

## the good mother: neutralization techniques used by pageant mothers

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This study examines Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralization through accounts by 43 mothers whose children participated in six national beauty pageants between September 1996 and May 1997. Respondents used "condemnation of condemners" most often followed by "denial of injury" with equal numbers using "denial of responsibility" and "appeal to higher loyalties." The "denial of victim" technique was not used by any respondents. The respondents were critical of the media's role in creating the "temporary deviant label."

### INTRODUCTION

The December 26, 1996 murder of JonBenet Ramsey, was the perfect case for capturing the attention of the press: a millionaire father, a Miss America finalist for a mother, and the

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alleged sexual abuse and murder of a tiny beauty queen. Media coverage focused initially on an alleged connection between the murder and pageants. A former Florida state representative asserted that children's pageants provide "an attractive package for somebody looking to violate a young person" (Briggs 1997:A4, A1). Child contestants were portrayed with a combination of sexuality and innocence—"exactly what a pedophile would do with a little girl" (Henetz 1997:A1). The question often asked was: "Could the pageants' sly sexuality have aroused her killer?" (Reed 1997:16:6).

Camille Pagalia believed the pageants represent "a deep sexual disturbance in the society" (Davidson 1997:61) and *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich declared, "the merchandising of children as sexual commodities is ubiquitous" (Rich 1997:23). The movie, television, fashion, and advertising industries were thought to share some of the blame (Davidson 1997; Giroux 1998). It is difficult to hold an entire society culpable and consequently mothers receive the brunt of criticism. Holding mothers responsible for the social and moral welfare of children is not unusual, as sex role tasks for specific traits, beliefs, and attitudes that include responsibility for protecting and socializing children characterize motherhood. For many, the measure of a good mother is reflected in her children.

The pageant controversy garnered media attention for a relatively short time. By the end of January, the connection between the murder of JonBenet and her involvement in pageants was discounted in the murder investigation and the media followed suit. The following statement summarizes the month long coverage of the Ramsey case.

JonBenet was horribly murdered, apparently with sexual motives...The killing has baffled the police and no arrest has been made. Nonetheless, the American media have decided that the beauty pageants were to blame. News organizations have waded in, deploring the use of make-up on little girls' cheeks and analyzing the parents who allow their daughters to enter beauty pageants. We have been urged to censure "mothers who live through their children," and to condemn the organizers of such events. The word "sick" has been widely used and polemicists have decried the "merchandising of children as sexual commodities." Feminists have sighed that

this is what happens when you force pre-pubescent girls to act like supermodels. (Letts 1997:18)

By late January 1997 the media shifted its focus from pageants being responsible for Ramsey's death to the plight of little pageant girls who were "robbed of their girlhood" (Berman 1997:E:1).

I know that children are not malleable lumps of clay, that they are smarter and tougher than we give them credit for. But I prefer to err on the side on caution any day of the week because at the bottom line, they are still children. Not vessels for adult fulfillment, not a second chance for faded parental dreams, not miniature women and men, but children. That has to mean something. It has to be inviolate. Sadly, that was not the case with JonBenet Ramsey. So far as I'm concerned, she was the victim of two crimes. On the day after Christmas, she was murdered. But long before that, she was robbed. (Pitts 1997:2)

JonBenet allegedly suffered from a syndrome called "pre-mature adulthood" (Berger 1997:E12). Lost childhood brought with it a multitude of problems including eating disorders ("Girls..." 1997:A6) and an array of other dysfunctions. "At best, such pageants put little girls at risk for delays in most major areas of development. At worst, the experience will lead to serious academic, behavioral, and emotional problems" (Elder, Digirolamo, and Thompson 1997:B7:2).

Popular culture articles focusing primarily on the evils of child pageantry began to slowly fade in the following months as attention was focused more on the botched murder investigation. Several documentaries produced since the first few months of 1997 closely investigate the social world of children's pageants, but for the most part these contests remain unexplored in scholarly research. Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje (1996) suggest that pageants have long been ignored by academia because they have been viewed as merely examples of popular culture. This article is concerned with how pageant mothers responded to the deviant label placed on them during the first few months of negative media attention. Specifically, this article addresses the neutralization

techniques utilized by mothers whose daughters participate in pageants.

