

Love Affair Gone Bad Leads to Violence: The Gonzalez-Angulo Story

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Abstract

The case of Ana Maria Gonzalez-Angulo, a woman who was convicted of poisoning her lover George Blumenchein, demonstrates how crime is intertwined with gender roles. While men's violent crimes are often connected with money, women's violent crimes are usually aimed at people who reside in their domestic sphere. Gonzalez-Angulo's crime fits this pattern. She did not poison her former lover for want of money, but instead appears to have assaulted him in anger as she had recently learned that Blumenchein would not be leaving his live-in girlfriend for her. Her all encompassing anger was at least partially fueled by her failure to meet cultural dictates for marriage and children. Despite widespread changes, marriage to a successful male is the culminating event in a whole host of cultural narratives, and Gonzalez-Angulo could not have escaped the pressure to achieve this goal.

Introduction

Because women's violent crimes are often linked to their relationships with men, it was not surprising to learn of the case against Ana Maria Gonzalez-Angulo MD [1], a cancer researcher who was accused of poisoning her lover, George Blumenchein MD. The 42-year-old Columbian born oncologist became romantically involved with Blumenchein while working alongside him at the esteemed MD Anderson Cancer Center in Huston. Their relationship, however, was not exclusive as Blumenchein had a long-term live-in girlfriend named Evette Toney. After making it clear to Gonzalez Angulo that his primary allegiance was to Toney, she spiked his coffee with ethylene glycol – a sweet tasting chemical found in anti-freeze. Though Gonzalez-Angulo continues to deny any kind of wrong doing, she was tried and convicted of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, and on September 29, 2014 was sentenced to ten-years in prison.

Explanation

The poisoning appears to be an isolated incident; Gonzalez-Angulo did not have a criminal record and had no prior history of violent behavior. Her patients, moreover, held her in high regard, describing her as a “brilliant, compassionate and loving healer who went out her way to help them” [2]. So one wonders just what led her engage in an action that was so out of character. Why would a highly respected cancer doctor suddenly commit such an extreme act of violence? I will begin to answer this question by examining the social rules that women in many parts of the world are expected to follow -- one of which is the need to find and keep a man.

Sociologist Rose Weitz [3] describes this powerful cultural dictate in the following way:

Western culture teaches that women are the weaker sex and they cannot flourish - or perhaps even survive - without the protection of men. Women are taught that they cannot live happy fulfilled lives without a Prince Charming, who is superior to them in all ways.

In this same vein, adult woman who fail to marry -- or form long lasting intimate partnerships with men -- are looked upon with scorn. In most societies throughout the world, women who fail to attract a male are seen as “less-than.” A prime example of this way of thinking can be found in China where unmarried females are mockingly referred to as leftover women [4].

Young girls are bombarded with this message from toddlerhood on. They learn about it directly from family and friends and indirectly by

way of movies, fairy tales and popular songs. As a result, the ability to attract men becomes incorporated into a woman's self-concept, and romantic rejection is often experienced as an assault to one's self-esteem.

As girls grow to adulthood, finding a husband (or a close equivalent such as a live-in boyfriend) becomes a primary aim. Securing a mate is, of course, not the only cultural objective that females living in America and other developed countries are required to achieve as women are now expected to attain some sort of career. But marriage to a successful male is the culminating event in a whole host of cultural narratives, and these narratives shape our points of view and guide our behaviors.

Ana Maria Gonzalez-Angulo could not have escaped the pressure to meet these objectives. She had indeed achieved one of these goals as she had built a highly successful professional career. But she was unable to form an exclusive relationship with a male, which is undoubtedly the more significant rule. When one examines the events that occurred prior to the assault, it is plain to see that establishing a long-term relationship with a male was something she had hoped to do¹. I am therefore convinced that the rage she felt toward George Blumenchein was at least partially fueled by her failure to reach this emotionally charged societal aim².

The research on women who commit violent crimes corresponds with this ascertain. In her book, *Why Women Kill: Homicide and*

¹For example, in a Huston Chronicle article titled, *Convicted of Poisoning her Colleague and Lover, MD Anderson Doctor Awaits Punishment*, (September 26, 2014). B. Rogers reports that Blumenchein and Gonzalez -Agulo traveled to Columbia where he met her parents, and goes on to write that Gonzelez-Angulo hoped to have children with Blumenchein. [2]

²It's important to note that Gonzalez-Angulo is from Colombia, and in many Latin American there is far more pressure on women to marry and have children than there is here in the United States.

