The dead and the abhorred: *Mindhunter* and the persistence of mother-blame

Michele Byers  
Saint Mary’s University, Canada

Rachael Collins  
Saint Mary’s University, Canada

Abstract
In her study of violent protagonists in American literature, Wilson-Scott argues that “mothers are frequently used as the principal traumatizing factor, demonized, and depersonalized in order to reassert their violent offspring’s humanity” (p. 191). Further, Wilson-Scott states that her work “reveals the persistent assumption that mothers make monsters” (p. 193). Taking our tacit agreement with Wilson-Scott as a starting point, we argue along with her that mother-blame remains a central motif of mainstream cultural narratives about violent masculinity. The focus of this essay is on the strategies through which mother-blame is used to validate the authorial authenticity of the male serial killer and his ways of knowing and of being in the world. In this essay we offer the first season of the popular Netflix series *Mindhunter* (2017–) as a case study and ask how the representation of the serial killer’s insight and seemingly accurate understanding of his own pathology is linked to its antithesis, woman-hate, and often, the pathologizing of the mother.

Keywords  
Feminist analysis, mindhunter, mother-blame, Netflix series, serial killer

In her study of violent protagonists in American literature, Wilson-Scott (2017: 191) argues that “mothers are frequently used as the principal traumatizing factor, demonized, and depersonalized in order to reassert their violent offspring’s humanity.” Further, Wilson-Scott (2017: 193) states that her work “reveals the persistent assumption that mothers make monsters.” Taking our tacit agreement with Wilson-Scott as a starting point, we argue along with her that mother-blame

**Corresponding author:**  
Rachael Collins, Department of Criminology, Saint Mary’s University, 923 Robie Street, Halifax, NS B3H 3C3, Canada.  
Email: r.collins@smu.ca
remains a central motif of mainstream cultural narratives about violent masculinity. The focus of this essay is on the strategies through which mother-blame is used to validate the authorial authenticity of the male serial killer and his ways of knowing and of being in the world.

One of the roots of the serial killer’s authorial self-narration—the way he is invited to construct himself for himself and for us, and the ways in which we, as audiences, are encouraged to take up his self-authorizing as deeply authentic and unusually insightful—is the invocation of the discourse of mother-blame. In this essay we offer the first season of the popular Netflix series *Mindhunter* (2017–) as a case study and ask how the representation of the serial killer’s insight and seemingly accurate understanding of his own pathology is linked to its antithesis, woman-hate, and often, more specifically, the pathologizing of the mother.

The 1970s and 80s was a particularly active time for serial killers in the United States. It coincided with the killings by, and apprehension of, people like David Berkowitz, the Hillside Stranglers (Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono Jr), Ted Bundy, Richard Cottingham, and many others. The highly mediated relations between these killers and law enforcement captured public attention with awe and fear; as most of these killers were taken in alive, their stories (in their own voices) became part of collective lore and legend. *Mindhunter* returns us to the 1970s, the period where the serial killer was the dominant criminal enigma: the boogeyman. Our interest is in the choices made to highlight specific cases (Ed Kemper, Monte Rissell, Jerry Brudos) in the series’ first season, and the way these characters are scripted for audience consumption. While serials killers represent a broad cross-section of intersecting identities—including gender and race—all but white men are virtually ignored on *Mindhunter*. Instead, a, already highly visible subgroup is centered, reiterating a central guiding logic of serial killer ontologies rooted in male, and especially white male, exceptionalism. We use this space to tease out some of the questions that are raised by the persistence of discourses of mother-blame in stories about serial killers, including those related to the intersectional nature of mothers and motherhoods.

**A few words about *Mindhunter***

The series, developed by Joe Penhall—a British playwright and screenwriter—for Netflix, is based on the memoir of the same title by John E. Douglas and Mark Olshaker, originally published in 1995. The book is based on Douglas’s life, and its primary focus is his years at the FBI, years where he helped to establish the Behavioral Sciences Unit, became one of its original criminal profilers, and coined the term “serial killer.” Much of *Mindhunter*’s first season is pulled directly from the book and, as we discuss below, is rooted in the same ideas about identity, structural power, and criminality that dominated (and continue to dominate) social, legal, political, medical, and criminal discourses about the origins of violence. The series focuses on Special Agent Holden Ford (Jonathan Groff)—the stand-in for Douglass—a newbie, blue flamer (overly keen officer) whose interest in the criminal personality lands him in the Behavioral Sciences Unit, newly established by the older, more cynical, Bill Tench (Holt McCallany)—who has been thought to stand in for Robert Ressler. They come to believe that the best way to learn about “serial killers” is to visit living ones in prison and interview them. With support from their eventual colleague, psychology professor Wendy Carr (Anna Torv), who offers empirical legitimacy to their efforts, they embark on a quest to taxonomize the serial killer; to demystify him. As the season progresses, so does Holden’s fascination with the men he is studying; as his hubris grows, he increasingly absorbs and amplifies the
qualities of his subjects: their sense of their own victimization/persecution, their self-assuredness about the value of their self-knowledge and ways of understanding the world, their unflinching sense of their own right to power. Despite the presence of characters who challenge him—Bill, his girlfriend Debbie (Hannah Gross), and later Wendy too—Holden's position, which largely reaffirms the views of the violent men he studies, ultimately holds sway.

