherhood and the importance of motherhood was stressed in media portrayals of mothers, fathers, and parents who together were responsible for the death of their child illustrates the high expectations associated with mothering. When it comes to being a parent and fulfilling a nurturing, caring role, it is still very much expected that mothers will take on that role and do so despite stressors and limitations. The fact that
motherhood was stressed in all of the cases, whether or not mothers were the offenders, illustrates how much importance is placed on the role of motherhood.

Thus, to some extent, the stressing of motherhood and the almost impossible standards associated with good motherhood necessitates an intermediary category between good and bad motherhood. Drawing inspiration from Jordan (2009) and her construction of the “good enough” father, there is room for the concept of “good enough” motherhood. There is a big difference between labeling a woman a bad mother for forgetting to make brownies for the local bake sale versus labeling a woman a bad mother because she facilitated the death of her child. The high expectations of good motherhood are still being stressed through the depictions of bad motherhood on the news and these depictions of bad motherhood further reinforce the high value of good motherhood. Yet the strict definition of a good mother does not lose any of its rigidity and so good motherhood remains this unattainable goal for most women.

Importantly, although a concept such as “good enough” motherhood could exist, it is the very rigidity of good motherhood that makes such a concept as “good enough” motherhood largely inconceivable in reality. Making good motherhood, even a qualified version of “good enough” motherhood, more attainable detracts from the sanctity of motherhood. In other words, motherhood can be held in such high regard in society because good motherhood is difficult to achieve. Thus, while individual mothers can be described as “good except for…” or in similar terminology to denote their departure from good motherhood, the creation of “good enough” motherhood opens the net too wide to be a feasible concept.

Taken together, these findings vividly illustrate the gendered nature of parenting. The repeated emphasis on how important motherhood is, not only for children but also for women,
along with the conceptualization of mothering as a very hands-on, nurturing, caretaking relationship, draws heavily on notions of traditional femininity. The idea that femininity and motherhood are intertwined is not a new one (i.e. Glenn 1994). However, what this research brings to the table are the ways in which motherhood is both gendered and racialized at the same time. Motherhood itself was racialized and gendered in that there were different expectations for white and black mothers. I find that black mothers were more strongly portrayed as bad mothers than were white mothers. In particular, Carlotta Brett-Pierce, Latisha Lawson, and Sheterra James were repeatedly cast as bad mothers without any major attempts to portray them as even capable of being good mothers. Overall, this is not surprising as Cavaglion (2008), Huckerby (2003), and Vandenberg, Brennan, and Chesney-Lind (2013) all find that white women are portrayed more positively than black women in media portrayals of filicide and other crimes. As Vandenberg, Brennan, and Chesney-Lind (2013) conclude, ideas about who is likely to offend are also coupled with who is likely to be rehabilitated and this informs the treatment that they receive. As such, black women are portrayed more negatively given that society believes that they more likely to be guilty as well as likely to offend again and thus deserve the more negative treatment that they receive.

In regards to intersectionality, it is evident that race, gender, and race and gender together affected media portrayals. Even just comparing the number of stories available, there were 135 stories about the black mothers, sixty stories about the white fathers, twenty-seven stories about the white mothers, and nineteen stories about the black fathers. It is surprising that white fathers garnered more media attention than white mothers, but overall the fact that there were so many stories about the black mothers and so few about the black fathers is not surprising. I say this because black male criminality is greatly emphasized in media coverage (i.e. Entman 1992), thus
an individual instance of black male criminality would more quickly lose appeal than someone else engaging in crime. At the same time, given the crime that was committed and the expectations of good motherhood, it would have seemed as though more attention would be paid to cases in which white mothers committed filicide than ones in which black mothers were the perpetrators given the association between white motherhood and good motherhood (i.e. Fumia 1999; Glenn 1994) as well as because of the findings of Dunn, Cowan, and Downs (2006) indicated that white mothers were the group that received the most media coverage. It is possible that I had more coverage of the cases of black mothers than white mothers because of my selection criteria which required that the women had been convicted of their crimes. The requirement that the women had been convicted may have resulted in specific groups of women, such as lower-class black women, being more likely to be included in the final sample than other groups of women, such as middle-class white women. This is an important note as the newsworthiness of a crime, as Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) find, is influenced by the race and gender of both victims and offenders.

