A Cry for Help: The Andrea Yates story

**Directions:** Read “A Cry for Help: The Andrea Yates Story,” and identify how psychologists from each of the modern perspectives would explain her behavior. Note actions & behaviors that would relate that each perspective’s explanation.

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| Perspective | Possible Causes of her Behavior | Actions / Behaviors that relate to the perspective |
| Psychodynamic |  |  |
| Behaviorial |  |  |
| Evolutionary |  |  |
| Biological |  |  |
| Humanistic |  |  |
| Cognitive |  |  |
| Socio-Cultural |  |  |

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Andrea Yates, 37, first drowned 2-year-old Luke, followed by Paul, 3, and John, 5. She carried each child's body to the master bedroom, placed it on the bed, and covered it with a sheet. As she was drowning 6-month-old Mary, Noah, 7, confronted her. "What's wrong with Mary?" he asked and then, realizing what was happening, fled. Andrea chased Noah through the house, dragged him to the tub, and drowned him alongside his dead sister. There is no evidence that any of the children were drugged.  
  
Next, Andrea telephoned the police, saying cryptically, "It's time." Then she called her husband, Russell (Rusty) Yates, an $80,000-a-year computer expert for the Space Shuttle Vehicle Engineering Office of NASA. "You'd better come home," he recalls her telling him. "Is anyone hurt?" he asked, alarmed by her tone of voice. "Yes," she said. "The children. All of them."  
  
Until her breakdown, Andrea had a seemingly spotless record as a daughter, sister, wife and mother. The youngest of five children and a high school valedictorian, Andrea Kennedy graduated from the University of Texas School of Nursing at Houston with a BSN degree. For eight years, she worked as a nurse at Houston's M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. She was studious and shy, and didn't date seriously until she was 23. One of her first experiences of depression followed a failed relationship when she was 24.  
  
She met Rusty when they were neighbors in an apartment complex. Raised near Nashville, he played football and was active in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes at DuPont Senior High School. His classmates voted him Mr. DuPont—an ideal representative of their school. At Auburn University his gridiron career, like that of many high school athletes, ended. In and outside the courtroom, he is rarely without the thick-bound volume of his wife's medical records. He wears his wedding band.  
  
After their first child, Noah, was born in 1994, Andrea became a stay-at-home mother and quickly had two more sons. She did not use birth control; she and Rusty agreed to accept as many children as God sent their way. When his job required a six-month stint in Florida, the family put most of their belongings in storage and accompanied him, living in a trailer home. Back in Houston, Rusty says, they'd forgotten why they ever needed half the things they'd stored. They moved into a customized Greyhound bus, described by Rusty as a 350-square-foot motor home.  
  
With the birth of her fourth child, Luke, Andrea was—like many new mothers—breast-feeding every three hours and sleeping only a few hours a night. On June 16, 1999, she called Rusty at work because she was extremely anxious. When he arrived home, Andrea was shaking and had difficulty speaking. "I need help," she said.  
  
The next day Rusty took his wife and children to the home of Andrea's elderly parents, where he thought "she feels comfortable" and would have support, he later told a social worker. But that afternoon, while the family napped, Andrea took 40 trazodone tablets—a medication with a strong sedative quality—that had been prescribed for her father. That overdose could have killed her, but her mother found her in time to rush her to Houston's Ben Taub General Hospital's emergency room.  
  
Yates was transferred to the psychiatric unit of Methodist Hospital, where James Flack, M.D., diagnosed her with "major depressive disorder, single episode, severe." This marked the beginning of a spiral into full-blown psychosis that was never adequately treated.

Andrea was remorseful after trying to kill herself. "I have my family to live for," she told nurse Bridget Fenton, who recorded the conversation in her notes. She worried to another nurse that the trazodone would make it unsafe to continue breast-feeding. But she couldn't discuss her hopelessness. "She was only able to ask if she had done any permanent damage to her body," Flack reported.  
  