### **TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION**

C. Wright Mills (1940) introduced the notion that moral culpability might be lessened by the way actors verbally rationalize socially disapproved behavior. The deviant actor's vocabulary was thought to reduce guilt about violating societal norms or laws, and simultaneously rationalizations serve to reduce negative opinions and sanctions of others viewing the behavior. Several sociologists have focused on verbal techniques used by deviant actors (Forsyth and Evans 1998; Forsyth and Markese 1993; Hewitt and Stokes 1975; Scott and Lyman 1968; Scully and Marolla 1984). Neutralization techniques have been analyzed concerning pedophiles (DeYoung 1989; Durkin and Bryant 2001), abortion (Brennan 1974), college cheating (LaBeff, Haines, Clark, and Diekhoff 2001), and poaching (Forsyth, Gramling, and Wooddell 1997; Eliason and Dodder 2001) among others.

According to Sykes and Matza (1957) neutralization techniques protect the actor from self-blame and deflect moral culpability. Five neutralization techniques identified by Sykes and Matza include denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and an appeal to higher loyalties. The denial of responsibility is a technique where the actor denies responsibility for the behavior because of circumstances beyond his or her control. When applied successfully, the technique functions to deflect blame and lessen guilt to buttress the self-image of the actor. The denial of injury neutralization technique enables individuals to view their action as not really causing any harm. If another person is not seen as being injured, then the culprit cannot be seen as a victimizer. Denial of the victim, the third technique, involves transforming the victim into a person who somehow deserves injury. The victim becomes the wrongdoer. In cases where this type of neutralization technique is used, the deviant views his or her behavior as justified—as though he or she has taken an almost heroic stance against the wrongs committed by others. The deviant accepts responsibility for the act but

deflects social disapproval because the act was viewed as justified.

The condemnation of condemners is a neutralization technique where one shifts attention from his or her deviant act by pointing out behaviors and motives of those who may judge the behavior. The infidel caught cheating on his spouse, for example, might point out that judges, lawyers, prosecutors, and even policemen cheat on their wives. He concludes that he is no worse than the people judging him. Appealing to higher loyalties is the final technique used by deviants to shield blame. The demands of the larger society are sacrificed for the demands of the smaller group to which the deviant belongs. Subcultural norms sometimes conflict with those of the greater society, and the offender imagines himself or herself to be seen in a better light by affirming loyalties to the group that support the particular act.

Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization techniques are used as a guide to examine the accounts offered by mothers who place their children in beauty contests. These accounts were collected during the first five months (January through May of 1997) after JonBenet Ramsey's murder when mothers were aware of how the media portrayed them.

### Contextual Framework

To illustrate that 1997 marked the year that pageant mothers became temporary deviants, a search of articles before and after 1996 was conducted. ProQuest Direct was used to find full-text articles about children's pageants using the key words "little miss," "children's beauty pageants," and "children's beauty contests." Table 1 displays the number of articles about children's beauty pageants from 1995 to 1999. Articles that mentioned upcoming pageant events or listing winners after the event were categorized as "local interest." Articles that were not about local events, but rather children's beauty pageants as a general topic were categorized as "national interest." Many national interest articles were excluded as they mentioned pageants only in passing focusing primarily on the murder investigation. Due to the large number of local articles it is possible that some articles were not located.