Additionally, the emphasis on mothering also means that the expectations on fathers are not only different but also fewer than on mothers. As previously mentioned, the devaluation of fathering occurs because masculinity is emphasized more in media portrayals of filicide than is fathering. Altogether, this reinforces the understandings of motherhood and fatherhood that Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) describe. As Cowdery and Knudson-Martin relate in their discussion of mothering as a gendered talent, there is the belief by some parents that because women give birth to their children they have a “natural connection” and “intuitively” know the needs of their children (2005: 339). My findings also suggest that mothering is understood to be
something inherent and natural, embodied within women from birth while fathering is something that must be learned, and, by contrast, is not a part of a man’s nature.

Themes of fatherhood. The themes of fatherhood included the minimization of the fathering role, demonized fatherhood, father as caretaker, and the importance of mothering. These themes all highlight how fatherhood is devalued, particularly in relation to motherhood. Furthermore, because fatherhood is valued less than motherhood and because the roles are highly gendered, the expectations on fathers are different than those on mothers.

The themes of the minimization of the fathering role and the demonization of fathers both portray fatherhood in a more negative light. The minimization of fatherhood suggests that fatherhood is not part of a man’s masculinity. This stands in stark contrast to motherhood and femininity where the two are more strongly thought of as being naturally, inevitably intertwined. In other words, women are thought of as maternal and feminine beings while men are thought of as masculine more so than paternal figures. In other words, a woman’s femininity gets subsumed under and intertwined with her maternity while a man’s masculinity remains primary and becoming a father neither adds to nor detracts from his masculinity. Given that research has found fatherhood is less of a salient role for men than motherhood is for women (Mulford and Salisbury 1964; Scott and Alwin 1989, it is not surprising that masculinity remains the primary focus for men. However, given the movement towards men becoming more involved in parenting (i.e. Bruce and Fox 1999; Drakich 1989) and taking on “mothering” roles (i.e. Risman 1987), there was the possibility that I could have found that fatherhood as a more important role. Notably, this is also racialized. When researchers discuss “new” fatherhood, although they do not directly limit this construction to white fathers, the “new” fatherhood that they speak of is more applicable to white fathers than black fathers. Given the historical (i.e. Moynihan 1965)
and contemporary (i.e. Oware 2011) discussions of black fatherhood, “new” fatherhood, as it has
been defined, better describes white fatherhood than black fatherhood.

Specifically, in my research, I identified the theme of father as caretaker. In this theme, I
discussed how the caretaking of fathers was portrayed as a temporary rather than permanent
fixture of their fathering. Through the stressing of details that position the fathers as inept at
caretaking, such as the description of the scalding water that Steven Nicholson was said to have
placed his children in, fathers are described in ways which suggest that they are not suited for
caretaking. While some women were also framed as being incapable of fulfilling the needs of
their children, it was clear that a good mother would have been able to do so. As such,
motherhood is still conceptualized as the nurturing, close-bond between mother and child and the
repeated emphasis on this conceptualization of motherhood and the ways in which men cannot
successfully care for their own children continues the devaluation of fatherhood. Like Cowdery
and Knudson-Martin (2005) found, when parents view mothers as better able to care for and
respond to the needs of their children, the fathers step back and eventually come to feel like they
are not able to respond to the needs of their children. As such, by continually stressing the
importance of motherhood while devaluing fatherhood, the status quo of mothers being more
involved in the lives of their children while fathers are more providers rather than nurturers is
perpetuated.

