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Mothers in the Media: Blamed and Celebrated - An Examination of Drug Abuse and Multiple Births

Sonya Charles Tricha Shivas

The media has always had a profound interest in mothers and birth stories. This study examined the difference between media portrayal of "good" mothers and "bad" mothers. Did the media cover potential harm to fetuses and would-be children in the same way for two groups of mothers: (a) pregnant women addicted to illicit drugs and (b) women who chose to continue a high-order, multiple birth pregnancy?

Two searches were conducted on Lexis-Nexis, one with keywords "McCaughy and birth" and another with the keywords "pregnancy and illegal drugs." A total of 210 articles were coded for the McCaughy search, and 90 articles were coded for the pregnancy and illegal drugs search. The media did not address potential harm in the same way in both cases. The harm from illegal drugs was exaggerated, while the harm from multiple births was downplayed. Consequently, the media response towards the two cases was dramatically different. In conclusion, the communal and regulatory responses to *both* drug-addicted pregnant women and large multiple births caused by infertility treatments needs to be rethought.

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America is a very pronatalist country. Women are encouraged to have children and motherhood is romanticized. However, not all mothers are equal. Images of the prototypical white, middle-class, stay-at-home mother are still common-place in films and advertising. There is a strong social expectation that it is the responsibility of the mother to protect her child from harm. Risks like birth defects, low birth-weight, premature birth, and learning disabilities are among the harms that mothers are expected to avoid. Physicians inform women of the importance of prenatal care, television commercial campaigns discuss the importance of folic acid and vitamin intake, cigarettes and prescription drugs warn against use during pregnancy, all in order to help mothers avoid exposing their fetuses to potential harms. However, are all women held responsible for their choices in the same way?

This is the question that this study is meant to answer. The medical and medical ethics literature has addressed the questions of exposure to potential harm to the fetus and would-be child in two cases: women who continue to use illegal drugs throughout their pregnancy and women who choose to continue high-order, multiple birth pregnancies that result from infertility treatments (Capron, 1998; Frank et al., 2001). This essay examines the paradoxical attitude in media coverage of these two cases.

Methodology

The focus of this study is on how the popular media, and more specifically, the printed newspaper media, covered illegal drug use during pregnancy and high-order multiple births. It compared the cases of illegal drug use during pregnancy and multiple-birth pregnancies for two reasons. First, they were both high-profile, received a lot of media coverage, and, thus, are instrumental in the social conception of a fit or unfit mother. Second, the hypothesis was that there would be a discrepancy in how these two issues were perceived in the public and handled by the media.

This study is not an all-inclusive examination of the literature, but rather is meant to serve as a case study that is representative of the larger issue. The media has covered a significant number of large multiple births in this country. This review focused on the most well-known case of the McCaughy septuplets. Two Lexis-Nexis searches were conducted, one with the keywords "McCaughy and birth" and another with the keywords "pregnancy and illegal drugs." For the McCaughy search a total of 481 articles were found. All the articles that focused on multiple births other than the McCaughy case itself were eliminated. For the pregnancy and illegal drugs search a total of 117 articles were found. Any articles that focused primarily on legal drugs such as alcohol and smoking were eliminated. For both searches, those articles that appeared in multiple newspapers (such as syndicated columns or Associated Press articles) were coded only once. Once these eliminations were made, a total of 210 articles for the McCaughy

search and 90 articles for the pregnancy and illegal drugs search were coded. Of the drug articles, all but one focused on cocaine use (that one dealt with ecstasy).

Since most of the articles were fairly short, each article counted as a "text unit." Also, themes were coded instead of keywords or percent of the article taken up by the topic. For example, any mention of a punitive response (such as prosecuting women if their newborns tested positive for drugs) was counted as one instance in the coding (regardless of whether more instances occurred in the same article). Similarly, any discussion of gifts given to the McCaugheys was counted as one instance no matter how many gifts were mentioned in the same article.