The temporary nature of deviance is illustrated in Table 1. The controversy over children's pageants as deviance dramatically

**TABLE 1** Year by Type of Article About Children's Pageants

Year	Local Interest	National Interest
1995	58	2
1996	75	2
1997	44	32
1998	87	8
1999	88	2

declined after 1997 as a focus of national interest. The promotion and celebration of local beauty contests dropped sharply in 1997, and this may suggest that the national response to pageants were noted even on the local level. Only in 1997 do we see a decrease in the number of local articles for the study frame. By 1998 the number of local articles increased beyond the totals for 1995 and 1996. We suggest that media attention given pageants at both the local and national level in 1997 merely promoted the appeal of pageants; however, this study is limited to investigating the pageant world in 1997 only, therefore future researchers should investigate this assertion. For this study, the escalation of articles at the local level in 1998 and 1999 seems to indicate that perceived deviance was no longer connected to pageants. The national articles concerning children's pageants peaked in 1997, and decreased rapidly after that year. By 1999 the number of articles returned to an average of two per year. When taken together, the decrease in local articles from 1996 to 1997 and increase in national articles from 1996 to 1997 illustrate, we suggest, that many in 1997 viewed pageants negatively. Consequently, the increase in local articles and decrease in national articles after 1997 illustrate the temporal quality of the deviant label on pageants and their participants. This article specifically examines the first five months in 1997 when pageants experienced a peak in negative attention, and highlights the problems mother's faced in negotiating accounts for their newly discovered deviance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study involves analyzing the latter part of a pageant survey conducted by the first author that began four months

before the Ramsey murder. A 48-item questionnaire was distributed at six national children's pageants between September 14, 1996 to May 25, 1997. These national competitions were held in Kentucky (Owensboro), Indiana (Clarksville), Alabama (Cullman and Decatur), and Tennessee (Jackson and Pigeon Forge). Because of their geographic proximity to the researcher, mothers of competing daughters 16 years of age or younger were asked to complete the questionnaire. A total of 371 forms were distributed with 122 returned after the competitions were completed. In the last section of the four-page survey space was provided for additional commentary about the respondents' involvement in pageants. The questions asked: "What do you like best about pageants?" and "What do you like least about pageants?" Forty-three mothers answered the questions and did so *only after the death of Ramsey*. The data used in this study were derived from their responses.

In the analysis of this section of the questionnaire the space seemed to take on a different character after JonBenet Ramsey's murder than its intended purpose. Instead of answering the questions specifically, the area allowed respondents to vent their dismay at the treatment of pageants by the media and public. Almost one-half of the responses found in that section of the questionnaire referred directly to childhood sexuality or exploitation, sexual predators, the Ramsey murder case, or the media—topics not generally connected to children's beauty pageants until after the murder of Ramsey. Perhaps because of its location the mothers had more space to express their sentiments. Many participants may have also assumed that the study was being conducted as a reaction to the pageant controversy that began with Ramsey's death. Additionally, the media's presence at two contests may have also accounted for the opinions expressed. The media was kept out of the ballroom where these contests were held, but their presence in the hallway was a constant reminder that the participants' behavior was being scrutinized.

### Population Studied

The population studied were mothers who place their daughters, aged from infancy to 16 years of age, in Southern-style national beauty pageants. "Southern" is a style rather

than a location. These contests are more complex than "Little Miss" contests at a county fair that require a minimum of stage performance, emphasizing facial beauty and personality. Southern pageants also judge facial attractiveness and personality, but have a strong emphasis on stage performance and glitzy attire. The emphasis on expensive attire, cosmetics use, and vibrant modeling techniques for children further separate Southern from Northern competitions and scholarship pageants that prefer a more natural appearing contestant.

Unlike other types of pageants where individuality is promoted, Southern style contestants are trained to fit "The Look," the dominating image for the last decade (Verneti 2001). "Think of it as candied red hots, Tabasco, Pepsodent smiles and Alka-Seltzer all rolled up into a glittering tornado of motion on the stage" (Verneti 2001:40). Verneti (2001) suggests to find competitors who are not professionally trained and polished is rare, and it is rarer to find a contestant that has an original stage persona and appearance. A national competition in this research was defined as one in which children from any state were eligible to compete, where entry fees were \$250 or more, where competitions included a beauty, modeling, and photogenic event, and where the grand prize equaled \$1,000 or more.