Overall, the media portrayals of filicidal fathers indicate that fatherhood is not valued as
highly as motherhood. While the roles associated with fatherhood have extended beyond that of
just being the financial provider for the family, caretaking responsibilities are still framed in
terms of mothering rather than fathering or parenting. Taking this from a “doing gender”
approach, when men are unsuccessful in performing those caretaking roles those actions are
taken as evidence that they are incapable of doing such roles and, by extension, that caretaking tasks are better left in the hands of women. This is not to say that men cannot care for their children, rather fatherhood is still conceptualized as “lesser mothering” (Dowd 1996).

*Themes of parenthood.* Finally, the themes of parenthood were shifting of responsibility, requirements of care, and the previously discussed importance of motherhood. The themes of shifting of responsibility and requirements of care applied to both mothers and fathers, but the themes were still racialized and gendered in clear ways. Overall, parenting is so entangled in gender that the findings pertaining to parents who jointly cause the death of a child can be easily seen as reinforcing notions of good and bad motherhood and fatherhood rather than the more gender-neutral construct of good and bad parenthood. In other words, parenting is so inscribed with specialized mothering and fathering roles that most aspects of parenting are attached to either mothers or fathers. This is not to say that mothers or fathers cannot or do not take on roles beyond those associated, respectively, with mothering or fathering. Instead, certain tasks like giving baths and cooking meals are thought of as mothering activities while financially providing for one’s children is thought of as part of a fathering role.

Importantly, as Olmstead, Futris, and Pasley (2009) describe, when fathers take on roles outside of the typical realm of fatherhood (e.g. more caretaking or nurturing tasks), those behaviors often gets referenced as “mothering” by researchers such as Risman (1998). Arendell (2000), for example, defines mothering as the social practice of nurturing and caring for children. While such a definition allows for parents of either gender to “mother,” the fact that nurturing and caretaking are labeled as mothering does illustrate that those behaviors are gendered. Yet, when women take on responsibilities more associated with fatherhood (e.g. providing economically for the family), her behavior is neither deemed beyond the call of motherhood.
Instead, women can take on any role that would be associated with being a parent, whether as a father or a mother, and all of those roles and duties are thought to encompass what she must, need, or want to do as a mother.

Getting back to the findings pertaining to parenting, one major theme was the shifting of responsibility. There were two subthemes: the denial of responsibility and blamed for actions of co-parent. These two sub-themes show two opposing views of fatherhood. On the one hand, in denial of responsibility, fathers were portrayed as shifting blame off of themselves and onto their co-parent. This shifting of blame was done by both attorneys and the fathers themselves. While this may have been a defense strategy, especially when the attorneys shifted blame off of their clients, the shifting of blame still reinforces the idea that when it comes to caring for one’s children the ultimate responsibility falls on the mother. However, while this theme suggests that men are not, in the end, responsible for the lives of their children, the other subtheme of blamed for actions of co-parent reinforces the idea of men as the head of household who is ultimately responsible for the entire family, including the actions and behaviors of their partners. The second of these themes, blamed for actions of the co-parent, on the other hand, sees the father as the as the one ultimately responsible for the actions of any member of the household. In these cases, fathers were held accountable for the actions of their children’s mothers even though they, themselves, did not cause the death of a child.

These two opposing views on fatherhood both point to the gendering of parenting. Mothers are seen as the ones who are responsibility for the day-to-day care and well-being of the children in a family while fathers are given a secondary role in this regard. Furthermore, this system will perpetuate itself because of what Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) find. If mothers are thought to be better suited for the caretaking of children, then mothers will take on
more of those roles. Without the same level of experience as the mothers, fathers will believe that they are less suited for those duties and continue to encourage women to take on more caretaking duties.

Revisiting Hypotheses

It is important to now readdress the four hypotheses that drove this project. My aim was to examine media portrayals of filicide in order to learn more about motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood and the ways in which these constructs are racialized and gendered. Below I restate each hypothesis, whether or not it was supported, and what was learned from each.