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Gender Equality [1], Jensen asserts that when women engage in the crimes of murder or assault, their violent actions are usually directed at people who reside in their domestic sphere. The person often assaulted or killed is a husband or boyfriend with the precipitating event being an argument coupled with physical and or emotional abuse. While men commit far more murders and assaults than do women, and these actions can occur in the context of their domestic sphere, sociological research shows that males are far more likely than females to kill for economic gain.

These facts are directly related to powerful social norms. While gender rules for men continue to equate status with wealth and power, much of a woman's social status is tied to having a man by her side. Jensen's research is, therefore, consistent with Gonzalez-Angulo's crime of aggravated assault. She did not poison Blumenchein for want of money; she instead appears to have assaulted him because she was angry with his decision to remain with his live-in girlfriend.

When they began their affair, Gonzalez-Angulo was fully aware of George Blumenchein's living situation. This had to have been a degrading experience, and one wonders just why she would enter into a relationship that placed her at the lower end of Blumenchein's relationship hierarchy? Sociologist Rose Weitz provides us with the likely answer. "In their struggle to keep their men," she writes, "women learn to view one another as untrustworthy competitors." [3]

It seems to me that Gonzalez-Angulo saw herself as being involved in the kind of competition they could definitely win. She surmised that Blumenchein would eventually come to see her as "that special one," and would ultimately leave Toney for her. Upon doing so, they would go on to form an exclusive relationship, have children and live happily-ever-after. When she learned that Blumenchein and Toney were attempting to start a family, she knew that she had lost the game³. A conversation between Gonzalez-Angulo and Blumenchein, which he secretly recorded after he was poisoned, supports this supposition. "It's too late, she won," Gonzalez-Angulo said to Blumenchein. "You go on, have a kid and I'll leave. It'll be fine." [5]

But this still doesn't explain why Gonzalez-Angulo went on to assault Blumenchein for most women who experience the sadness and disappointment that accompanies ill-fated romances do not attempt murder. And even though Blumenchein's womanizing can definitely be thought of as the kind of behavior that would provoke anger, it did not give Gonzalez-Angulo the right to poison him. So why did she take her hurt, anger and disappointment to such an extreme? Did she have some sort of mental illness?

Although I have never met Gonzalez-Angulo, I would argue that most mental health professionals would view poisoning one's lover as "crazy" behavior. After all, why would anyone in their right minds engage in an action that would ultimately destroy their lives? Here is what I think happened. After Gonzalez-Angulo's discovered that Blumenchein and Toney were attempting to have children, her bubble was burst and she was forced to face the truth: Blumenchein would never leave Toney for her. This was not only a crushing blow, but also a major assault to her self-esteem. What's more, she was now forced to accept the fact that she would remain childless and unmarried. And as a single woman in her early 40s, she also had to have known that as a good many people would view her with scorn. So the fury she felt toward Blumenchein for refusing to give up Toney, coupled with the anguish

that accompanied her overall inability to meet cultural expectations for marriage and children, caused her to snap.

I am not, of course, the first behavioral scientist to draw a link between gender rules and psychopathology, and though such works are too numerous to expound upon in this short essay, I'll mention several of them here. In her best selling book *Reviving Ophelia*, Psychologist Mary Pipher reports that girls who were fine as children begin to develop psychological disorders when they enter into their teens. Placing the blame for such maladies squarely on the back of cultural rules for women, Pipher notes that as girls move from childhood to adolescence, they are expected to follow harmful social directives. [6]. One such rule induces females to spend an inordinate amount of time perfecting their looks, which takes time away from healthier pursuits such as sports, study and other creative activities. Although girls know these rules are damaging, they replace their true needs with false ones in order to fit in with their peers. It is the suppression of one's true needs that gives rise to all kinds of psychological disorders.

Other social scientists have examined the ways in which gender roles impact adult women. In a study of married females diagnosed with schizophrenia in the 1950s, sociologist Carol Warren discovered that the women's psychiatric symptoms were imbued with gender symbolisms relating to their husbands and children. One woman, for example, tried to burn her house down and another woman fed her child a tranquilizer pill. After conducting a careful analysis of their life stories, Warren concluded that mid-century gender rules, which relegated women to the domestic sphere, served to incite feelings of powerlessness, loneliness, stress and isolation. As time went on, she theorized, their feelings morphed into more serious psychiatric ailments⁴[7].