Responding to the questionnaire were women from 19 states, with the greatest response coming from Tennessee (21.9 percent), Kentucky (19.0 percent), and Alabama (17.5 percent). The typical pageant mother was White (88.6 percent), married (80.3 percent), and between 29 and 39 years of age (79.1 percent). Approximately 28 percent of the mothers had high school diplomas, 37 percent had some college experience, and 27 percent were college graduates. The majority of the mothers (74.8 percent) were employed and reported a family income in the range of \$20,000 to \$49,000 (56 percent).

## RESULTS

Before examining the accounts provided by the respondents, a table was constructed to illustrate the overall patterns that emerged from analyzing the data contained in the responses to "What do you like best about pageants?" and "What do

**TABLE 2** Neutralization Technique, Frequency, and Percentage

Techniques	Frequency	Percent
Denial of responsibility	06	13.9
Denial of injury	11	25.6
Denial of victim	00	00.0
Condemnation of condemners	20	46.5
Appeal to higher loyalty	06	13.9
(N)	43	99.9

you like least about pageants?" Table 2 lists the type of neutralization, the frequency of use, and the percentage of responses that fit the category. The results indicated that condemnation of the condemner was the most frequently used technique (46.5 percent), the denial of injury followed at 25.6 percent with denial of responsibility and appeal to higher loyalties each with 13.9 percent. The neutralization technique of denying the victim was absent, therefore no discussion of this technique is provided.

### Condemnation of the Condemners

As previously stated, the condemnation of condemners is a strategy that diverts negative attention from the deviant and focuses on parties standing in judgment. This neutralization technique was employed most frequently by 46.5 percent of the mothers. Many mothers proffered that those pointing an accusing finger were probably pedophiles or suffering from some mental disorder. Attention is diverted from the mothers' actions to the perversions of the sex offender. One mother said: "People are sick if they can see anything sexy about a little girl." This theme was echoed by others. According to a few subjects, the spotlight on pageants *will create* deviance in the social world as the following example illustrates:

Only a sick person would see these children as sexual. There is nothing sexy about these little girls. All girls like to play dress up. I wonder about the mentality of those people who have never been to a pageant but pretend to know what is going on. Pageants have never had to worry about pedophiles but now all those perverts will be trying to get in. It's sick.

The neutralization technique of deflecting the actions of the accused onto the accuser by questioning their motives and behaviors may reflect the opinion that many of these women believe it was JonBenet Ramsey's death that aroused public concern. While the overall theme of the media was to point out that these contests were sexualizing youth, some mothers seemed to fixate on the media's linkage of pageants to the murder. One example:

JonBenet's death had nothing to do with pageants. I am sick of hearing people say that pageant girls are looked at sexually. Nobody better ever tell me that my daughter looks sexy—they'll be sorry they ever messed with me.

Another version of the same theme:

It is sad that JonBenet was killed. It probably was a pervert. I watch my daughter like crazy now—now that perverts know about these contests.

Several mothers directed their anger at the media, a forum where appearance plays a great role in who is portrayed on screen. One mother viewed a television news reporter who interviewed her daughter as a hypocrite.

They [television media] came to interview us about pageants from our local station. They asked about the fake hair, sun-tanned skin and all. My daughter is bi-racial, we don't go to tanning beds. The girl asked if we were obsessed with beauty or something like that. Did she think I did not know who she was? She was in pageants herself! How do you think she got her job—she got it on her looks. We all know that. And how about her bleached hair, tanned skin, and the boob job, talk about the pot calling the kettle black!

### **Denial of Injury**

The denial of injury technique was used by 25.6 percent of the mothers. As previously stated, denial of injury results in eliminating the guilt or blame when no victimization occurs. If the daughter is not a victim, the mother cannot be causing her harm. Responses included statements that referred to the exaggeration of the media's claims about pageants. These respondents insisted their daughters were helped—not harmed. Many mothers attributed their daughters'

accomplishments to their involvement in pageants. A middle-class mother admitted that her daughter's hair is lightened, that she also wears make-up on stage, and uses hair extensions. Beyond her school activities the five-year-old takes modeling classes and practices at home at least twice a week. She commented:

My daughter loves pageants. Her teacher tells us she is far ahead of other children her age. She has better concentration than most her age. I think pageants brought that about. We put all her winnings back for college, and she has won two cars and several thousand in cash. That will go a long way to finance her education.

