

Infanticide

Authored by
mohammad looti

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1. Core Definition and Legal Context

Infanticide, derived from the Latin words "infans" (infant) and "caedere" (to kill), is formally defined as the deliberate killing of an infant. While the general understanding encompasses the killing of a very young child, legal and medical definitions often specify an age limit, most commonly when the child is under one year old. This specific age demarcation is crucial, as it often differentiates infanticide from other forms of child homicide, which may carry different legal implications and societal perceptions. The act of infanticide is distinguished not only by the victim's age but also by the complex array of factors that can precipitate such a tragic event, ranging from severe socio-economic pressures to profound psychological disturbances experienced by the perpetrator, most frequently the mother.

Across various jurisdictions, the legal treatment of infanticide can vary significantly, often reflecting a nuanced understanding of the circumstances surrounding the act. Some legal systems recognize a specific offense of infanticide, distinct from murder, particularly when committed by the mother suffering from a mental disturbance related to childbirth. This legal distinction acknowledges the unique physiological and psychological challenges mothers may face in the immediate post-partum period, which can impair their judgment and capacity for rational thought. The recognition of such mitigating factors aims to ensure that justice is administered with consideration for the complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social elements that can contribute to this profound act of violence against a vulnerable infant.

2. Etymology and Cross-Cultural Historical Perspectives

The practice of infanticide, though universally condemned in modern ethical frameworks, has a long and complex history across diverse cultures and civilizations. Its roots are often intertwined with societal norms, economic conditions, and religious beliefs, sometimes serving as a drastic means of population control, resource management, or even as part of ritualistic practices. Records from antiquity reveal instances of child sacrifice, where infants were deliberately killed as offerings to deities, illustrating a deeply disturbing yet culturally sanctioned form of infanticide. These practices, while abhorrent by contemporary standards, underscore the varying value systems and survival strategies that characterized human societies in different historical epochs.

Historical accounts provide numerous specific examples of infanticide practices. In ancient Greece, for instance, the philosopher Aristotle notably advocated for the killing of deformed children, reflecting a eugenic philosophy aimed at maintaining a robust and healthy citizenry. This practice, often carried out by exposure, was not uncommon in Greek city-states like Sparta, where

newborns underwent inspection, and those deemed unfit were left to die. Similarly, in third-century China, the practice of killing female infants was prevalent, driven by strong societal preferences for male offspring, economic considerations, and ancestral worship traditions that favored males. One particularly brutal method cited was "baby water," where an infant was submerged in a bucket of cold water until succumbing to hypothermia, highlighting the stark reality and tragic ingenuity of such acts.

These historical instances demonstrate that infanticide was not always viewed through the lens of criminality or moral depravity, but sometimes as a pragmatic, albeit harsh, response to prevailing socio-economic or cultural pressures. Factors such as famine, poverty, illegitimacy, disability, and gender preference often played significant roles in determining an infant's fate. The widespread nature of infanticide across geographically disparate and culturally diverse societies suggests it was a deeply ingrained, albeit often concealed, aspect of human history, challenging modern perceptions of universal protection for infant life. The gradual shift away from these practices reflects evolving ethical standards, improved social support systems, and greater recognition of the inherent value of every human life, regardless of circumstance.

3. Motivations and Psychological Factors

The motivations behind infanticide are multifaceted and often deeply personal, distinguishing modern cases from the more societally sanctioned practices of antiquity. While historical infanticide was sometimes a collective decision or a consequence of cultural imperatives, contemporary instances are frequently driven by extreme individual distress, mental health crises, or desperate attempts to conceal unwanted pregnancies. The emotional and psychological landscape surrounding the act can be profoundly complex, involving intense feelings of shame, fear, hopelessness, and an overwhelming sense of isolation. Understanding these underlying motivations is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies and providing appropriate support to vulnerable individuals.

Among the most frequently cited probable reasons for mothers committing infanticide are severe mental health conditions, particularly those that manifest in the post-partum period. Post-partum depression (PPD) is a mood disorder that can affect women after childbirth, characterized by symptoms such as intense sadness, anxiety, exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy, and difficulty bonding with the baby. While PPD is relatively common and does not typically lead to infanticide, its more severe forms can significantly impair a mother's capacity to care for her infant and, in rare and extreme cases, can contribute to distorted perceptions of reality or impulses that lead to harm. The pervasive emotional distress and cognitive distortions associated with severe PPD underscore the critical need for comprehensive maternal mental health screening and support.

Even more critically, post-partum psychosis (PPP) represents a severe, but rare, psychiatric

emergency that can occur shortly after childbirth. PPP is characterized by rapid onset of symptoms including hallucinations, delusions, severe mood swings, disorganized thinking, and impaired reality testing. Mothers experiencing post-partum psychosis may have delusional beliefs that their baby is evil, possessed, or would be better off dead, or they may experience command hallucinations to harm their infant. This acute mental state significantly compromises a mother's ability to act rationally and poses a high risk for infanticide or suicide. The immediate identification and intensive psychiatric treatment of PPP are paramount to ensure the safety of both mother and child, highlighting the devastating impact severe mental illness can have on parental capacity and infant vulnerability.