Mother-blame: A quick and dirty history

Åström (2017), in the introduction to *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination* (p.1), notes that the trope “is a transhistorical phenomenon, a cultural conversation about mothers, mothering and motherhood that transcends historical and generic divisions.” At the same time, it inaugurates a conversation about children and childhood, about nature versus nurture, and forms a nexus for understanding adult behaviors, dispositions, and identities.3 Träger's (2017: 208)4 consideration of the mother in horror is instructive here, arguing that the bad mother depends for her construction on her dyadic other: the Romantic-era innocent child. It is not surprising that the opening analysis in Träger’s chapter is of *Psycho* (1960), an inaugurating text in the psycho-killer genre. One of the important points that Träger makes about *Psycho* is that it has been central to the intertextual development of the horror/thriller genre, and as such, references to it as an ur- (or original/originary) text have long been part of the citational practice through which the genre itself becomes recognizable. The bad/evil mother—the mother to blame for the violence of the killer—is part of this intertextual lineage that seeps across the borders of the “real” and the “fictional,” just as all discourses do. John Douglas, the FBI profiler who helped formalize the name and category “serial killer”—and, as mentioned, who wrote the book Mindhunter upon which the TV series is based—was an American high schooler when the movie version of *Psycho* came out in 1960. Did he see it and how might it have shaped his understanding of bad mothering as an establishing characteristic of male violence? By the time Douglas joined the FBI at the dawn of the 1970s, *Psycho* had established itself, as Träger says, as the intertextual foundation for stories about certain kinds of killers, drawing itself upon psychological theories about bad mothers. What is the relationship between these discourses weaving into stories, into the minds of profilers, and then back onto the page and screen?

Studies and histories of motherhood and mother-blame exist across a variety of academic and professional disciplines, including the relatively new interdisciplinary field of Motherhood Studies itself. These are, as a whole, well beyond the scope of our work here. Instead, we offer a few thoughts about some of the dominant discourses that circulated in mainstream American starting in the 1960s. This period encompasses both the time in which *Mindhunter* is set, and the time of its production, and also includes the period in which mass mediated culture itself became institutionalized in the American home.

What is of particular interest to us is the intractable nature of the mother-blame discourse, even as new ways of thinking about mothers and mothering were proliferating.

By the 60s and 70s the private/public divide that had shaped our understanding of motherhood was being breached, as was our understanding of gender, race, and class as social categories (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014: 212). Neill (1990: 504) notes that as much as the pathological-mother discourse rooted itself in the language of science, “cultural needs strongly influence the development and practice of our theory.” This question of cultural need helps explain why scientific
discreditation did not lead to the disappearance of mother-blame discourse. In the 80s and 90s, mother-blame as a central scientific discourse gave way; however, it remained, latently, part of the discursive landscape in medicine, social welfare/policy, mental health, the law, and in mediated accounts of adult violence and pathology. Relatively recent work in medicine and psychology/social work underscore this tenacity. Davies and Krane (1997) argued that “cultural assumptions around mothers and mothering” (p. 4) led to the reproduction of mother-blame in social work practice. Two decades later, in their study of maternal blame in child sexual abuse cases (where the mother is the non-offender), Azzopardi et al. (2018: 267–268) showed that while victim-blame (i.e. blaming the child) has significantly diminished in these cases, and despite clear empirical refutation, “CSA policies, practices and research continue to be heavily informed by antiquated gender biased theories,” which translate into professional protocols that “imply some level of maternal culpability” and which, together, “constitute a never-ending cycle of institutional structures and processes tinged with systemically entrenched mother-blame discourse.” While focused on the discourse of victim-blame, Fast and Richardson (2019: 7) contend that asking “who controls the dominant narrative” in violence prevention, offers a nuanced reading of the way that “misrepresentation is a main reason that violence in society remain[s] ubiquitous and problematic.” The authors also note that, at least in the case of white men, “perpetrators are excused for the harm they cause others because they were hurt as children” (Fast and Richardson, 2019: 15–16). We also note Jiwani’s assertion that offenders’ ability to present themselves as victims is itself predicated on systems of power, while “women who are victims of violence are often accused of playing the victim card.”

Two articles we examined deal specifically with serial killers/mass murderers. Henson and Olson (2010: 358) examine serial killers through the lens of stigmatized identity management. They write: “Previous traumatic experiences were explained as instigations to commit murder [. . .] In essence, the men felt as if they were victims of their circumstances.” Melendez et al. (2016: 529) use Goffman’s concept of “courtesy stigma” to explore mother blame in the mass murder cases of Columbine and Newtown. They argue that mothers whose sons commit mass murder exist at the intersection of moral and group identity types of stigma, “resulting in particularly harsh judgment.” They note, in their findings, that these murderers evidence a “worrisome trend in U.S. society and as deeply gendered practice—both in terms of who committed the crimes (males) and who was blamed in the aftermath (their mothers)” (Melendez et al., 2016: 533–534). They argue further that, “young men who commit school shootings are commonly framed as the victims of abuse, bullying, or parental neglect in order to explain their actions [. . .] the compounding sources of stigma for Susan Klebold and Nancy Lanza are their female gender, their role as mothers [. . .] and failed moral character through courtesy stigma.” We see, again, that the narrative of perpetrator as victim/mother as cause is a familiar script for these stories to be slotted into.

Epstein (1995: 257) argued that “American films repeatedly represent serial killers as the product of ‘evil mothers’ [. . .] Despite the fact that the sons are doing the killing, the crimes become the fault of the killer’s mother.” Reimer and Sahagian (2015: 3) describe “how the world is structured to persecute mothers [. . .] for everything from a nine-year-old child’s lack of proficiency in math to the horrific crimes committed by adult serial killers.” In their edited collection Bad Mothers, Hughes et al. (2017a) “argue for a closer acknowledgment of the power of such representations to sustain mother blame” (p. 14). Hughes et al. (2017b) found that in the films they studied, “mothers become both symbolic of social ills and the causes of
these ills themselves” (p. 193); they suggest that these films don’t articulate mother-blame, so much as “show” it, arguing that “through imagery, dialogue, and story arcs, these films envision what we already thought we knew: bad children are raised by bad mothers” (Miller et al., 2017: 208). Åström’s (2015: 205) study of The Snowman, a 2007 novel by Norwegian crime writer Jo Nesbø, argues that the author “uses the readers’ cultural preparedness to believe in the perfidy of mothers to normalize and recuperate the murderer” and, in so doing, “represents adulterous mothers as a greater threat to society than a man who cuts women to pieces.” Further, Åström (2015: 214) suggests “the narrative presents the murderer as pitiable and absolves him of responsibility for his actions” and renders him “part of a community of victims.” Importantly, the author shows that it is extradiegetic—news mediated, psychological, cultural, sociological—discourses that prepare the ground onto which the reader/viewer steps, creating a familiar understanding about victimhood and relations of power in which violence is meted out by men to women.6

