"Death Without Weeping"

Author: Nancy Scheper-Hughes
Originally Published in: Natural History
Date originally published: 1989
Country: Brazil
Location: Alto do Cruzeiro (may be a pseudonym)

- Maternal infanticide has been observed in a number of species, including primates. Scientific studies of such behavior in monkeys show a clear link between maternal infanticide and extreme cases of maternal stress ("A Primatologist discovers the social factors responsible for maternal infanticide").

- Anthropologist Sarah Blafer Hrdy and others suggest that human maternal responses are not instinctive, encoded in our genes such that we are controlled by them, but that the mother-child bond results from a complex interaction between biological and environmental conditions. After birth, maternal hormones surge that promote bonding with the infant, while the same hormones increase in babies as they are touched. Studies have found that one of the factors that can affect the bonding process is stress related to "problems with finances, poor housing, malnutrition, or unemployment" ("Maternal-Infant Bonding").

- Consider the following as you read the article:
  1. Why did Scheper-Hughes first go to Alto do Cruzeiro in Brazil? What was she when she returned 15 years later?
  2. What factor is largely responsible for low life expectancy in the Northeast?
  3. What are the traditional protections that exist for children born in the interior? What are the conditions of women's lives in the shantytowns or interior market towns that limit those protections for children born there?
  4. What were the conditions affecting infant mortality that she observed in 1965? What was the response of mothers that puzzled her, and shaped her research agenda?
  5. What could be used to rescue infants and toddlers from death?
  6. What patterns of nurturing did she identify? What is "passive infanticide/mortal selective neglect"?
  7. What was the response of the Alto women when she attempted to rescue Zezinho (Ze) by force-feeding him. What was the response of Ze, when asked who was the best friend he had ever had in life?
  8. According to Scheper-Hughes, what are the two parts of learning to mother in Alto do Cruzeiro? Is allowing "nature to take its course" seen as sinful by these devout Catholic women? How were most of the victims of passive infanticide buried?
  9. Who does she think is capable of selective neglect? She describes passive infanticide as an active survival strategy. What - in areas of high infant mortality -can be the advantage in such behavior?
  10. What factors contributed to the routinization of child death?