Results

A total of 73% of the articles on illegal drugs and pregnancy discussed punitive approaches to dealing with women who use drugs during pregnancy. These articles focused on both court cases and legislation that dealt with women's drug use while pregnant. Of the articles reviewed, women were accused of the following criminal charges: distribution of a drug to a minor, child abuse or neglect, risk of injury to a minor, manslaughter, attempted murder, murder, and homicide. In addition, 40% of the articles made a direct analogy between drug abuse during pregnancy and child abuse, and 7% discussed ways to keep the women from having more children. In contrast to the 73% dealing with punitive approaches, only 27% discussed non-punitive measures such as better access to prenatal care and expanding the number of drug rehabilitation centers. Furthermore, none of these articles discussed corporate gifts provided to assist these women in either the care of the resulting children or during the rehabilitation process.

The way the media covered the McCaugheys differed dramatically. A total of 42% of the articles dealing with the McCaughey's mentioned the gifts the McCaugheys received (see Table 1). All of these gifts were noted as being given to the McCaugheys after the septuplets birth for the purpose of the care of the children. Despite the fact that 35% of the articles mentioned the potential and actual birth defects of the septuplets, not surprisingly, there was no discussion of criminal charges in these articles.

A total of 31% of the articles dealing with drug use and pregnancy made derogatory comments about the women's character, and 22% discussed concern for the welfare of the child postbirth. In contrast, only 10% of the articles discussed concern for welfare of the septuplets. Furthermore, only 8% of the articles were critical of the McCaugheys for their decision to continue the pregnancy or to use fertility drugs in the first place. Interestingly, 19% of the articles were critical of the fertility industry. There was no parallel criticism in the illegal drug cases. For example, articles did not criticize drug dealers or the "illegal drug industry." In addition, 15% praised the McCaugheys, and a total of 6% referred to the McCaugheys as experts in parenting.

The role of the community in supporting the McCaugheys in a nonfinancial manner was discussed in 26% of the articles, and 23% of the articles addressed the need for community support in cases with drug-addicted mothers.

Discussion

Women who use illegal drugs when pregnant have been called unfit, coerced into sterilization, and have even faced criminal charges for causing harm to their fetus. Yet, a systematic review recently published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that children whose mothers used cocaine did not demonstrate a higher risk for

Table 1. List of Gifts the McCaugheys Received

Corporate Gifts

- Van (15-seat Chevrolet)
- Chevrolet also donated \$100/car sold during one month after the babies were born
- Lifetime supply of Pampers (estimated by one article as 32,200 per year)
- 7 years of free cable television
- One year supply of groceries and baby care products
- Car seats and strollers
- Washer and dryer, refrigerator, oven, dishwasher, and design consultant provided by Maytag
- New home (Clark Co. effort spearheaded by the governor who pleaded with people to be generous), including lumber, steel, paint, and windows
- Sears Portrait Studio pictures three times a year for 10 years
- A pledge from a mutual fund company of \$20,000 for education IRAs
- Furnished nursery
- Free baby food from Gerber
- Power for heating and cooling
- 16 years of apple juice and applesauce from Motts
- New Zealand Multiple Births Association sent sleepwraps designed to hold the babies in safe sleeping positions
- Free Website from Sony

Noncorporate Gifts

- Des Moines Register donated proceeds from special edition to the McCaugheys
- Proceeds from Carlisle 3000 balloon launch (\$1 per balloon)
- Hannibal-La Grange College has offered them scholarships
- \$10,000 donation from Cindy Crawford
- Land donation by a private individual (worth \$21,356 in her hometown)
- St. Ambrose University in Davenport offered tuition for four years to the septuplets (in honor of the parents' decision not to selectively abort)
- Undisclosed amount from gifts from the general public

birth defects as a result of the use of that drug (Frank et al., 2001). Specifically, the meta-analysis of current research reviewed all the major birth defects typically attributed to cocaine use, such as stunted physical growth, lower developmental test scores, and decrease in receptive or expressive language. Of these, none could be shown to be directly tied to cocaine use as opposed to other drugs often used at the same time (such as alcohol and tobacco) or environmental factors that also effect development. The one potential exception is a single study that found a slightly higher incidence of behavioral problems in cocaine-exposed infants once they reached school age. However, this study used an evaluative system that is still considered experimental. In addition, the health problems associated with other illegal drugs, such as heroine and ecstasy, are, in general, also far better known (and more damaging) than health problems associated with cocaine (Chavkin & Breitbart, 1997; Hall, 1999). However, the media and criminal focus has been almost exclusively directed toward women who

abuse crack cocaine. Therefore, our statistics deal exclusively with cocaine addiction and pregnancy.