Wilson-Scott (2017: 201) adopts the term “violent-eye” to describe narratives in which the killer protagonist occupies the central spot. This term suggests “the emphasis is not only on their perspective, and thus their ‘eye’, but also on the self, and thus the ‘I’.” Mothers, Wilson-Scott asserts function less as characters in their own right and more as devices to reposition the killer as victim, as a person with a complex life story, and thus to restore his at-risk humanity.7 Fictional and non-fictional stories about serial killers and those who hunt them center on these characters and their points of view, slotting them into a familiar cultural script that we have shown interweaves medical, psychological, sociological, and mediated studies/discourses. Wilson-Scott (2017: 191) suggests, that:

[D]uring the 1990s there arose a number of controversial texts that repositioned the violent individual from the background to the forefront of the narrative, giving him a voice through which he could present his own perspective and continually immerse the reader in his thoughts and feelings about extreme and taboo acts, such as rape and murder. Yet in telling their own story, many of these characters also reveal narratives of causality [. . . ] trauma is a recurring method of representing such protagonists as deviant aetiologically rather than ontologically, and [. . . ] mothers are frequently used as the principle traumatizing factor, demonized and depersonalized in order to reassert their violent offspring’s humanity.

This describes how many of the serial killers on Mindhunter frame themselves and are framed by others: as beginning with a traumatized child. Scholars of identity argue that we become recognizable as particular types of subjects by learning how to tell our stories in ways that publics—whether readers or viewers or communities—have already been primed to accept. To recall Åström (2015: 216), not only texts, but all narratives use “societal notions already in play in order to create a believable” or coherent narrative, in order to create order. Unchecked, the idea that sadistic violence emerges from childhood trauma, helplessness, and social isolation—as well as the corollary that these are transmogrified into violent expressions of desire for domination, power, and control—ultimately reaffirms structures of power as they exist; because who can claim trauma, helplessness, and isolation, and be believed or pitied? Who can violently demand power and control and be understood as somehow legitimate in their demands? What is left unexamined are the social structures that facilitate the killer’s understanding of himself as victim and his sense that
power, control, and dominance are his due (female killers are never represented in this way, nor are BIPOC or queer killers—on the first season of *Mindhunter* they are barely represented at all). 8

It is thus key that we consider the way televisual representations of serial killers tend to cluster, intersectionally, along various axes of privilege and power, as central to the way they understand themselves, ask us to understand them, and ask us to help them assign blame for their actions to (m)others. As we move into our analysis of the first season of *Mindhunter* we are attentive to the choices made in constructing a narrative that ultimately draws on those “societal notions already at play” (Åström, 2015, again), even as, as a contemporary text aimed at a relatively privileged audience, it has to weave that work through various forms of gentle (though not disruptive) critique.

"Butchering people is hard work": Temporality in the *Mindhunter* universe

Why is it significant that *Mindhunter* takes place in the 1970s? That is, although the book and the stories it tells take place during this period (and later), the choice to tell this story, then—as opposed to now—is significant for a few reasons. First, it more explicitly links the series and the non-fiction book, lending it a documentarian sense of authenticity or truth. Second, the temporal shift allows the writers and producers to do and say things that would be deemed problematic in a contemporary setting; again, in the name of authenticity.

In the British crime series *Life on Mars*, a detective from 2006 is transported back to the 1970s. Because Sam is from the future, he imagines himself to belong to a “better time”—a future quite different from this “world where rough-and-ready methods of policing prevail and where sexism, chauvinism and homophobia are rampant” (Kilborn, 2013: 212); “Sam is presented to us as a representative of the modern, allegedly more civilised (2006) age who, by an unfortunate turn of events, is forced to confront a world which in many ways seems diametrically opposed to the one” from which he sprung (p. 214). Of course, to buy into this narrative requires that we believe that the present is better, that our current world is not one where “rough-and-ready methods of policing prevail and where sexism, chauvinism and homophobia are rampant.” But might we not, rather, read a series like *Life on Mars* as less a critique, and more “as a paean to 1970s policing by appearing to reject the ‘politically correct’ strictures that surround policing in the 21st century” (Garland and Bilby, 2011: 115).

One example of the way temporal shifting works on *Mindhunter* is found in the repeated truism that “all fathers are absent fathers.” *Mindhunter* often invokes the mythic, nuclear family of the 1950s as a (white, middle-class) ideal. Fathers’ absences are to be lamented but are understandable within the broader structural constraints on fatherhood at the time; that is, their role as family breadwinner which required them to relinquish domestic tasks and focus on industrial ones (and, of course, leisure ones as a form of self-care). The embodiment of this is Bill Tench, who works long hours, is often out of town, and when he is not working, plays golf. This leaves his wife, Nancy (Stacey Roca), at home worrying over their adopted son, Brian (Zachary Ross Scott). In our first glimpse of the family, Bill describes himself as a “helpless father.” While there is a sense that Bill feels some remorse, he isn’t really represented as trying to connect with or help his struggling child who is, ultimately, Nancy’s charge. Should Brian fail to become the proper offspring of the white, suburban, middle-class, it will be her fault.
We know almost nothing about Holden and Bill’s mothers (they like or liked them, so they say, but they never take on any form), but we know A LOT about the mothers of the serial killers who make up most of the secondary characters on the show. Indeed, these men spend a lot of time talking about their mothers, and find, in Holden in particular, sympathetic listeners. Of the killers we hear about or hear from directly, most have crafted a narrative in which their father is absent—often because of their mother—and their mother is neglectful (note that this is not the same as absent), monstrous, or, in opposition, maternally enmeshed. Whatever the specifics of each case, the mother is presented as bearing the responsibility for failing to provide the middle-class, cishet household the killer believes he deserved in childhood and/or adulthood.

