

Victorian 'Baby-Farming' Child Killers: Aberration or 'Rational' Act?

Joshua Stuart-Bennett
Department of Criminology

What were 'baby-farming' child killers?

The term 'baby-farming' was used to describe a widespread business practice which was sensationally brought to light during the Victorian period. The activity concerned women who provided temporary or permanent, paid child-care and adoption services for individuals (typically other women) with children who were either undesired or could not be cared for. It became apparent that some of the women providing these services, particularly in cases of permanent adoption with a one-off payment, were either actively killing the children in their care or allowing them to die by starvation, exposure or neglect.

How has this been understood?

Having remained largely inconspicuous in social research for some time, the matter of 'baby-farming' child killing has recently been brought to light within some recent criminological literature which has sought to highlight this behaviour, with particular reference to the case of Amelia Elizabeth Dyer (1837-1896), as an early example of female 'serial killing'. This interest has followed general recognition of the lack of discussion surrounding female perpetrated multiple-homicide, as well as recent changes to the authoritative 'serial killing' definition which now includes women within its classification.

The 'traditional' approach in the study of multiple-homicide focuses upon the actor of the killing and seeks an understanding on an individual level. In other words, it suggests that there is something about, or within, such individuals that causes them to behave in this way. Accordingly, they are typically labelled as being psychopathic, psychotic, evil or monstrous. Alternatively, because of some inherent weakness, they themselves may be viewed as a victim of sorts.

How may it be understood differently?

This research, in challenging this view of 'baby-farming' child killers as 'serial killers', as well as the tendency by some criminologists to view past crimes through the eyes of the present, seeks to examine the phenomenon within the wider social, cultural and historical context in which it occurred. In doing this, the research argues that the present 'traditional' essentialist and individualistic approaches within the study of multiple-homicide (where an explanation is located on the level of the individual) are often flawed and provide erroneous and limited understandings.

Accordingly, the research shifts the focus away from the individual actor to instead examine contextual themes such as the wider behaviours and ideologies that underpinned these acts, as well as the social creation of opportune circumstances and victim groups that allowed these acts to occur. Rather than being the result of individual pathology, weakness or 'evilness', the research therefore explores how such occurrences may instead be viewed as a product of the time, place and circumstances in which it transpired and therefore 'rational' and comprehensible within its context.



**Amelia Elizabeth
Dyer**

*The Reading
Baby Farmer
(1837-1896)*

What relevance could this (re)understanding have for our modern approach to multiple-homicide?

The research highlights that the study of multiple-homicide requires a much broader and holistic examination that considers factors beyond those at the level of the individual offender. The labels and classifications used within the 'traditional' approach to explain this type of behaviour generally lead to dead-end debates and simplified understandings of these acts.

While the 'traditional' approach allows causes and responses (treatment or punishment) to be fixed at the level of the individual, this research brings to light the possible wider social involvement, or complicity, in such acts.