Despite this lack of harm linked directly to cocaine use, a synopsis of state case and statutory law published in the *Yale Journal of Health Policy, Law, and Ethics* shows that almost 60% of states have had at least one major court case dealing with substance abuse during pregnancy (Synopsis of State Case, 2001). Of these cases, all were punitive in nature; they were mainly cases of detaining, arresting, prosecuting, or punishing women. None of these cases had to do with women gaining access to drug rehabilitation or other forms of community support.

However, women who decide to continue large multiple birth pregnancies are not met with criminal charges, instead they are praised and provided financial and social support for their choice. The major risks to the fetus in a multiple birth pregnancy are premature birth, low birthweight (and the higher the order of multiple the greater the risk), increased mortality, respiratory distress syndrome, cerebral palsy, blindness, and cranial hemorrhage (American Society for Reproductive Medicine [ASRM], 2001). In fact, very low birthweight (less than 1,500 grams) is 33 times more likely to occur in triplet or more births than in a singleton birth (Martin & Park, 1999). Despite these well-documented risks to the fetus, multiple birth mothers are not subject to prosecution and public vehemence, but instead are met with a multitude of support groups and a public push to secure financing for their choice (insurance coverage for infertility treatments).

Given this context, the results of this case study are not surprising. The media review found paradoxical attitudes concerning drug-addicted mothers and multiple birth mothers that fell under three overlapping themes: only some women deserve punishment for placing their fetuses at risk, only some women should be blamed for behaviors that expose their fetuses to harm, and only some women with at-risk infants are worthy of community support.

Only some women are deserving of punishment. Despite the fact that there was a recognized, high possibility that the McCaughey septuplets would have birth defects or health problems later in life, there was no suggestion in the public press that the mother's choice to continue a high multiple pregnancy was deserving of criminal charges. Quite the contrary, much of the media focus was on the gifts they received from corporate and private sources and the "miracle" that all seven were born alive. Also, some articles even praised Bobbi for managing to keep the babies in for so long (Furson, 1997a; Kettle, 1997). In addition, many articles noted the McCaugheys published two books, produced a CD, and were spokes people for Black and Decker and the "Got Milk" campaign (Camilli, 1999; Hogan, 1999).

In contrast, the articles addressing the cases with illegal drugs focused almost entirely on appropriate punishment to the mothers because of the potential harm drug use could cause the children. Of the 66 articles that discussed punitive approaches to dealing with women who use drugs during pregnancy, many detailed either specific cases where women were arrested for drug use while pregnant or specific legislative approaches (or hospital policies) that explored various ways to penalize women who took illegal drugs while pregnant. The vast majority of the arrests and/or custody issues relied on child abuse laws, and many of the articles make a direct analogy or reference to drug use during pregnancy as a form of child abuse. Along with criminal punitive measures, a few articles discussed anti-pregnancy measures, such as Barbara Harris' CRACK program, a non-profit organization that pays drug-addicted women to go on birth control or get sterilized (Bernstein, 2000). The few arti-

cles that do discuss nonpunitive measures mention things like better access to prenatal care, expanding the number of drug rehabilitation centers that will accept pregnant women, and other community support systems.

However, using the harm argument to prosecute and penalize drug-addicted women contradicts the attitude toward women who carry large multiple births. It reveals that the harm to the fetus cannot be the only factor in explaining why there are such negative reactions to women who use illegal drugs while pregnant. The risk of harm clearly exists in both cases and the risk at this time is arguably statistically more significant in the case of large multiple births. So, if it is not harm (or at least *only* harm) to the fetus that is at issue, what is?

