

Jodi Arias from a Sociological Perspective

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What fascinates me most about crime patterns is how closely they correlate with contemporary gender rules and roles. So in reading about the sensational Jodi Arias trial for the murder of her one-time boyfriend, Travis Alexander these past few months, I couldn't help but look at it through a sociological lens. As a read about the case, I kept thinking about the gendered cultural rules that modern-day women are expected to follow.

Before the 1960's, most young women believed that finding a husband was their primary goal. But by the late 1960s these cultural rules had become more complicated and building a career also became an objective—a shift that was largely the result of the Women's Liberation movement. But despite this change, a large strand of cultural thought still urges contemporary American women to seek emotional and economic dependence through their husbands and boyfriends. In other words, although modern-day women are encouraged to be somewhat more assertive than they were in the past and to build careers, the cultural rules for females continue to place a high premium on finding a male partner.

Sociologists who study culture are well aware of the fact that popular stories reflect and reinforce social norms, and the complexities that exist within modern-day gender rules can be seen in today's widely read stories. Disney princess movies provide a primary example. Although Disney has tried to update their fairy tales with more progressive princesses such as Mulan, the traditional Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty exist right alongside them. And no matter what the plot, the majority of these princesses end up with a romantic partner at the end of the story.

So how do these rules relate to Jody Arias? Here is my hypothesis. Like many young woman, Jody Arias was working on developing her career as a photographer, and was also looking for a suitable mate. She meets this successful good-looking young man named Travis Alexander at a conference and he appears to be the "prince charming" that Arias had always dreamed of. But their relationship quickly turns sour, and he tries to break it off with her. She cannot accept that the man of her dreams no longer wants her and so she hangs on. Alexander allows her to do so but degrades her in the process. Arias becomes enraged, and eventually murders him.

This scenario is consistent with what my colleague, sociologist Vickie Jensen has learned about women who commit murder. Jensen asserts that when women kill, they usually murder people who reside in their domestic sphere. When women murder their husbands or boyfriends, the precipitating event is usually an argument that is coupled with physical abuse. And although Arias' veracity has been repeatedly questioned, she did claim that on the day of the murder that after she dropped Alexander's camera, a violent confrontation had ensued.

Whatever the motivation for the murder, Arias certainly did not kill Alexander for money which stands in sharp contrast to the reasons why a majority of men kill people. Sociological research shows that males are far more likely than females to commit murder for reasons that are associated with economic gain. This comes as no surprise as American gender rules for men continue to equate status with wealth and power.

In the end, the Jody Arias case fits the pattern that Jensen and other criminologists describe. Arias did not murder Travis Alexander for some sort of economic pay-off. She instead appears to have killed him because she felt manipulated and emotionally abused by the person who she thought was going to be her prince charming.

How does journal *Sociology and Criminology: Open Access* relate to all of this? The new journal is relevant because it will allow for scholars to publish their research and to also present their ideas in a creative manner as illustrated by this editorial. And since sociological research can serve to explain crime, what sociologists teach us about peoples' motivations for crime can help us to prevent it.

When I think about Jody Arias' situation, I wish she would have had the opportunity to take a gender course. In this way she would have learned to deconstruct cultural gender rules and roles, and she may have been able to come to some understanding about why she was so drawn to Travis Alexander and why his decision to end the relationship led to so much hurt and anger. If she had more of an understanding of her situation, she may have been able to refrain from engaging in the heinous crime that ruined her whole life.

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