_Hypothesis 1: Media portrayals of filicidal offenders will vary depending upon the race and gender of the offender._

Overall, there was support for hypothesis one as I find and discuss in chapters four, five, and six. Media portrayals of filicidal offenders did differ depending upon the race and gender of the offender. Generally speaking, black parents were portrayed more negatively than white parents. This was true across all three chapters. However, this manifested itself in different ways depending upon gender.

Largely, black mothers, whether they acted alone or with their co-parent, were strongly and repeatedly portrayed as bad mothers. Specific details such as the pink belt that Latisha Lawson used to beat her daughter with; Carlotta Brett-Pierce’s acts of drugging, starving, and beating her daughter; and the emphasis that Chisa Hughes did not act when a mother should have known that her child was in danger all displayed extreme ways that women could be bad mothers. Yet, when in the portrayals of the fathers, bad fatherhood was less emphasized than black, male criminality. Details about their criminal pasts, as came up in the cases of Thomas
Brown and Tyrone Hamber, as well as repeated labeling of Ryan Bennett as killer and less clear establishment of his role of father, all indicate how black fatherhood is devalued.

*Hypothesis 2: Filicide will be used to reinforce constructs of both good and bad motherhood.*

I also found support for hypothesis two, the impetus of chapter four. However, it is important to note that the coverage of these women more thoroughly illustrated and reinforced the construct of bad motherhood than good motherhood. Good motherhood was a constant by which the mothers were being judged, but the specific actions and descriptions of these mothers more profoundly spoke to the construct of bad motherhood.

Given prior research such as that by Huckerby (2003) and Cavaglion (2008), it was thought that good motherhood would be evoked in the stories of white mothers; however this was not the case. Both black and white mothers were more strongly portrayed as bad mothers than good mothers, which is not surprising given that they were convicted for causing the death of their children. That being said, given the historical preferential treatment of white women by the criminal justice system (i.e. Daly 1987a, 1987b; Pollack [1959] 1979), the disparity between portrayals of white mothers and black mothers was not as divergent as I expected it would be. This is not to say that the black mothers were treated in a lenient manner or that the white mothers were treated in an overly harsh manner. Instead, I am suggesting that it is because these women committed a crime that is so antithetical to good motherhood that a mother, regardless of race, is portrayed as a better representation of bad motherhood than good motherhood. Furthermore, in none of the cases were the mothers discussed as having committed this act for the sake or benefit of their children. As Huckerby (2003) focused on Andrea Yates who, as
previously described, explained that she drowned her children in order to protect them, the
greater connection with bad motherhood that I found may have been influenced by the method
and rationale for killing the children.

_Hypothesis 3:_ Unlike the cases of mothers who committed filicide, filicide committed by
fathers will say less about the men as fathers and more about the men as masculine beings.

I find that media portrayals of filicide more strongly emphasize masculinity than
fatherhood. In many respects, fatherhood is devalued, especially in comparison with the level of
emphasis and stress placed on the importance of motherhood. Yet, while fatherhood is not the
most stressed element in these media portrayals, this also means that being a bad father is harder,
but not impossible, to achieve. Explicit definitions of what encompasses bad fatherhood are not
included even in many of works that discuss bad fatherhood (i.e. Cavaglion 2009; Jordan 2009).
Furstenburg (1988) for example, defines “bad dads” as absent, dysfunctional, or violent and as
failing in or rejecting the duties of fatherhood. To be considered to be a bad father, thus,
requires substantial evidence of being deviant in other ways (e.g. dysfunctional, violent) and not
fulfilling the fatherhood role at all. While women can also be considered to be bad mothers
through evidence of deviancy or by not fulfilling the motherhood role at all, it takes less
evidence to view a woman as a bad mother than it does to view a man as a bad father.

As mentioned above, black fatherhood is more devalued than white fatherhood. Media
portrayals of black fatherhood continue to stress black men as absent or as embodying the
characteristics of a “bad dad” as outlined by Furstenberg (1988) or even separate them
completely from the role of father and just focus on the status of offender. Thus, white men are
more readily seen as good fathers than black men are because of such cultural scripts played out
in the media. However, the racialization of good and bad fatherhood is not as strong as is the racialization of good and bad motherhood.

