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ABSTRACT

How Women Come to Commit Neonaticide: A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Criminal Cases

by

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Neonaticide, the offspring murder of an infant within its first 24 hours of life, is a complex human phenomenon. Limited literature exists on the conceptual processes, including a mother's thoughts, meanings, understandings, definitions of their circumstances and the foetus, prior to, during and after the commission of the act. Furthermore, limited literature explores a woman's actions and emotional processes, including her emotional experiences and the degree of closeness experienced towards the foetus in this regard. Research is further lacking on how such thoughts, emotions and actions present in accordance to the women's non-neonaticidal pregnancies (N-NP) (pregnancies that were not followed by neonaticide) and their neonaticidal pregnancies (NP) (pregnancies followed by the act of neonaticide) among women who commit the act. The study thus questions: "What are the conceptual and emotional processes as well as actions underpinning a NP and N-NP among women who commit neonaticide?".

The purpose of the study was to provide a substantive theory on how women from criminal populations come to commit neonaticide. An abstract theoretical account is provided on the underpinning conceptual and emotional processes as well as actions that reveal how women come to commit the act. The underpinning processes are revealed via a comparison of the women's thoughts, emotions and actions of their N-NPs and NP. The theory was constructed via constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methods. Initial explorations were sensitised by the symbolic interactionist perspective, focusing on the formation of the women's thoughts, emotions and actions. Data was collected through intensive iterative interviewing (28 interviews) of eight participants from three correctional centres across South Africa, including Kgosi Mampuru II (Gauteng), Westville (KwaZulu-Natal) and Pollsmoor (Cape Town). Participants were all convicted, sentenced and incarcerated for murder, specifically

neonaticide. All women had also experienced one or more pregnancy where they did not take the life of their newborn.

Data analysis involved the techniques of constant comparisons throughout the processes of initial line-by-line coding, focused coding and axial coding. The analysis rendered the construction of various conceptual categories, communicating abstract explanatory ideas about the data. One core category was constructed, namely, docile gestating. Four major conceptual categories were also constructed, including, a) The vicarious mother; b) Vicarious accessing; c) Contexts of security; and d) Degree of engaging with its associated concepts of vicarious actions, misrepresenting actions and phantomising actions.

Docile gestating reveals the different ways in which the women approach pregnancy-related content. The concept refers to a passive approach towards pregnancy-related content, where the women await instruction on how to think, feel and act towards such content. The roles the women enact with respect to 'being' a mother is addressed by the concept, the vicarious mother. The concept reveals how the women enact being a mother via others; or in the absence of others, negate to 'be' mother at all. Vicarious accessing concern the manner in which the women engage with their interpersonal environments and the interaction and communication strategies employed in an attempt to secure support. The consequences of such relating are addressed by the concept, contexts of security, which concerns the extent of support secured. The concept, degree of engaging, concerns the extent to which the women engage with the pregnancy process. The degree of engaging is shown to be attained and maintained by behaviours such as acting through another (vicarious actions), acting towards something other than the foetus and pregnancy (misrepresenting actions), or behaving in a way to render the foetus and pregnancy as being unreal (phantomising actions).

The final theory reveals how the constructed concepts interact over time in accordance to the NP and N-NPs across the pregnancy events of a) Pre-pregnancy; b) Receiving pregnancy news; c) Sharing pregnancy news; d) Physical pregnancy; and finally, e) Labour, birth and afterwards. It shows how the women need to engage in the pregnancy experience via close reliance on another (non-neonaticide). In the absence of such support, the women may refrain from engaging in the pregnancy process and, ultimately, act towards a newborn that never fully existed in their experience and mind (neonaticide).