The mother seems successful in her attempt to point out the monetary gains of her daughter's involvement in pageants and the financial security for her daughter's education. Although some may still question the vast amount of money she has invested in these contests that would likely exceed the child's winnings—others may believe that the money invested for college indicates these events are not harmful.

Another "denial of injury" theme focuses on alleged child abuse. This working class mother is aware of what others think about pageant participation for children, but how she situates her argument mutes the consequences of harm.

I am sick of people saying that my daughter is abused. She really looks abused. She has the finest clothes that money can buy, parents that adore her, and she is doing well in school. How many people can say that they have won a car, and lots of money? I wish someone would abuse me like that.

The injury to the child is difficult to see by this response alone. The mother points out the material gains from pageants and the financial and emotional support from family. The image she describes is not what most people would recognize as abusive.

### **Denial of Responsibility**

Ideally, the denial of responsibility takes place when the actor recognizes the behavior as wrong, but outside circumstances intervened to influence the deviant's actions. However, this definition did not adequately explain what was found in the

case of the pageant mothers. Instead of an outright affirmation that pageants were wrong, 13.9 percent of these mothers indicated that they *personally* did not care for pageants. Responses falling in the denial of responsibility category were ones in which the mother acknowledges that pageant participation is viewed as wrong, but the mother contends she would not put her child in these contests if it was up to her alone. Outside forces are the “real” cause of the child’s involvement in these contests.

A college professor and mother of a 16-year-old who competes in 7 to 12 pageants a year, implied forces beyond her control have placed her in this situation. She said:

My daughter used to come home in tears when she was in the eighth grade. Her classmates used to make fun of her and call her ugly. Appearance makes a big difference to girls her age. Pageants have brought self-esteem and self-confidence to my daughter. Today her peers think she is pretty and she is a much happier girl. I never cared for pageants but I was willing to do anything I could to help her feel better about herself.

This mother recognizes that being stigmatized by peers can be particularly hurtful to young children, and most adults can relate to incidents in their own lives where others (or they) were mistreated because of appearance norms. This neutralization technique allows the mother to deny responsibility because she is merely trying to help her daughter avoid peer criticism. Some may envision this woman as a caring mother who wants only for her daughter to be treated well.

Four other mothers of older children made similar statements, but placed blame solely on the media and unobtainable beauty standards. One comments:

I’m okay about how I look. I guess fat looks good on an older woman. But my daughter is not okay about her looks and she is slim and beautiful. But according to Cosmo she is not good enough.

Although mothers with children over 12 years of age used this technique most often, a 7 year-old’s mother also chose it. She said:

My daughter saw a pageant on television and begged to be in them! She wants to be Miss America too. I never wanted to be a queen. What else could I do? Blame t.v.

### Appeal to Higher Loyalties

The appeal to higher loyalties was identified by 13.9 percent of the mothers, suggesting that the norms and values of the greater society are understood and appreciated, yet when they conflict with the normative actions of the subculture loyalty is given to the subculture. In the social world of pageants, the mother is faced with a dilemma: Her actions may not be considered appropriate by society in general, but if she wishes her child to do well in these contests, she must conform to the norms operating in the pageant subculture. For example:

I do not care for the pressure of making my 4-year-old daughter look and act like a 25-year-old woman. The requirements to compete are a little much. I'll quit when she finally gets tired of doing them.

Apparently to this mother, when the child becomes an independent thinker, and is not influenced as much by the group she will no longer compete. She seems to be indicating her daughter's current fascination with pageants—but the child is hardly old enough to be making her own decisions. Similarly, a five-year old's mother is much clearer as why she continues in these contests—she wants her daughter to excel at them.

I really do not like making small children look grown. But that's what it takes to win.