**June 18**  
Social worker Norma Tauriac described Andrea as "unwilling" or "not able to identify any recent life stressors." Rusty was "aware and accepting" of his wife's problems and was more comfortable calling her condition postpartum depression than major depression. Tauriac noted Rusty's concern that his wife was "struggling with the concept of salvation." Tauriac also found the Yates's living arrangements objectionable. "As a rule the patient and her husband and the four children live in a converted bus," she wrote in her notes. Tauriac called Texas's Child Protective Services abuse hotline on June 23 to report the family's "living arrangements and the fact that patient's husband allows the 31/2-year-old son to use a power drill."  
  
Seven days after Tauriac's complaint, Dan Willbur, CPS Supervisor II, wrote to thank her for her concern. However, "because the situation does not appear to involve the occurrence and/or substantial risk of abuse or neglect�we plan no further inquiries," he said. The letter stated that her concerns had been forwarded to the Houston Police Department, because "they do appear to have jurisdiction in such matters." Tauriac jotted a note on the bottom of the CPS letter: "Important. Please place in the chart of Andrea Yates." The letter lay dormant in her file until the murders.  
  
**June 24**  
"Interviewed patient again this a.m.," Flack noted on. "I also spoke to the patient's husband at length. They are requesting that she be discharged to the family's care. They have agreed to watch her around the clock and are aware that she is at risk of harming herself again." But Flack later indicated that Yates was being "discharged because of insurance restrictions" after only seven days in the hospital. He also noted that she might be suffering from delusional guilt. Flack raised Andrea's dose of the antidepressant Zoloft to 150 milligrams a day (a fairly routine dosage), referred her to outpatient therapy with Eileen Starbranch, MD, and discharged her.  
  
**Three weeks later...**  
Andrea tried to slit her throat. Rusty found her in the bathroom and stopped her. This time she was admitted to Memorial Spring Shadows Glen hospital. She had been taking Zoloft inconsistently and had flushed the Zyprexa prescribed by Starbranch down the toilet when she realized the drug was an antipsychotic.  
  
Asked what had happened, Yates was quoted by hospital psychologist James P. Thompson as saying "I had a fear I would hurt somebody. � I thought it better to end my own life and prevent it [from happening]." She described hallucinations: "There was a voice, then an image of the knife. I had a vision in my mind—get a knife, get a knife." She acknowledged obsessive thoughts "over our children and how they'll turn out." She grew nervous about "the kids, trying to train them up right, being so young. [It's a] big responsibility. � I don't want to fail." Asked to write a sentence spontaneously, she scribbled, "I love my husband and kids."  
  
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It was soon apparent that Andrea's disease was postpartum psychosis, a medical emergency that endangers both the mother and the child's lives. It affects roughly one in 1,000 mothers and shouldn't be confused with postpartum depression, which affects about one in ten new mothers, or the common "baby blues," which gives up to 75 percent of new mothers mild emotional symptoms.  
  
Psychiatrist Arturo Rios, MD, recommended electroshock therapy for Andrea, but both Yateses were against it. Instead Andrea began receiving an antipsychotic described in medical records as an "injectable cocktail including Haldol and Cogentin," in addition to the antidepressants Effexor and Wellbutrin. Slowly, she began responding.  
  
Rusty visited his wife diligently in the psych ward. Nurses' reports describe him as "supportive and caring." Rusty brought flowers, complained when Andrea hadn't been bathed in three days, and worried over the effects of her medications. "Most of visit, patient was lying on sofa with husband sitting next to her stroking her head," one nurse wrote.  
  
Three weeks into this second hospital stay, she was discharged to the Partial Hospitalization Program (PHP), in which she continued daily hospital care but slept at home. Home was now a three-bedroom house in Clear Lake, Texas.  
  
"I bought the house when Andrea was sick the first time," Rusty said. "She never complained about the bus, I just thought the house might be better for her. I didn't even know if she liked the house until one day she told me, 'I'm glad you bought it.'" Rusty enthusiastically described how he built bunk beds for his sons in one of the bedrooms. Baby Mary would sleep with her parents. The third bedroom was used for storage.  
  