Mothers, in this temporal paradigm, are supposed to be at home nurturing their children. In many of the cases offered in *Mindhunter*, the mother has a career—a job necessary to support herself and her children. This is provided as proof of her failure to be a proper wife and mother. Because the serial killer (believes he) has everything necessary for social success—masculinity, whiteness, intelligence, etc.—it is the lack of nurturance emerging from a normative family structure that he imagines creates the monster “within.” If only, more than one of the killers opines, I could have lived with my father; if only my mother could have been better and my father had wanted to stay, then I would have become this (better) person. Monte Rissell (Sam Strike) is the character who most explicitly articulates this sentiment, but it is there in the profiles of several other killers, if not in their own words. Rissell says: “Nobody on this earth wanted me. Put that on your fucking tape. If only they’d let me stay with my dad. It’d all be different. Might even be a lawyer. [Holden: “So, your dad wanted you?”] Have a nice car. House. Be out in my backyard perfecting my recipe for bar-b-q. I’d have found my way” (“Episode 4” 104). A number of things are significant in this short monolog. First, although nobody wanted him, Rissell imagines his unwanted life would have been better with his father. His father’s lack of desire for his son isn’t relevant, but his mother’s is. Second, when Holden asks his question, Rissell doesn’t appear to hear him, doesn’t respond. That’s not just because he’s already answered, but because it doesn’t matter. In this diegetic world (that stands in for America in the 1950s and 60s) (a) life with (a) father is successful, whether he wants/nurtures you or not. Third, the “way” that Rissell imagines he might have found is strikingly idealistic: upper-middle-class, professional, suburban. Further, “my way” suggests a visible path. That is, this idyllic life is seen by Rissel, even after years in prison, as having been within reach (within the imaginable of his life trajectory). The only impediment he appears to see to that life is external—his mother—not structural (race, class, etc.) or personal. Finally, note that a wife/mother is absent from Rissell’s fantasy. He imagines a future for himself alone.

As we have shown in earlier parts of this essay, the 1970s were a period in which mother-blame was entrenched, but during which it began to be contested. *Mindhunter* allows for this, particularly in the figure of Debbie Mitford, Holden’s girlfriend, a graduate student in sociology who regularly pushes back against Holden’s 1950s views of social life; his simple acceptance that the status quo is fine and the center should always hold. Debbie, the budding intellectual and the not-yet (and maybe never) wife-and-mother calls out Holden’s myopia from their first meeting; in contradiction to the other characters who seem quite sure of his *enfant terrible* brilliance. He’s never heard of Durkheim or Labeling Theory she asks with incredulity upon their first meeting (“Episode 1” 101). When, after meeting Dwight Taylor (Tobias Segal), Holden talks to her about his similarity to Ed Kemper (Cameron Britton), Debbie says, “It’s kind of prosaic, that it’s always
Byers and Collins

the mother.” Holden responds, “It is the mother” (“Episode 3” 103). Later, when she explicitly states that Holden is just like his subjects: he expects his women to agree, to “shut up and adore you” (“Episode 10” 110), he says: “Well, you could try it.” In each case, Debbie attempts to redirect Holden’s entrenched reliance on outdated discourses about gender relations and mother-blame. In each case he dismisses or petulantly insists on the primacy of his own truth. In terms of the work of the series, Holden is the center. Debbie functions as an interlocutor from a future known to the audience, but not yet arrived at the time of the text (Kilborn, 2013: 213). She is there to interrupt the seamlessness of these discourses; to show textual awareness of the problems inherent to giving them so much space and legitimacy. At the same time, her interjections rarely go anywhere, and she isn’t successful in shifting the discourses that center the narrative. In the end, the message is: (a) It is always the mother (b) a brilliant man deserves to be agreed with and adored by the women in his life.

“It’s a riddle, but it can be solved. It’s complex, but it’s human”: Good versus bad mothers and nature versus nurture in Mindhunter

The second theme we draw on here addresses the question of good and bad mothers and the sons they produce, whether through “nature” or “nurture.” We don’t mean nature versus nurture in the academic sense as we depart here from the strict psychological/psychoanalytic roots of the concept. Since our focus is popular culture and representation, our interest lies in how we read Mindhunter as inviting its audience to understand these concepts. As we have already elaborated, this imagined viewer is primed with understanding, in this case of the general discursive parameters of “nature” (born) and “nurture” (learned) and that’s what the series leverages, not the more complex and nuanced meanings of the term. Mother-blame and the nature versus nurture debate are symbiotic, discursively. While Mindhunter largely lands on the nurture side of the debate, a closer examination of its framing of motherhood as the root of sadistic, serial male violence reveals some complexity in these representations.

The mothers on the first season of Mindhunter are all white and so the framing of motherhood happens within a relatively narrow discourse of white maternity. As suggested earlier, this references a tension in the 1970s between a desire for a return to an imagined, earlier ideal of domestic, middle-class, white motherhood and the broader discourses of emancipation—gender, racial, sexual—that emerged in the 1960s. On Mindhunter, the good white mother—that is, the virtuous, asexual, domestic paragon, who reproduces the nation’s good, white citizens—is an elusive figure. We meet very few mothers in the first season and almost all of them are bad. But to give us a sense of what a bad mother is we need to first to be schooled in the “good.” The closest we get to this “sacred mother/maternal” (Sommerfeld, 1989) is Ada Jeffries, one of the very first victims we encounter in the series pilot episode (“Episode 1” 101). Ada Jeffries, as described by Detective Frank McGraw (Thomas Francis Murphy), is a good victim: “Ada was the kind of women who wouldn’t say ‘boo’ to a goose. She came from a deeply religious family in Arkansas. When they found out she was pregnant they put her out. She lived in a rooming house in Libertyville. No drugs. No alcohol. Never had a brush with the law. Boy was polite, quiet. She had him in Sunday school at the Methodist church. She would sweep the steps every evening, just to be of service. I never met Ada. Every now and again I’d see her and her son walking along the road into town.
They didn’t have a car. Landlady found the bodies. They had been dead . . . four days.” While Ada is poor and unmarried—and dead—the text resurrects her through a series of uncompromising paeans to the maternal scared: quiet, devout, devoted, of service, polite, lawful.