A mother of an eight-year-old who has participated in pageants for over three years admits her daughter wears make-up, hair extensions, and a "flipper" (dental partial) when appearing on stage. This mother is clearly deeply involved in competitions, but hopes the subculture will change.

It is getting hard to keep up in pageants. There is too much emphasis on money and clothes. Spending \$1,000 on a dress and another \$1,000 on a picture is ridiculous! Modeling is another thing that has gotten out of control. We keep doing

them hoping that the time will come when a simple dress, real hair, and missing front teeth can win a pageant.

The use of "we" in the above statement implies that both the child and the mother are tired of the escalating costs and beauty enhancements necessary for competition. It is unlikely that the daughter is concerned with financial matters, but in making a united plea to the organizers of these events it appears as if the mother is in touch with her child's feelings concerning pageants. The team remains loyal to the subculture, but are ready for a change in the structure of these events. Like parents with children in sports, pageant mothers have been accused of living vicariously through their children. In the above statement the interconnection between mother and daughter is evident by the use of the pronoun "we." Surprisingly, few accounts were stated in this fashion and most mothers separated their role from their daughter's role as contestant.

## **DISCUSSION**

Beauty pageants for children illustrate the ambiguous and ever-changing nature of deviance. Pageants for children may or may not be considered deviant today. The controversy over these contests has faded and little scholarly research can be found on the phenomenon. The purpose of this research was to make a sociological contribution in understanding this subculture by examining the neutralization techniques utilized by mothers of participants. This study indicated that during the peak of negative press in 1997 the mothers were aware that the media viewed them as deviants. The presence of the media at two of these contests studied further reflected, we argue, the perception of being labeled deviant. The mothers in this study generally saw little wrong with pageants but were adamant the media played a major role in creating the perception that pageants were arenas exploiting young girls.

The data presented in this article demonstrate that mothers of children who participate in pageants use "condemnation of condemners" as the main neutralizing technique responsible for the negative perception associated with beauty pageants. The majority of these mothers discussed the positive and

more functional dimension of pageants. Pageants were seen as mechanisms to help their daughters achieve culturally valued skills such as self-esteem, confidence, or future educational funding. Consequently, they were convinced that participation did not result in injury to their daughters; therefore, "denial of injury" was the second most identified neutralizing technique used.

Since respondents' denied that 'Southern' pageants were deviant activities for children, some of the categories designed by Sykes and Matza (1957) took a different form or were excluded from the analysis. The "denial of responsibility" neutralization technique was somewhat altered. For example, the mothers stated that they would not enter these contests themselves, but did not admit the contests were deviant for their daughters to enter. The "denial of victim" technique was not used by any mothers and thus was excluded in the analysis since no mother intentionally set out to cause her daughter any harm. The accounts suggested these were good mothers who only wanted the best for their daughters. Their sentiments are perhaps not that different from other women in our society who grew up knowing the importance of appearance norms. Many of these women likely watched television, read magazines, and experienced in their own lives just how valuable beauty is in our society. The emphasis on beauty has permeated much of our society, but while many of us publicly condemn the overemphasis of beauty in our society, we privately strive for physical attractiveness through weight loss and exercise programs, and fashionable attire. While many "right minded" people in our society condemn it, beauty still has its advantages.

Some say it's sick to put a child in a contest of physical beauty, because it teaches her the wrong values. Yet beauty contests teach something true: Beauty gets you places.... Certified beauties get movie deals, endorsements, their own television shows, modeling gigs and a shot at some very desirable mates. They do Broadway and get invited to state dinners. They are people like Vanessa Williams, Phyllis George, Kathy Lee Gifford, Diane Sawyer and hundreds of other women who parlayed their sashes and tiaras into enviable careers. (Leach 1997:A7)

Finally, these mothers felt that there were norms associated with the pageant subculture and although some did not like these norms they still complied. In this instance "appeal to higher loyalties" was identified as a justification for their daughter's participation.

