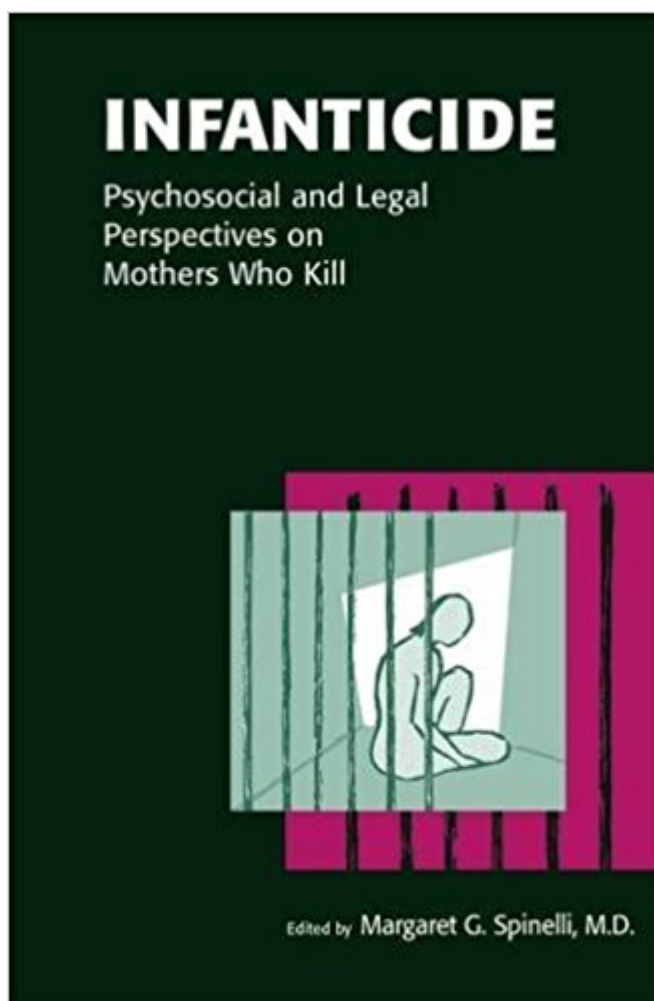


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# Infanticide: Psychosocial And Legal Perspectives On Mothers Who Kill



## **Synopsis**

Maternal infanticide, or the murder of a child in its first year of life by its mother, elicits sorrow, anger, horror, and outrage. But the perpetrator is often a victim, too. The editor of this revealing work asks us to reach beyond rage, stretch the limits of compassion, and enter the minds of mothers who kill their babies -- with the hope that advancing the knowledge base and stimulating inquiry in this neglected area of maternal-infant research will save young lives. Written to help remedy today's dearth of up-to-date, research-based literature, this unique volume brings together a multidisciplinary group of 17 experts -- scholars, clinicians, researchers, clinical and forensic psychiatrists, pediatric psychoanalysts, attorneys, and an epidemiologist -- who focus on the psychiatric perspective of this tragic cause of infant death. This comprehensive, practical work is organized into four parts for easy reference: - Part I presents historical and epidemiological data, including a compelling discussion of the contrasting legal views of infanticide in the United States, United Kingdom, and other Western countries, a review of the latest statistics on maternal infanticide, and a discussion of the problems of underreporting and the lack of available documentation. - Part II covers the psychiatric, psychological, cultural, and biological underpinnings of infanticide, detailing how to identify, evaluate, and treat postpartum psychiatric disorders. The authors explore clinical diagnosis, symptom recognition, risk factors, biological precipitants, and alternative motives, such as cultural infanticide. Chapter 3, developed to assist the attorney or mental health professional in understanding the implications of postpartum psychiatric illness as they relate to infanticide, presents a sensitive and thorough inquiry into infanticidal ideation. - Part III focuses on contemporary legislation, criminal defenses, and disparate treatment in U.S. law and compares U.S. law with the U.K.'s model of probation and treatment. Chapter 8 is an especially useful resource for the attorney or expert psychiatric witness preparing for an infanticide/neonaticide case in the criminal court system. - Part IV discusses clinical experience with mothers as perpetrators and countertransference in therapy, the range of mother-infant interactions (from healthy to pathological), and methods of early intervention and prevention. This balanced perspective on a highly emotional issue will find a wide audience among psychiatric and medical professionals (child, clinical, and forensic psychiatrists and psychologists; social workers; obstetricians/gynecologists and midwives; nurses; and pediatricians), legal professionals (judges, attorneys, law students), public health professionals, and interested laypersons.