These studies demonstrate that different types of gender rules can lead to a variety of mental illnesses as women have diverse life-circumstances and varying vulnerabilities. The pathological anger, which undoubtedly prompted Gonzalez-Angulo to assault her lover with a deadly weapon, is just one of the many maladaptive responses humans sometimes display when they find it impossible to meet society's rigid gender norms. Other psychopathologies directly linked to peoples' failure to realize these goals include eating disorders, nervous breakdowns, and even suicide⁵ [9].

While many women turn the pain and disappointment of a failed relationship inward, others lash out rage. As such, the contours of the case are similar to another sensational crime of passion that garnered widespread media coverage—that of Jodi Ann Arias – a woman who was convicted of killing her onetime boyfriend, Travis Alexander in May of 2013. Like Gonzalez-Angulo, Arias found herself at the bottom of lover's relationship hierarchy as Alexander was actively pursuing other women while he maintained a sexual relationship with Jodi [10]. And like Gonzalez-Angulo, Arias had no history of violence and no prior arrest record. In the end, the intense emotional turmoil that

⁴Likewise, 19th century feminist scholar Charlotte Perkins Gillmen wrote the semiautobiographical short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," to show how 19th century social rules, which confined middle class married women to their households and kept them from pursuing intellectual endeavors, could literally drive them mad [8].

⁵Writer Sylvia Plath was prime example of someone who took her life when she failed to meet the norm of "keeping her man." After experiencing feelings such as anguish and rage after her husband left her for Assia Wevill, she slid into a deep depression and ultimately committed suicide. It's important to note that she had a propensity for major depression as she had attempted suicide once before in college. So this is why she reacted to her husband's betrayal with this particular response [9].

³The symbolism of conceiving a child must have led Gonzalez-Angulo to feel excruciating pain, and the fact that she was an unmarried and childless in her early 40s surely intensified this pain.

accompanied these love affairs gone-bad seems to be what triggered the violent behaviors exhibited by both women.

So what then, can we learn from these stories? The key point here is that gender rules are very potent social forces that can incite all kinds of psychopathologies -- some of which induce people to commit acts of violence. It is also important to remember that the vast majority of these gender norms are rooted in patriarchy -- an entire system of male dominance riddled with all sorts of beliefs about male superiority. An unattached man, in effect, does not experience the kind of stigma that is associated with an unattached woman. Because he's the superior being, he's fine all on his own. Because she's deemed inferior, she needs a man by her side to make her whole.

Patriarchal views give rise to multitude of social problems which includes violence against women, and the tendency for a good many women to remain with their abusive partners [11]. And as we have seen with the Gonzalez-Angulo and Arias cases, in some rare instances, failure to meet significant gender norms can impel women to engage in violence against men⁶ [11]. In short, patriarchal gender rules are dangerous.

Conclusion

Though many of the cultural guidelines discussed in this essay are pervasive and resistant to change, it does not mean we should stop trying to modify them. People tend to take gender rules for granted, and it is for this reason that they need to be questioned on a regular basis, and the questioning needs to take place in the public sphere so that the general populace can learn to think about gender norms in a critical manner. In this way gender norms can be exposed for what they really are: a narrow set of socially constructed dictates, which impinge upon our personal wellbeing. And once we learn to stop taking gender

rules so seriously, we won't become so upset when we fail to abide by them.

I don't think Ana Maria Gonzalez-Angulo understood that her inability to achieve an emotionally charged societal rule served to intensify the anger she felt toward George Blumenchein -- so much so that it turned into an all-encompassing rage. For if she had greater insight into the causes of her fury, she might never have committed the crime that ruined her whole life.

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⁶It is important to note that men commit the vast majority of murders and assaults that occur in conjunction with dating and marriage. Jacobson and Gottman note that women are more likely to be killed by their husbands, boyfriends, ex-husbands or ex-boyfriends than all other perpetrators combined. What's more, the fact that the Gonzalez-Angulo and Arias cases are so rare is the reason they've garnered so much media attention [11].