*Hypothesis 4: Cases of filicide, whether committed by a mother alone, a father alone, or a mother and father acting together, will be used to construct good and bad parenthood and this construction will be influenced by the race and gender of the offender.*

Finally, there was very limited support for hypothesis four. Overall, the constructs of motherhood and fatherhood were more greatly emphasized in these media portrayals than parenthood. Again, this is not to say that parenthood as a construct does not exist. Rather, parenthood is a deeply gendered construct resulting in behaviors and actions being associated with mothering or fathering rather than parenting. In chapters four and five which focused solely on mothers and fathers, respectively, that acted alone, parenthood was not a focus of the media portrayals. Specifically, as discussed in chapter four, when a mother was the responsible party for the death of her child, the father of the child was almost completely omitted from the story. In many instances, the name of the father, or any other details about him, were unreported. Out of the eight women that I discussed, only four of them had any information or reference about the father made and even so it occurred an irregular basis. Michelle Lepkowski, Carlotta Brett-Pierce, Sheterra James, and Latisha Lawson were the only women who had stories that did discuss the father. The fact that three of these four women are black should not go unnoticed. However, in the coverage of fathers who were responsible for the death of their child, the mother of the child was discussed more frequently, hence the basis for the theme of the importance of mothering in that chapter.
Overall, the focus on the more specific constructs of mothering and fathering rather than parenting is greatly informative to the gendering of parenting. As I have repeatedly discussed, motherhood is thought to be natural to being a woman (i.e. Harris 1995) while fatherhood is something that is learned (i.e. Cowdery and Knudson-Martin 2005). The gendering of parenting goes much further beyond these distinctions, however. Everyday tasks, behaviors, and even characteristics that are associated with being parent are thought of in terms of being mothering or fathering. This is especially true given that some, like Risman (1998), argue that men can “mother.” Taken together, the gendering of parenting continues to perpetuate the “necessity” of women taking on more childcare responsibilities than men since women are more naturally suited for such tasks. However, as Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) relate, it is because women spend more time with and do more of those childcare tasks that they seem better suited for those tasks.

Discussion

Overall, when it comes to motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood there are clear racialized and gendered expectations. Good motherhood is still largely thought of in the terms of white motherhood and so makes it difficult for black mothers to meet those expectations. Moreover, black motherhood is found lacking when compared with white motherhood and so is portrayed more negatively. But, beyond this limited and limiting view of good motherhood, media portrayals of filicide demonstrate the variety of ways in which women can be bad mothers, many of which are tied to being traditionally feminine. This racialized view of parenting holds true for black and white fathers, too. Like black motherhood, black fatherhood is compared to white fatherhood and black fathers are devalued. The focus on absent dads is especially prevalent in other research on black fatherhood (i.e. Coles 2011; Oware 2011).
Although I did not speak to this stereotype of black fatherhood, the portrayals of black fatherhood that I did discuss illustrated that the fatherhood role embodied by black men is minimized, particularly in relation to their role of criminal.

In some respects, the stricter requirements of good motherhood and the ease by which women can be labeled bad mothers is problematic, sociologically speaking, when it comes to understanding the roles and expectations of mothers. The perceived inadequacies associated with bad motherhood can have real effects on how individual mothers go about mothering as well as how the entire concept of mothering is viewed by society as a whole. If good motherhood is so inherently limited, then women are striving after a goal that is, for most of them, unattainable.