## **Book Information**

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: American Psychiatric Publishing; 1 edition (October 1, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1585620971

ISBN-13: 978-1585620975

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 1 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.3 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,206,745 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #54 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Mental Health > Postpartum Depression](#) #2040 in [Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Clinical > Psychiatry](#) #2144 in [Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Psychology > Clinical Psychology](#)

## Customer Reviews

Margaret Spinelli has gathered a group of experts to examine the subject of maternal infanticide from biologic, psychosocial, legal, and cultural perspectives. Her book handles the material sensitively, with an eye toward prevention. It also serves as a compendium of knowledge to aid mental health providers in diagnosing and treating psychiatric disorders related to infanticide, while assisting experts involved in the legal defense of women charged with the crime. The heart of the book, an exploration of psychiatric aspects of infanticide, emphasizes postpartum depression and psychosis, neurohormonal mechanisms, diagnosis, and treatment. An entire chapter is devoted to the denial of pregnancy and its relation to infanticide, with evocative case material used throughout. A banner is raised to improve early detection and intervention among at-risk mothers and their children. The case of Andrea Yates (*Yates v. Texas*) is used to illustrate how the poorly understood biologic and psychosocial aspects of infanticide led to a tragedy that could have been prevented. Considerable attention is paid to legislative issues, including the disparity in legal standards across countries and states. For example, the British Infanticide Act (1938) contains a special provision for women who have killed their infants as a result of psychiatric disturbances associated with childbearing. Such women are charged with manslaughter rather than murder, and sentencing often involves probation or psychiatric treatment. The stunning fact is put forward that for more than 50 years, no woman found guilty of infanticide in England has been incarcerated. No such legislation exists in the United States, resulting in a lack of uniformity in charges and sentencing. A woman in one state might be convicted of unlawful disposal of a corpse (a misdemeanor) and receive probation, whereas in another state, she could be convicted of first-degree murder (a felony) and

sentenced to life in prison. Thus, this book not only provides legal information about infanticide for attorneys and medical experts but also calls for legislative reform. The book addresses common misconceptions in an attempt to foster a more humane view of women who kill their infants. The contributors form a chorus in asserting that many of these mothers have been the victims of poorly diagnosed and treated psychiatric disorders and have lacked the social and familial supports that could have prevented the tragedy. Although the view of the perpetrator as the victim is a notable bias of the book, it is a view that I share, at least in part. In my clinical work, I too have been pained to discover that too often a woman who killed her infant had been turned away by health care professionals, law-enforcement officers, or family members just before the crime, despite her obvious psychiatric disorganization and violent impulses. Although the portrayal of these women as victims may reflect a bias, at-risk mothers, children, and society may benefit from this point of view. The book neglects a few key issues. Many mothers who kill their infants fit the profiles described by the authors, but others are affected by chronic mental illness, substance abuse, and severe personality disorders -- factors that are addressed only in a cursory fashion. And although a sophisticated overview of contemporary attachment models is provided, relevant psychopathy, narcissism, and malignant attachments are not explicitly linked to the crime of infanticide. Specifically, the authors do not examine what makes these mothers resort to violence as a solution to their predicament. Because so many personal and societal taboos must be overcome in order to kill one's own child, this central question begs for an answer: What is it about the biologic and psychosocial factors that lead these women to cross the boundary from violent impulse to action? In the end, however, this excellent book leaves readers well equipped to ponder this question themselves. Jennifer L. Kunst, Ph.D. Copyright © 2003 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS.