If dead Ada stands in for the elusive good mother on Mindhunter, Ed Kemper’s mother is the most fully articulated—although also dead—version of the bad mother. While the good mother does not need a bad child to define her, the bad mother is in large part defined by her dyadic relationship to her innocent child (Träger, 2017). What we see in Mindhunter is the construction of this dyad through the recuperation of the serial killer’s innocent child self—the self whose intrinsic value is wholly stripped away by the bad mother (Sommerfeld, 1989). Ed Kemper insists, “My mother yelled and screamed at me. Told me I was sick” (“Episode 2” 102); “If a woman humiliates her little boy, he will become hostile and violent and debased. Period” (“Episode 2” 102); “Everyone knows it’s because of what she did to me. Because of the way she treated her son” (“Episode 3” 103). Monte Rissell insists his mom robbed him of his future by choosing his stepfather over him, allowing him to be subject to his stepfather’s violence and neglect, and ultimately sending him away (“Episode 4” 104). Jerry Brudos (Happy Anderson) describes his mother burning the high heels she found him wearing at the age of 5. “She always said she wanted a girl,” he says, and while he insists that his interest in the shoes was not about wanting to be a girl, he links his anger and confusion about the loss of the shoes to his mother’s ambiguous feelings; his sense that she was not happy with him as he is/was (as an innocent child) (“Episode 7” 107). These representations and their evocation of the bad mother who transforms her innocent son into a homicidal monster are lifted directly from Douglas and Olshakers’s (1995) book Mindhunter, where they describe Kemper’s serial homicides as: deciding “to fulfill [his mother’s] expectations” (pp. 114–115). They insist, further, that Kemper was “not born a serial killer but manufactured as one [. . .] To get back at dear old Mom.” As Holden describes it in the series: Kemper “was conditioned to do it” (“Episode 2” 102).

Mindhunter also suggests another way of thinking nature vs. nurture in relation to the discursive construction of violent masculinity and the serial killer in particular. That is, while the killer’s identity is presented as largely a product of his mother’s behavior toward him (nurture), the bad mother’s identity is represented as a part of her inherent nature, a kind of vacuum into which the proper ways of mothering disappear. Mothers are, contradictorily, seen as inherently powerful: their actions having ultimate authority over the type of men their children will become. Their failures are offered as evidence of this terrifying power and, in the case of Kemper, as clear legitimations for their destruction. As we show below, this displacement of blame from son to mother is constructed also through a displacement of affect from the victims—usually women—to the perpetrator.⁹

“The question is not only why did the killer do it, but why did the killer do it this way?”: Representation and misrepresentation on Mindhunter

The question of misrepresentation is tricky. As we have already shown, what we see on Mindhunter very closely follows the narrative set out in John Douglas’s memoir. Further, as the earlier discussion of mother-blame reveals, whether true in some empirical way or not, and whether it has been discredited or not, mother-blame remains a structuring discourse across a great diversity of social
and political institutions. So we can say that the centrality and constant reiteration/legitimation of mother-blame as a key revelatory discourse in the attribution of motive for serial murder is a (mis) representation, but it has a long and relatively constant history—it never goes out of fashion—on screen and off (Epstein, 1995; Neill, 1990; and Vandenberg-Daves, 2014). This is a familiar lens for viewers and it is relatively easy for them to “get it.” That doesn’t mean they accept it uncritically, but that it fits into a discursive space that has already been primed for them to receive.

One of the most significant issues related to (mis)representation on *Mindhunter* is the way that the perpetrators are represented as victims. A lot of screen time is devoted to their own and others’ discussion of their victimhood and victimization, often by their mothers. While at various moments this discourse is disrupted, these disruptions ultimately fail. Why? Affect. Affectively we are positioned in various ways to empathize with the perpetrators. One way is through our possible identification with other characters, like Holden, who see the killers as victims, feel empathy for them, and tell us that relatively directly. As Bill says to Wendy Carr and Holden about Kemper and Rissell: “So the self-pity angle works. You have sympathy for both of them” (“Episode 4” 104). And it’s true. We are given a lot of time to listen to the excellent actors playing these killers, to their impassioned speeches about their plight. Whose voices and persons are absent here? Those of the victims, their families, even the families of the killers. We only know them through what we are told; we do not know their sides of the story.

In Season One we spend very little time with victims, and as Georgia DA Mayweather (Rhoda Griffis) tells Holden and Wendy in the season’s final episode, “Forget TV. Because it will never tell you about the experience of the victim” (“Episode 10” 110). This is one of the few narrative pathways with the capacity to flip the series’ affective alignment away from the killers because the murder victim, in this case, is a child, a 12-year-old majorette. She is one of the few victims whose picture we see; an $8 \times 10$ of her alive, in her uniform, smiling brightly at the camera. As Agent Smith (Joe Tuttle) describes: “By all reports she was a good girl. No drugs, no alcohol, no boyfriends anyone knows of. Autopsy indicates that she was a virgin, before all this.” Again, consider the careful construction of the victim, and the proximity of the language to what we saw with Ada Jeffries in the first episode, bringing us full circle in our appraisal of female victims. At the same time, the text remains in tension because its hero isn’t DA Mayweather, it’s Holden and Wendy, who are desperate to keep killer Darrell Gene Devier (Adam Zastrow) from the electric chair for fear that it will impede their project. Here again is a displacement of sympathy for the victim to sympathy for the perpetrator.

Screen and voice are key to the way we understand text. Presence is one of the ways that narratives build affective relationships with readers/viewers. Television series are particularly adept at this, because we have long periods of time to connect. In *Mindhunter* we are not only invited to listen to the killers reflect on who they are and why they did what they did, but we are instructed by the other characters that what they say is an invaluable resource. Only by listening to them and giving credence to their insight into themselves can we begin to unravel the serial killer’s mind. To that end, their ruminations and the discussion of these by Holden, Bill, and Wendy—our expert professionals—take up all the space in the text. Other knowledge of the perpetrator is not offered as having any value. We are invited, even encouraged, to take the killer’s story to heart as truth, even as we are cautioned against this by the text itself.