Overall, the racialization and gendering of parenting result in very different expectations and realities for black mothers, white mothers, black fathers, and white fathers. Although there are some clear, and rather basic, premises for what is expected of a parent in order to be a good parent, the extent of the racialization and gendering of parenthood make it difficult for both researchers and larger society to think of a person as parenting and not explicitly link those behaviors and roles as a part of mothering or fathering. In terms of research, the implications for dividing parenting into mothering or fathering, rather than focusing on parenting more broadly, are great. As such, gender is being embedded into research in unknown ways by the very labeling of particular acts or roles as those prescribed to mothering rather than fathering or vice versa. The same can also be said to be true to the racialization of parenting as the constructs of motherhood and fatherhood are still treated as universal when race plays a huge role in the way people parent as well as the expectations associated with their parenting (i.e. Glenn 1994; Collins 2009).
Importantly, although there is a lack of a clear conceptualization of parenting, this is not to say that good and bad parenthood, or even for that matter parenting, does not exist. There are commonalities of being a parent that are shared by the roles of mothering and fathering. However, those commonalities are often racialized and/or gendered and thus associated more strongly with mothering or fathering. For example, financially provided for one’s family is a part of taking care of one’s family but given historical views it is more strongly associated with fathering. What this means is that within research parenting is not treated as its own concept. This is problematic because for real, everyday parents there is cross-over between the roles of mother and father.

**Conclusion**

The media play a huge role in society in disseminating knowledge. This knowledge can range from facts about a particular event, like a crime, to spreading cultural expectations through social constructions. As this project illustrates, news media coverage of filicide does more than just detail the death of a child by the hands of his or her parent(s). This case further elucidates on parenting, mothering, and fathering through the constructions of the good and bad mother, father, and parent. Furthermore, the constructions of good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood demonstrate the racialization and gendering of parenting. Altogether, expectations of parenting are culturally bound but even within the same culture there are differences depending upon one’s race and gender.

Filicide is a difficult topic that seems to be antithetical to understandings of what is expected of a parent but as I find, media portrayals of filicide perpetuate the cultural expectations of mothers, fathers, and parents. Although there are differences in what is associated with the role of mother and the role of father, there are still clear expectations of what is expected of a
parent regardless of gender. One of those expectations, at the very least and in very general terms, is to care for one’s children. The level and type of care may vary from person to person or family to family, but, despite this variation, a unifying theme is that parents are expected to, at the very least, not stand in the way of their children’s continuing survival.

Recommendations

I only focused on twenty-five cases of filicide committed by mothers, fathers, and parents working together during a two-year span in the US. Future research can elaborate upon this project in a number of ways. Firstly, I only discussed white and black parents. Increasing the racial diversity of parents can continue to flesh out the ways in which mothering, fathering, and parenting are racialized concepts. Similarly, I did not address the issue of ethnicity. The inclusion of Latino/a parents is an important aspect that future research needs to address. Race and ethnicity both play major roles in the ways that individuals do parent. At the same time, race and ethnicity also play major roles in the ways that parenting is understood and portrayed in the media. Given that the racial/ethnic diversity of the US is increasing and that minorities are being increasingly represented in the media, news media included, this is an important call for future research to heed.

Future research that continues the line of research on the media portrayals of filicide could also utilize different multiple data sources. Comparing the coverage across newspapers, on-air television coverage, and web coverage from newspapers and/or local television news affiliates could illustrate if the medium impacts what details are given or the attention devoted to each case. This project utilized stories from local television news affiliates. As Pitts (2003) relates, television news websites can supplement the information that is provided on-air. Pitts
(2003) further finds that in larger markets more supplemental information is offered online. Alternatively, research could draw from local newspapers and explore how the coverage varies across these different news mediums. One of the strengths of local television affiliates news websites was that the news sites can be updated as more details emerge, including multiple updates within one day or can provide supplement information not provided in the on-air broadcasts as Pitts (2003) suggests. Although newspapers do not have the ability to update as new details emerge as frequently as websites are able to, that source would allow for one to trace the development of a story just as the local television affiliate news websites did.