Only some women should be blamed. Perhaps it is the character of the individual that is at issue in the distinction of how these individuals are treated. In fact, reports about the McCaughey's decision to not selectively reduce was very often coupled with praise for their sticking with their religious convictions (specifically in relation to abortion). Praise of the McCaugheys included calling Bobbi "Supermom;" the mayor of Carlisle saying, "You can't imagine how thrilled we are;" and even President Bill Clinton saying, "I admire you and I think it is great and I hope it will be a great adventure for you the whole way through.. It has been exciting for the whole country" (Smith, 1997; Standora, 1997; Williams & Pienciak, 1997). Even the few editorial articles that were critical of the McCaughey's choices framed the McCaughey's decision as a family determined to beat the odds and who trusted in God to provide assistance in that goal.

However, the women who continue to use illegal drugs during pregnancy are said to be irresponsible since they ignore the risks to the infants only for self-gratification. Consider the often-cited statement by Charles Condon, the Attorney General of South Carolina: "You do not have the right to have a drug-addicted or cocaine baby... Until they suffer some sanctions, ... you're going to see the problem increase" (Sataline, 1991). And, from another article: "These women were mocking us, but worst of all they were destroying these children's chance to have a life" (Krueger, 1993). As these quotations show, most who favor a punitive approach are not interested in seriously considering the life circumstances of those who become pregnant while addicted to drugs. Many articles frame drug addiction as simply part of the woman's "lifestyle" or a "voluntary" choice, and the women are considered "bad mothers" for continuing this behavior (Hall, 1992; Hansen, 1998). Only a few articles consider that these women may continue their pregnancies despite drug abuse because they love and want their children. Also, few articles seriously discuss why these women are addicted to drugs to begin with or what motivates women to continue to use drugs during pregnancy.

To reiterate, these arguments are *not* proposing that it is acceptable for women to do drugs while pregnant. Often drug-addicted women do engage in various behaviors that could be harmful to themselves and the fetus. However, these comments are meant to highlight the fact that the potential harms inflicted by a drug-addicted mother are often no worse than the potential harm inflicted by a woman who carries high-order multiples to term. Therefore, the different attitudes toward potential harm portrayed in these articles regarding these two cases needs to be questioned. Additionally, there are different attitudes reportedly taken toward the women's lifestyles or personal choices. Even though drug addiction is recognized as an illness that people cannot simply stop at will, these women are criticized in the public press for their choice to either take drugs during

pregnancy or continue to carry the pregnancy to term. In contrast, religious beliefs or the choice to use fertility drugs is reported as an acceptable reason to carry high-order multiples to term.

Only some women are worthy of community support. In addition to the differences of how harm plays out and how the character of the women in these cases is discussed, there is a dramatic discrepancy in how the media portrays the role of the community. In the case of drug-addicted mothers, there is little discussion of rehabilitation programs, except in cases where the article was framed as a plea from a director of such a program who feared its closure without some type of community or government support. In the case of the McCaugheys, very public figures including the governor of Iowa, Terry Branstad, spoke out and orchestrated the building of the McCaughey's new home (Furson, 1997b). Additionally, the McCaughey's church and town were called upon to take up shifts as house cleaners, shoppers, and diaper changers once the McCaugheys got home. Some were even given the job of babysitters when the McCaugheys went out on their Friday night date. No such support was discussed for women who wished to enroll in drug programs. There was no discussion of communal duty to support these women so they could work and raise their children and certainly no discussion of the requirement of a babysitter so they could attend drug counseling, not to mention date night.

In summation, these data demonstrate that harm is not what is at issue in the cases of drug-addicted mothers portrayed in the media, but rather it is about who should and who should not have children. The next leg of the study will be to explore in more detail what factors are at play in creating this distinction in the way the public reportedly reacts to drug-addicted mothers versus mothers of multiple births. The preliminary data indicate that race and economic status may be key factors in this distinction.

For now, the communal and regulatory responses to *both* drug-addicted pregnant women and large multiple births caused by infertility treatments need to be rethought. Criminal law has no place in either of these cases, and the lack of regulation of reproductive technologies needs to be addressed. Additionally, instead of simply criticizing drug-addicted women for the risks to which they expose their children, the government needs to fund programs to assist these women in their recovery.

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