The killer’s positioning of himself as victim—especially as a formerly innocent child molded into the body/mind of a killer by forces beyond his control—is reiterated across institutional and
mediated discourses about serial killers. It is perhaps the most significant discourse related to motive on *Mindhunter*. Ed Kemper, in particular, played charmingly by Emmy-nominated Cameron Britton, has a lot to say on this: “As far as she was concerned... I was a fuck up and an embarrassment”; “My mother yelled and screamed at me. Told me I was sick. She thought I was going to do something hideous one day” (“Episode 2” 102); “From the moment I woke up in the morning she was demeaning and belittling. And she knew all my buttons because she put them there. I was her toy all my life” (“Episode 3” 103). Viewers are offered support for the legitimacy of this understanding from the FBI. In the pilot episode, when Holden first goes on the road with Bill, he tells a group of gathered police officers the following about Charles Manson: “Monster, right? I think we can all agree. However, what do you really know about him? Do you know that his mother was a jailbird and a prostitute?” Later, Bill says, of Monte Rissell: “A pathological man who murdered eight women sees himself as the victim. And we’re giving him a shoulder to cry on” (“Episode 4” 104). It is surprisingly easy to miss these references as you screen the series (including if you are binge-watching). Even after we had decided to write this essay, we did not actually see how pervasive mother-blame discourse was in the series, and how centrally it was used as a textual alibi to mitigate the violence and misogyny of the serial murderer. It was only after taking notes and organizing our data that we really began to see how central this discourse was in the way the text “wrote” their killers; that is, in the way the *Mindhunter* script positioned the mother as the epicenter of the serial killer’s violent rage.

At the end of Season One, after sending Holden many letters, Kemper tries to kill himself in a bid to get Holden to visit. It works. In a long scene that ultimately closes the season, Kemper repositions himself as victim, this time Holden’s victim, but also positions Holden as his potential victim, not unlike his mother. He argues that Holden, who has spoken to the press, “has been talking about me in my absence. Using what I tell you to legitimize yourself.” He then turns the tables, foregrounding the tension between himself as victim, and Holden as victimizer/legitimate object of violence (as well bringing our attention to his superior genius for setting up the whole thing): “My whole life no one wanted to interact with me. Not even the family cat, when I was a kid. The only way I could have those girls was to kill them. And it worked. They’re still with me. Funny thing, in the ICU there’s no system to alert the guards. It’s short sighted, seeing what kind of people come through. I could kill you right now, pretty easily. Do some interesting things before anyone showed up; then you’d be with me in spirit” (“Episode 10” 110). Unlike the other victims, Holden, like Kemper’s mother, is shown to have hurt him explicitly by refusing him the love, care, and respect he deserves, and thus deserving of what he gets.

**Conclusion**

We began this essay with the recognition that the discourse that “mothers make monsters” is temporally persistent across a wide range of institutional and cultural sites.

The literature establishes a long and ongoing relationship between mother-blame and the production of the exceptionalism of white male serial violence. If we are to revel in our fascination with serial killers, we need to displace our abhorrence for their actions somewhere, and nothing/no one has proved as convenient in this regard than (their) mothers. This is a story that audiences can relate to—it is familiar. It offers a way to punish mothers for continuing to demand and define their own identities outside of the maternal sacred. Certainly, *Mindhunter* reinforces long held
stereotypes about bad mothers and mothering and the risks they pose to the children in their care. We note that these particular structures assume mothers to be white—the white mother who fails carries a particular type of courtesy stigma. This is a highly individualized sort of stigma. Serial killers tend to be represented as a small and exclusive group; likewise, mothers of serial killers are individually abjected, not subject to the type of policing we see of, for example, poor, Black mothers who are represented as producers of group pathology.

Mother blame, in the way it circulates on *Mindhunter* is quite particular, linked to the exceptionalism of individual killers who are invited to tell us (as we are invited to hear) not only their stories, but their innate insight into their own psychologies. Mother blame becomes most relevant in series/spaces where the killer is allowed to narrate his own life; there are few stories that invite us to hear what the killers says, especially in ways that are so formally “authorized,” as *Mindhunter*, which has a special relationship to “real life” and hence to authenticity. The text drives this authenticity home by casting actors who are sometimes virtual doppelgangers of the killers they portray. The combination of these types of authority positions *Mindhunter* somewhat uniquely, reiterating the value of particular voices, while soothing concerns about its deep implication in white supremacy, anti-Blackness, classism, misogyny, and homophobia, with the well-worn mantra: “that’s the way things were, back then.” In fact, central to the efforts of series like this one, is the pleasures it appears to offer in the recuperation of spaces in which these things can be performed with uninhibited abandon. It might be worth considering what this suggests about the producers’ and broadcasters’ assumptions about their audiences’ tastes. Though it is beyond the scope of what we can do here, we will circle back to this briefly and somewhat indirectly, below.

Despite what we see in popular culture, empirical evidence today shows us that serial killers are a diversified group, in terms of, for example, age, gender, class, race. *Mindhunter* returns us to the moment when serial killers were first taxonomized, the particular moment when particular killers were seen as particularly fascinating, and were given space to tell their own stories, even while other killers (and other stories) disappeared. What might those less visible stories contain, we wonder, and what keeps propelling this one particular group back into the spotlight?