Moving beyond research on filicide, future research could focus more on good motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. As good motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are a mechanism of social control, it is important to flesh out these concepts and understand how they do act as social control in concrete ways. This could be done through media portrayals and use any of a number of different types of media such as television shows, news media stories, movies, magazines or literature, for example. As I have focused more heavily on the construction of bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood, in large part due to the focus on media portrayals of filicide, it is important to more fully explore how good motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are constructed, too. Additionally, as this project use media coverage of a crime, media portrayals that are not based around crime could also elaborate on bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood as it is constructed in other ways.

Future research could also use focus groups or surveys to understand how individuals view media portrayals of both good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. Using this methodology and tapping into how media portrayals of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood have the potential to greatly expand understandings of these constructs. On a related
note, as this project discussed the media’s ability to exert social control over parenting through the constructions of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood, employing focus groups or surveys could find the extent to which social control is actually exerted onto people within society.

Overall, while I had the aim of better understanding both good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood, given the focus on filicidal parents more was learned about bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood. As the media are greatly influential on people’s lives and have the ability to exert social control over society, it is important to understand the constructions of both good and bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood more completely. Furthermore, research needs to continue to examine the ways in which these constructs are racialized and gendered. As this research was more informative on bad motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood, it will be important for future research to tap into how good motherhood, fatherhood, and parenthood are racialized and gendered. In the very least, as fatherhood is thought by some (i.e. Ranson 2012; Risman 1987) to have undergone a shift to be more like mothering, it is possible that as fatherhood is transformed to include more “mothering” roles that the racialization and gendering of all of these constructs will also undergo change.

Parenthood, motherhood, and fatherhood are a major part of all societies. As such, better understanding how these concepts are socially constructed will not only be informative on a society but will also allow parents to be able to inform these constructs so that they better encapsulate reality for parents and children. For example, as good motherhood largely remains an unattainable ideal that is even further restricted to just white women, motherhood and good motherhood could be reimagined to make mothering a better experience for all.
References


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Appendix A.

Preliminary Data Collection and Search Related Information

Search Terms

The following search terms were used when utilizing the Proquest database for news stories on cases of filicide.

$$[(("killing of child" AND (PARENT OR MOTHER OR FATHER) AND convict)) and Date(geq(5/23/2010)))$$

$$[(("killing of child" AND (PARENT OR MOTHER OR FATHER) AND sentence)) and Date(geq(5/23/2010)))$$

$$[(("killing of child" AND (PARENT OR MOTHER OR FATHER) AND guilty)) and Date(geq(5/23/2010)))$$

$$(("child killing" AND (parent OR mother OR father) AND convict")) and Date(geq(5/24/2010)))$$

$$(("child killing" AND (parent OR mother OR father) AND sentence")) and Date(geq(5/24/2010)))$$

$$(("child killing" AND (parent OR mother OR father) and guilty")) and Date(geq(5/24/2010)))$$

$$(("child killing" AND guilty")) and Date(geq(5/25/2010)))$$

$$(("child killing" AND convict")) and Date(geq(5/25/2010)))$$

$$(("child killing" AND sentence")) and Date(geq(5/25/2010)))$$

$$(("killing of child" AND convict")) and Date(geq(5/25/2010)))$$

$$(("killing of child" AND guilty")) and Date(geq(5/26/2010)))$$

$$(("death of child" and convict)) and Date(geq(5/26/2010)))$$
Final Data Collection and Search Related Information

Search Terms

The following search terms were utilized in combing both Proquest and LexisNexus databases for news stories describing cases of filicide.