"We do recommend this book to clinicians treating women of childbearing age and to attorneys seeking to increase their knowledge about perinatal mental illnesses."- "Phillip J. Resnick, M.D., and Susan Hatters-Friedman, M.D.," "Psychiatric Services, August 2003" "This excellent work should be a valuable tool for psychiatric and medical professionals, legal professionals, public health professionals, and interested laypersons. I would highly recommend it to all. As for me, I am going to keep this book with me, because as a forensic pathologist, I have to deal with infanticide cases almost on a daily basis, and now I know where to fall back upon, when I am stuck."- "Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Book Reviews," "September 08" "Margaret Spinelli has gathered a group of experts to examine the subject of maternal infanticide from biologic, psychosocial, legal,

and cultural perspectives. Her book handles the material sensitively, with an eye toward prevention. It also serves as a compendium of knowledge to aid mental health providers in diagnosing and treating psychiatric disorders related to infanticide, while assisting experts involved in the legal defense of women charged with the crime.... Because so many personal and societal taboos must be overcome in order to kill one's own child, this central question begs for an answer: What is it about the biological and psychosocial factors that lead these women to cross the boundary from violent impulse to action? In the end, however, this excellent book leaves the readers well equipped to ponder this question themselves."-- "Jennifer L. Kunst, Ph.D., *The New England Journal of Medicine*" "[I]t is truly outstanding, a must read for clinicians in both psychiatry and obstetrics, as well as forensic psychiatrists, criminal defense attorneys, prosecutors, and judges. What sets this text apart is that it goes well beyond a discussion of the phenomenon of infanticide to formulation of plans of prevention and management for at-risk mothers and children, making this a useful resource for anyone involved in the mental health of mothers and their young children."-- "Keith A. Caruso, M.D., *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*", "September 2003" "This new book is essential reading for any lawyer handling an infanticide case. This volume is the first book to cross the line between the mental health professional and the lawyer on this subject. It is easy for the lawyer to read, has loads of references for further research and most importantly lets you know who to contact to continue the educational process. It's hard to believe that a lawyer could be considered competent to handle one of these cases without the information in Dr. Spinelli's new book."-- "Michael G. Dowd, *Criminal Defense Attorney*" "We do recommend this book to clinicians treating women of childbearing age and to attorneys seeking to increase their knowledge about perinatal mental illnesses."-- "Phillip J. Resnick, M.D., and Susan Hatters-Friedman, M.D.", *Psychiatric Services*, August 2003" "This excellent work should be a valuable tool for psychiatric and medical professionals, legal professionals, public health professionals, and interested laypersons. I would highly recommend it to all. As for me, I am going to keep this book with me, because as a forensic pathologist, I have to deal with infanticide cases almost on a daily basis, and now I know where to fall back upon, when I am stuck."-- "Anil Aggrawal's *Internet Journal of Book Reviews*", "September 08"

Dr. Spinelli and her expert colleagues have compiled an invaluable, one-of-a-kind reference on infanticide. This comprehensive and elegantly written text sheds much-needed light on this difficult topic. This book also provides crucial insights into post-partum mental illness, and helps the reader to better understand the plight of these women. The information is presented in a clear, thoughtful, and sensitive manner. I highly recommend this important book to both medical and legal

professionals and lay persons alike. It is a must-read for any clinician who treats women of child-bearing age, and any lawyer who handles cases involving women who are charged with infanticide. It is through the kind of work presented in this book that we will come to better recognize, evaluate, and assist women at risk, in order to prevent the tragedy of infanticide.

While it is not a bad text, it doesn't mention much of the research done on the topic of infanticide that demonstrates that most of those who commit neonaticide are mentally competent. Read "Why Mothers Kill" if you're looking for more psychologically sound text.

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