Is it possible to reclaim the mother on *Mindhunter* and from serial killer stories more generally? To unsuture her from her son’s crimes, to refuse her ascribed courtesy stigma? We’re not sure. The series was heavily critiqued in the popular press for its vulgar misogyny and celebration of violent white masculine exceptionalism (as well as its deeply problematic treatment of race). In the second season, it tries to change tack away from the mother-blame discourse that so deeply permeates the first season. In Season Two, one focus becomes a group of formidable Black mothers, fighting for intervention into what came to be known as the Atlanta Child Murders, as well as Nancy’s growing anxiety about her and Bill’s adopted child—who we have now been primed to read as a proto serial killer. These narratives broaden the scope of motherhood within the narrative if only because the narrative shifts away from the voice of the killers themselves. But, the second season also demonstrates the sharp distinction between different types of mothers, their sons, and the blame transmitted between them. As Camille Bell (June Carryl), the mother of one of the Atlanta murder victims says in Season Two: “Are they looking for suspects outside the families? . . . Does that include the KKK, because you know APD’s not doing that. Half the force used to be klan” (“Episode 4” 204). This story arc attempts to position motherhood as an intersectional identity, produced by institutional structures, and stands in stark contrast to what we saw in Season One. At the same time, mothers like Camille Bell, even though they are given voice and
presence, always lose the fight to be seen as knowing subjects in relation to those who govern—whether politicians or the FBI. The seasonal comparison is beyond the scope of this essay but is worth pursuing further.

*Mindhunter* may have the dubious distinction of participating in the resurrection of mother-blame as a prominent discourse in the production of the serial killer, just as it has participated in the public growth and fascination of the serial killer more generally. We were struck recently, watching *I’ll be Gone in the Dark* (2020), the docuseries about the Golden State Killer, by how different in orientation that text is from the one studied here. The latter’s strategy foregrounds survivors’ stories and experiences and creates community. It refuses to position GSK as brilliant, amazing, or supernatural—in his ability to reinvent himself over decades, to elude those who hunted him, to compartmentalize his domestic, professional, and criminal selves. *Mindhunter* by contrast celebrates our fascination not only with violence, but with the criminal offender whose motivations remain elusive to everyone but himself. Perhaps this coincides with another shift, a more recent one, away from the bureaucratic centrality of the wars on drugs and terror, to a more prominent interest in celebrity, social media, and various forms of governance and political polarization. The serial killer is an apt example of the early adoption of the media in the construction of self, and his recentering here points to so far only imagined and largely untapped social relations between violence, celebrity, and (social) media cultures—at least for those inhabiting particular nexuses of social power.

Some might ask if the first season of *Mindhunter* is a residual holdover, paving the way for more radical and transformative stories about serial violence. We would disagree. Earlier, we mentioned *I’ll be Gone in the Dark*, and could point to other, similarly critical texts, these are still relatively rare in storytelling about the serial killer. As we argue elsewhere, most of the innovations in stories about serial killers are esthetic, not ideological, and in the most popular texts, killers, survivors/victims, detectives, agents, and discourses remain remarkably homogenous. It is true that the second season of *Mindhunter* is different from the first, and we would speculate that this was done, at least in part, to address criticism of the series’ handling of gender and race in season one. However, if you look more carefully at the second season you will see how there is a kind of subterfuge in this; the long arc about the Atlanta Child Murders is a kind of decoy, while the rest of the text focuses on stories very much like the ones in season one. Further, the Atlanta Child Murders arc, while perhaps making Holden appear more sympathetic, raises, but does little to interrogate and/or disrupt the gross misogyny and explicit racism that many see as informing the way the case was handled (including the arrest of Williams, see for example, Baldwin, 1995). Notably, the way these series change; and remain the same, offers the audience interesting insights into the types of stories that the broadcaster thinks its audiences want to be told, and how to tell them.

Neill (1990) argues that if relationships persist, it is because they fulfill cultural needs. What need does the persistence of mother-blame fulfill? The prosaic (in Debbie’s terms) choice to insist, “It’s always the mother,” is recognizable as an easy way out of our complex relationship to white, male violence. Like most discourses, it slips easily between news and narrative fiction. What kind of work does a series like *Mindhunter*—with its attention to detail and breathtaking acting—do? Does it disrupt narratives about male violence, or does it subtly (or not) maintain them? Rooted as it is in the quasi-documentary space of historical authenticity, the series mines and excavates particular discourses rooted in 1970s American cultures. These are deeply racist, misogynist, and
queer-phobic; mother-blame is but one example of this. The series does not really critique these, because it locates itself so firmly in the verisimilitude of the time—as if critiques of these things were not also happening at the time.\textsuperscript{10} We are talking here about storytelling choices; about what and whose stories to tell, and how. Consider \textit{The Ripper}, a docuseries (also produced by Netflix) about Peter Sutcliffe, who was convicted of the murder/attempted murder of 20 women in 1981. Sutcliffe was active between 1975 and 1980—exactly the time period we are following on \textit{Mindhunter}. However, \textit{The Ripper} chooses to foreground the stories and voices of survivors, of women involved in the case, and of emerging activists for whom the murders acted as a catalyst for social change. This is a very different view of the serial murderer and his [sic] crimes, considering marginalized voices and the relationship between culture, discourse, and violence. \textit{Mindhunter}, by contrast, recuperates, relatively uncritically, the agents’ often joyful fascination with serial killers and encourages us to do the same. Maybe the ease \textit{Mindhunter} finds in repeatedly identifying the mother as the root of male serial violence, points to the cultural need it fulfills, and helps to explain why it’s so hard to dislodge. The mother is a convenient scapegoat, she gives the audience something other than repulsion to feel for the serial killer. She gives him complexity and depth, pathos, and so makes us more willing to explore his identity and give credence to his voice, his stories. The mother is easily disposed of—sometimes, like on \textit{Mindhunter}, she barely makes an embodied appearance—unraveling the roots of this violence in the structures of intersectional misogyny that permeate the deepest roots of our institutions is much, much harder.

