

Martha Smithey, *The Cultural and Economic Context of Maternal Infanticide: A Crying Baby and the Inability to Escape*, Emerald Publishing Limited: Bingley, 2018; 144 pp.: 9781787542082, £60 (hbk)

Martha Smithey's book, *The Cultural and Economic Context of Maternal Infanticide: A Crying Baby and the Inability to Escape*, offers a long-needed sociological assessment of the causes of maternal infanticide; the terms infanticide is often used to denote the killing of infants, with some scholars specifically employing the term when referring to mothers who kill their own infants. While infanticide has been the focus of numerous academic studies (historical and legal approaches, psychological causes, typologies of different forms of maternal filicide – filicide being the killing of a child by their parent), this is one of the first studies to contextualise this form of women's violence within sociological analysis, drawing on compelling sociological theory in order to assess and explain why some women commit fatal violence against their own children. The study is comprised of data from intensive interviews conducted with mothers who have committed infanticide and findings from other studies on infanticide; Smithey is based in Texas in the United States and so it is likely the study is based on data from this geographical location. While there is limited

discussion of the research data and how it was analysed, the narrative is rich with insightful and compelling quotes to support key arguments. Smithey's sample focuses specifically on lethal assault to children aged under three years by the biological mother. As such, Smithey excludes cases of neonaticide (the killing of infants within 24-hours of birth, clinical cases of mental illness that proceeded the conception of the infant, clinical cases of post-partum depression and psychosis (caused by hormonal imbalance from the pregnancy), murder-suicide, and infant homicide by other perpetrators. As such, Smithey's analysis focuses on the group of women who, while have been the focus of a significant number of studies, we still have very limited sociological understanding of the drivers behind their fatal acts.

One of the key strengths of this text, and a reason why it is an important study for the criminological community, is due to Smithey's complex and compelling analysis of the steps that lead to fatal act against the child. As Smithey notes, whereas numerous other studies have provided detailed data, trends or descriptive analysis (and I would add helpful typologies), Smithey's analysis goes further, addressing the gap in research and explicitly considering 'how the larger, social contexts in which mothers must operate contribute to her lethal violence' (13). By contextualising women's violence against their infants in the structures of ideologies of 'good mothering', Smithey outlines how women

assess their parenting actions and the behaviour of their infant against unrealistic standard, coming to the inevitable conclusion that they are simply not good enough mothers. As such, the crying of the baby and the inability to escape that crying, due to social-cultural circumstances that constrict parenting activities for all but the wealthy, results in a situation whereby force to gain compliance is not an unreasonable or unexpected next step for a mother. As such, Smithey roots mother's fatal assaults of their infants firmly within the structures of patriarchy, exposing another consequence of gender economic and cultural inequality.

As a conclusion of her analysis, Smithey briefly touches on the unhelpfulness of criminal justice and social services interventions, identifying the condemnation of 'bad mothering' as an element of the problem, rather than part of the solution, particularly in relation to stringent punishments and criminal justice responses (which is common in the United States comparative to legal jurisdictions that have the offence of infanticide, such as the England and Wales, Canada and New Zealand). As part of this conclusion, Smithey carefully skirts around the question of women's agency in committing these violent acts. An assessment of agency was not a focus of Smithey's analysis and so my comments here are not a limit of the book. However, the complex and compelling analysis that Smithey presents lends itself to further develop this

idea of agency and what role criminal control and punishment should play in response to maternal infant filicide if, as Smithey argues, the causes of this violence are entirely rooted in patriarchal capitalism, the oppression of women by men, and devaluation and disregard for the stresses and strains of raising children. The question of women's agency as criminal offenders is one that has been at the focus of feminist criminology for decades and that still requires theorisation, particularly in light of sociological analysis of criminal activity, such as that provided by Smithey.

Overall, this is a compelling book that provides an excellent overview of the issue of maternal violence towards their infants. The data presented and sociological theorisation is impressive. The book is well written, and the reader is walked through the theory, identifying the steps towards fatal maternal violence. The selected extracts from the interviews add depth and dynamic to the theorisation, supporting Smithey's arguments and facilitating understanding.

Emma Milne, University of Plymouth, UK

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8887-1585