4. Methods and Demographics

The methods employed in infanticide vary widely, reflecting both historical contexts and individual circumstances, often dictated by opportunity, intent, and the perpetrator's state of mind. Historically, common methods included exposure to the elements, starvation, suffocation, drowning, and physical violence, as exemplified by the "baby water" practice in ancient China. In contemporary cases, methods can range from passive neglect leading to death, such as intentional starvation or failure to provide necessary care, to active violence, including strangulation, suffocation, blunt force trauma, or poisoning. The choice of method can sometimes reveal the degree of planning, the emotional state of the perpetrator, and their attempts to conceal the act, underscoring the often desperate and chaotic nature of these tragic events.

While the source content does not delve into precise demographics, global studies on infanticide reveal certain patterns, though these can vary significantly by region and socio-economic context. Perpetrators are overwhelmingly biological mothers, particularly those experiencing mental health crises, social isolation, or extreme poverty. However, fathers or other caregivers can also commit infanticide. Victims are, by definition, infants, with the most vulnerable age group often being newborns, especially within the first few days or weeks of life, when mental health issues like post-partum psychosis are most likely to manifest, and when concealment of pregnancy and birth is most feasible. The demographics underscore the critical need for support systems targeting new mothers and families facing severe stressors.

5. Infanticide in the Animal Kingdom

Infanticide is not a phenomenon exclusive to humans; it is also observed in various species within the animal kingdom, where it typically serves an evolutionary or ecological purpose. These instances are usually driven by reproductive strategies, resource competition, or hierarchy maintenance rather than the complex psychological factors seen in humans. For example, among social carnivores like lions, infanticide is a well-documented behavior. When a new male lion or coalition of males takes over a pride, replacing the previous leader, they often kill the existing cubs

sired by the former dominant male. This brutal act is a reproductive strategy for the new males, as it causes the lactating females to cease nursing and come into estrus (heat) sooner, allowing the new males to father their own offspring more quickly and perpetuate their genes.

Beyond lions, infanticide is also seen in other species, including primates (e.g., langurs, gorillas, chimpanzees), rodents, and certain bird species. In these cases, the motivations are often similar: males killing offspring not their own to gain reproductive opportunities, or females killing their own offspring due to resource scarcity, overcrowding, or perceived defects in the young. From an evolutionary perspective, these behaviors are often interpreted as adaptive strategies that enhance the reproductive success of the perpetrator, even at the cost of the lives of genetically unrelated or less viable offspring. Observing infanticide in the animal kingdom provides a comparative lens through which to understand some of the underlying biological drivers of behavior, though it is crucial to distinguish these instinctual, adaptive responses from the complex ethical and psychological dimensions of human infanticide.

6. Societal Responses and Prevention

Societal responses to infanticide have evolved dramatically, shifting from historical tolerance or even sanctioning in certain contexts to universal condemnation and rigorous legal prosecution in modern times. Contemporary societies view infanticide as a profound violation of human rights and a severe crime against a vulnerable life. Legal frameworks have been established globally to criminalize the act, with varying degrees of punishment that sometimes acknowledge mitigating factors related to post-partum mental health. Beyond legal punitive measures, societies have also developed social support systems aimed at preventing infanticide, recognizing that many cases stem from desperation, lack of resources, or mental health crises rather than malice.

Prevention strategies are multifaceted and target various risk factors. Public health initiatives focus on improving maternal mental health, including comprehensive screening for post-partum depression and psychosis, and providing accessible psychiatric care and counseling for new mothers. Social welfare programs aim to reduce socio-economic stressors such as poverty and lack of housing, which can contribute to desperate acts. Additionally, safe haven laws or baby boxes in many countries provide anonymous options for mothers unable or unwilling to care for their newborns, offering an alternative to abandonment or infanticide. These interventions reflect a collective societal effort to protect infant life while addressing the complex underlying issues that can lead to such tragic outcomes, emphasizing support and intervention over mere punishment.

7. Ethical and Philosophical Debates

The concept of infanticide triggers profound ethical and philosophical debates, particularly concerning the moral status of infants, the limits of parental autonomy, and society's responsibility

to protect its most vulnerable members. A central point of contention revolves around when an infant acquires full moral personhood, and consequently, an absolute right to life. While most contemporary ethical frameworks affirm the inherent value and right to life of all human beings from birth, historical and certain philosophical perspectives have explored whether the absence of cognitive capacities, such as self-awareness or rational thought, could ever diminish an infant's moral status. These discussions, though often hypothetical in modern legal contexts, highlight the deep-seated moral quandaries associated with the act.

Furthermore, debates around infanticide often touch upon the complex interplay between individual suffering and societal norms. While the act is undeniably abhorrent, the circumstances leading to it, such as severe maternal mental illness or extreme social deprivation, compel an examination of culpability, compassion, and systemic failures. Philosophers and ethicists grapple with the tension between condemning the act unequivocally and understanding the profound distress that can drive individuals to commit it. These discussions contribute to the ongoing evolution of legal and social policies, striving to balance justice for the victim with a compassionate, evidence-based approach to prevention and intervention for those at risk, recognizing the intricate ethical landscape surrounding the deliberate killing of an infant.

Further Reading

[Infanticide - Wikipedia](#)

[Child Sacrifice - Wikipedia](#)

[Aristotle - Wikipedia](#)

[Ancient Greece - Wikipedia](#)

[Postpartum Depression - Wikipedia](#)

[Postpartum Psychosis - Wikipedia](#)

[Lion - Wikipedia](#)