There were some unavoidable limitations to this study. As it was a part of a larger study that began before children's pageants became a controversial topic, it was not specifically designed to address techniques of neutralization or pageant participation as deviant behavior. A label of deviance must be applied *before* an individual can deflect blame for the deviant act. Therefore, it was serendipitous that in the midst of gathering data for another research project that these events became labeled deviant. The presence of the media at two of these events perhaps reduced the response rate and challenges the validity of the larger study. While not representative to all pageant participants, we argue that these were valid responses to the deviant label placed on the mothers at the pageants observed.

Initially it was frustrating to analyze questions not answered specifically by the subjects; however, this frustration abated when it was determined that the mothers were expressing valuable information. Although it was explained to the mothers that the distribution of the survey began months before the Ramsey tragedy—the anger, frustration, and confusion came through in their transformation of the final questions asked in the questionnaire. This study will be difficult to replicate. If the deficiency of negative media attention given pageants after 1997 can be used as evidence that deviance is no longer closely associated with these contests, then it would be problematic to assert that mothers still believe they are viewed as deviants and are seeking to deflect blame. Finally, the small sample size makes it difficult to generalize the findings because there is little ethnic or racial diversity among the subjects, and contests were limited to southern regions hosting this particular type of contest in 1997.

Despite these limitations, this study can provide directions for future research. Among the 43 subjects who responded to the final questions, it was noted that their daughters were at least four years of age. Notably absent were comments from the mothers of babies aged three years or younger.

This absence may have been the result of being the most stigmatized of the group within the pageant world by the media. These mothers could not have commented that their children wanted to compete, as the mothers of older children implied. Nor would it seem plausible that pageants were helping their daughters gain self-esteem, confidence, or improve academic performance. Their neglect in responding may be due to their lack of ability to deflect blame—as without some method of saving face in the light of criticism they would be seen as most culpable. It is also of interest to note that mothers of children over 12 years of age used only one technique—the denial of responsibility. Perhaps the age of the purposed victim may also be worthy of further investigation as a variable for choosing techniques of neutralization.

The structuring of this particular form of deviance by the media and general public deserves greater attention. According to media programming, pageants themselves are not deviant—Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe are televised annually to millions of appreciative viewers. Similarly, some pageants for children are not deviant—attend any county or state fair and watch the crowds appear at these events. The media insinuated that only Southern pageants for children deserved the label of deviant. It was the mothers who the media held as primarily responsible for creating a glamorized and sexualized image of children.

The data suggest that the media played an important role in the creation of deviance. The amount of time allotted this construction was also a variable in the stability of the deviant label. As evident in Table 1, these pageants became an object of concern only in 1997. While the attention may have initially been negative, we speculate that media exposure may have increased the popularity of these contests and encourage future researchers to examine this phenomenon more closely.

Future researchers should examine more closely the contributions of others connected to these contests that the media neglected such as the dentists who supply the “flippers,” or to the clothing designers who supply the children’s costumes. No one has yet questioned the operators of the tanning beds that allow six-years-olds to use their facilities. There has been no outrage directed at the photographers (or the make-up artists who work with them) who sculpt the child into

adulthood while charging fees of \$400 or more. These peripheral contributors deserve greater attention, but pale in comparison to the contributions made by the media in sexualizing and glamorizing young females.

As in the game of "Clue" where specifics are necessary in defining the villain: it was the mothers, at the Southern children's pageants in 1997, with the curling iron and mascara wand—or so the story went, as children's pageants faded from the limelight into obscurity. The temporal state of deviance is in part due to the reactions of the media and public toward beauty pageants in general. Perhaps it was because they were so reluctant to denounce pageants as deviance that the definition of what was inappropriate became very narrow. Such a narrow boundary represents only a marginal group of people who qualify as being deviant. With so few people involved in this specific form of deviance, according to some, they are hardly worth studying, and certainly not worthy of media attention or censorship by legislators. Sociologists must share some of the blame in this assessment. Instead of trivializing these events as simply popular culture, it should be recognized that the pageant world *reflects* what is found in the greater society. Valuable information can be obtained from this group concerning the changing nature of childhood, appearance norms, sexuality, gender, and deviance.

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