\textbf{Declaration of conflicting interests}

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

\textbf{Funding}

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

\textbf{ORCID iD}

Rachael Collins \textsuperscript{id} https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7935-9929

\textbf{Notes}

1. Although Ressler and Shachtman (1993), in his memoir \textit{Whoever Fights Monsters}, makes a similar claim.
2. We use the “him” deliberately here, in recognition of the common sense belief that most serial killers are men. On \textit{Mindhunter} there is no discussion, or inclusion, of female serial killers.
3. The mother is important in many stories about policing as well. For example, in Michael Connelly’s series (books, now TV) \textit{Bosch} (2014–), the detective’s mother was a sex worker who was murdered when he was a child. The childhoods (good and/or bad) of detectives are often alluded to in crime stories and form part of an ancillary narrative through which these characters are to be understood.
4. Elsewhere we have recently argued that the same is true for the dominant discourses that underwrite the myths about serial killers (Byers, Michele, and Rachael Collins, “‘We’re here for something else’: \textit{Mindhunter}, serial murder, and the reverential.” \textit{Serial Killers on Screen}, eds. Claire O’Callaghan and Sarah Fanning. Palgrave, forthcoming).
5. The discursive construction of mass murderers (perhaps especially school shooters) is quite different from that of serial killers. Serial killers are often less reviled than mass murderers, and mass violence is more
often attributed to intersectional aspects of the killers’ identities, such as race, religion, nationality, and ideology. While beyond the scope of this essay, school shooters are particularly linked to mother-blame because of their age and location in what are disproportionately white, middle-class suburbs. Further, mass murderers, who usually die at the scene of their crimes, are rarely given space to self-narrate their own victimology—mother-blame is thus primarily attributed by the public not the killers themselves.

6. Note that these binary categories are used in the broadest possible way.

7. Few of the works reviewed here take an intersectional approach, but the ways in which narratives frame mothers and murderers, in our view, cannot be understood outside of the ways that motherhood and male violence are themselves always already understood through interlocking systems of power related to gender, sexuality, race, class, nation, and other social locations.

8. The focus on the second season on the Atlanta Child Murders, in which an African American suspect was charged, operates in a completely different discursive fashion from the killers we discuss here.

9. The first season of *Mindhunter* largely avoids serial murderers who kill men.

10. The authors encourage readers to look at critiques of series like *Mad Men* and *The Crown* that make similar critiques.

References

Åström B (2015) The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture: Single Father and the death of the mother. *Feminist Media Studies* 15(1): 593–607.

Åström B (ed.) (2017) Introduction—explaining and exploring the dead or absent mother. In: *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp.1–21.

Azzopardi C, Ramona A and Fallon B (2018) From Freud to feminism: Gendered constructions of blame across theories of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 27(3): 254–275.

Baldwin J (1995) *The Evidence of things Not Seen*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Davies L and Krane J (1997) Shaking the legacy of mother blaming. *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 7(2): 3–22.

Douglas J and Olshaker M (1995) *Mindhunter*. New York: Gallery Books.

Epstein S (1995) The new mythic monster. In: Ferrell J and Sanders CR (eds) *Cultural Criminology*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, pp.66–79.

Fast E and Richardson C (2019) Victim-blaming and the crisis of representation in the violence prevention field. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* 10(1): 3–25.

Garland J and Bilby C (2011) ‘What’s next, dwarves?’: Images of police culture in *Life on Mars*. *Crime Media Culture* 7(2): 115–132.

Henson RJ and Olson LN (2010) the monster within: How male serial killers discursively manage their stigmatized identities. *Communication Quarterly* 58(3): 341–364.

Hughes M, Hager MT and Bromwich RJ (eds) (2017a) The bad mother, in relief. In: *Bad Mothers: Regulations, Representations, and Resistance*. London: Demeter Press, pp.1–20.

Hughes M, Michelle G, Hendrix-Slaon M, et al. (2017b) Discovering and listening to the bad mothers behind the criminals in popular crime films. In: Hughes M, Hager T and Bromwich R (eds) *Bad Mothers: Regulations, Representations, and Resistance*. London: Demeter Press, pp.192–211.

Kilborn R (2013) Back from the future: Shifting time-planes in life on mars. In: Trivundža IT, Carpentier N, Nieminen H, et al. (eds) *Past, Future, and Change: Contemporary Analysis of Evolving Mediascapes*. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana Press, Založba FDV, pp.209–218.

Melendez MS, Lichtenstein B and Dolliver MJ (2016) Mothers of mass murderers: Exploring public blame for the mothers of school shooters through an application of courtesy stigma to the Columbine and Newtown tragedies. *Deviant Behavior* 37(5): 525–536.

Miller MH, Hendrix-Sloan GM and McDermott J (2017) Celluloid Marys: Discovering and listening to the bad mothers behind criminals in popular crime films. In: Hughes M, Hager T and Bromwich R (eds) *Bad Mothers: Regulations, Representations, and Resistance*. London: Demeter Press, pp.192–211.

Neill J (1990) Whatever became of the schizophrenogenic mother? *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 44(4): 499–505.
Reimer V and Sahagian S (2015) Introduction: Contextualizing. In: Reimer V and Sagahian S (eds) In: The Mother Blame Game. London: Demeter Press, pp.1–15.
Ressler RK and Shachtman T (1993) Whoever Fights Monsters. New York: St Martin’s Press.
Sommerfeld DP (1989) The origins of mother blaming: Historical perspectives on childhood and motherhood. Infant Mental Health Journal 10(1): 14–24.
Träger E (2017) Symbolic matricide gone awry: On absent and—maybe even worse—present mothers in horror movies. In: Åström B (ed.) The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp.207–222.
Vandenberg-Daves J (ed.) (2014) Modern Motherhood: An American History. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Wilson-Scott J (2017) Victims and villains: The legacy of mother blame in violent-eye American Literature. In: Åström B (ed.) The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp.191–206.
Note: The Mindhunter episodes are simples called “Episode1,” “Episode 2,” and so on. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindhunter_(TV_series)#Season_1_(2017)

Author biographies

Michele Byers is a critical, interdisciplinary scholar of media and popular culture, and gender and sexuality studies, with a decades long focus on television text. She has long taught a popular course called “Crime and Media,” in which she teaches students to unpack how popular TV series reaffirm, even if they also critique, dominant discourses about crime, criminality, and justice.

Rachael Collins is an interdisciplinary and mixed methods scholar. Her primary research area is in violent behaviour. Specifically, she is interested in understanding the risk factors (e.g., social isolation, depression and personality disorders) associated with the complex behaviour of mass shooters and perpetrators of multiple homicide.