"death of child" and "convict*"
"death of child" and "guilt*"
"death of child" and "sentenc*"
"death of infant" and "convict*"
"death of infant" and "guilt*"
"death of infant" and "sentenc*"
"death of baby" and "convict*"
"death of baby" and "guilt*"
"death of baby" and "sentenc*"
"killing of child" and "convict*"
"killing of child" and "guilt*"
"killing of child" and "sentenc*"
"killing of infant" and "convict*"
"killing of infant" and "guilt*"
"killing of infant" and "sentenc*"
"killing of baby" and "convict*"
"killing of baby" and "guilt*"
"killing of baby" and "sentenc*"
"child killing" and "convict*"
"child killing" and "guilt*"
"child killing" and "sentenc*"
"infant killing" and "convict*"
"infant killing" and "guilt*"
"infant killing" and "sentenc*"
"baby killing" and "convict*"
"baby killing" and "guilt*"
"baby killing" and "sentenc*"
"murder of child" and "convict*"
"murder of child" and "guilt*"
"murder of child" and "sentenc*"
"murder of infant" and "convict*"
"murder of infant" and "guilt*"
"murder of infant" and "sentenc*"
"murder of baby" and "convict*"
"murder of baby" and "guilt*"
"murder of baby" and "sentenc*"
"filicide" and "convict"
"filicide" and "guilt"
"filicide" and "sentenc"
"child neglect" and "death" and "convict"
"child neglect" and "death" and "guilt"
"child neglect" and "death" and "sentenc"
"child abuse" and "death" and "convict"
"child abuse" and "death" and "guilt"
"child abuse" and "death" and "sentenc"
"child homicide" and "convict"
"child homicide" and "guilt"
"child homicide" and "sentenc"
"infant homicide" and "convict"
"infant homicide" and "guilt"
"infant homicide" and "sentenc"
"baby homicide" and "convict"
"baby homicide" and "guilt"
"baby homicide" and "sentenc"
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"manslaughter of child" and "guilt"
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"fatal abuse" and "child" and "guilt"
"fatal abuse" and "child" and "sentenc"
"fatal abuse" AND "infant" AND "convict"
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"fatal abuse" AND "baby" AND "convict"
"fatal abuse" AND "baby" AND "guilt"
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### Cases by Region

Table A.1. Distribution of Cases by Region with States Identified.

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Appendix B. News Story Citations

The following are the citations web addresses for each of the stories used as data for this dissertation.

Black Mothers

_Carlotta Brett-Pierce_


Associated Press. 2010a. “Mother Charged In 4-Year-Old Brooklyn Girl’s Death,”  

Associated Press. 2010b. “NY Prosecutors: Mom Of Dead Girl, 4, Beat Her,”  


Associated Press. 2010d. “ACS Admits Mistakes In Case Of Dead Girl,”  

Associated Press. 2010e. “NYC agency admits mistakes in case of dead girl,”  


Associated Press. 2010g. “Brooklyn Child’s Death Leads to Agency Probe,”  

Associated Press. 2010h. “City Spent $11 Million On Provider For Dead Girl,”  
(http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2010/10/17/city-spent-11-million-on-provider-for-dead-girl/).

Associated Press. 2010j. “Murder Charges For Mom In Gaunt NYC Girl’s Death,”


Franklin, Marcus. 2010. “Brooklyn DA to Probe ACS in Wake of Tot’s Tragic Death,”


Long, Colleen. 2012b. “Marchella Pierce’s 6-Year-Old Brother Testifies Against Mom,”


Long, Colleen. 2012d. “Grandmother Convicted of Manslaughter in Marchella Pierce Death,”

Miles, Darla. 2010. “Child found dead, tied to crib in Brooklyn home,”


Rosondra Marie Clay


Sheterra James


Latisha Lawson


A summary of news articles related to the case of a mother accused of starving her child to death.


Ashley C. Williams


White Mothers

Michelle Lepkowski


Brandie L. Nelson


Tracy Wright


Black Fathers

Ryan Bennett


Thomas Brown


Tyrone Hamber


274


Stephen Todd Nelson


White Fathers

Robert Babcock


**Thomas Huge**


Jonathan Katan


Steven Nicholson


Jericho Wright


Black Joint

Davis and King


Chisa Hughes and Jerald Hicks


Ibeagwa


White Joint

*Rebecca Christie and Derek Wulf*


Christopher and Stephanie Dunham


John and Susan Griffin


Stanley and Colleen Rimer