On Andrea's first posthospital visit, Starbranch told her that even though she was feeling better she should "remain compliant with [her] medications." In the past Andrea often took half doses or skipped her medication altogether. Depending on drugs made her "feel like she's weak," she told her PHP therapy group. By the next visit, August 16, 1999, Starbranch reported in disbelief that Andrea "is talking of wanting off medications!" She "wants to get p.g. [pregnant] and have more kids. Wants to homeschool the children." On August 18 Starbranch wrote, "Apparently patient and husband plan to have as many babies as nature will allow! This will surely guarantee future psychotic depression."    
  
"What was the deal with the Greyhound bus?" I asked Rusty of the vehicle that was still parked next to the Yates's house. He looked at me without humor, without anger, without comprehending why I might find a Greyhound bus an unusual place to live. The bus, however, provides a previously unreported link between the Yateses and an itinerant preacher named Michael Warnecki, who sold it—and perhaps a way of life—to the Yateses. He and his family travel the United States in a motor home, proselytizing on college campuses. Warnecki's wife, Rachel, was quoted in the Indiana Daily Student: "Seek Jesus not in the church or religion and not in Christianity and not in the system. The system cannot save you because it is based in Satan."  
  
The Warneckis recommended seeking Jesus in the New Testament—at home. Rachel Warnecki homeschooled her six children so the family could remain together on the road. Andrea, who had corresponded with Rachel and Michael, pleaded with her mother and siblings to renounce Roman Catholicism. She sent her family copies of a newsletter warning of the banishment to hell of all Catholics. The Yates family did not belong to the Church of Christ, where the children's funeral was held, as is widely assumed. They described themselves as nondenominational Christians.  
  
Rusty conducted family Bible study classes for his wife and children roughly every three nights. By March 2000, Andrea was pregnant again.

Andrea was homeschooling Noah and caring for three toddlers. Rusty babysat one night a week. For a time Andrea continued monthly visits to Starbranch, whose notes of their December 1999 session quote Andrea as saying she is "doing great—baking cookies and getting ready for Xmas." Rusty accompanied Andrea to her January 12, 2000, appointment. Starbranch wrote that Andrea "admits she's off all meds since 11/99. Husband says he didn't like her doing this but [she] seems to be doing okay. [Patient] wants to be off meds unless symptomatic. Husband agrees." There are no records of further visits to Starbranch.  
  
**November 30, 2000**  
Andrea had been off medication for a year when she gave birth to Mary. Three months later Andrea's father, whom she had been nursing through Alzheimer's disease for seven years, died. Her psychosis returned with a vengeance. She held baby Mary in her arms nonstop, terrified to put her down. She stopped eating, drinking, and speaking. Her desperate husband brought her to nearby Devereux Hospital in League City, Texas, telling the admitting physician his wife "could not survive another night at home."  
  
This time her attending psychiatrist, Mohammad A. Saeed, MD, and Patricia Corke, MD, an examining physician, quickly appealed to the probate court of Galveston County, Texas, to commit Andrea to Austin State Hospital. Both doctors checked committal form boxes indicating Andrea was a danger to herself and that she was unable to make a rational treatment choice. One box was left unchecked: "is likely to cause serious harm to others."  
  
In the two-year span of her severe depression, neither her family, her friends, nor the many doctors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers who treated her indicated that Andrea could be a threat to her children's lives. The many Father's Day cards she'd art-directed, the costumes she'd sewn, the Valentine certificates for hugs and kisses she'd given her children, didn't add up to filicide. On the contrary there was an unshakable conviction in people who knew her, slightly or well, that Andrea must have lost her mind by the time she killed her children.  
  
Rather than having Andrea committed to a state hospital, Rusty convinced her to voluntarily sign herself into Devereux. Had Andrea been placed in the state hospital, her stay would not have been limited to health plan maximums. After 12 days at Devereux, she was again discharged into her family's care.

As with her 1999 hospitalization, Andrea was back in a matter of weeks. "The patient was near catatonic. Sat in the chair and did not move at all," Saeed wrote. "At this time we decided to try the Haldol again at the husband's request."  
  
**May 22, 2001**  
(Almost four weeks before the murders.) After ten more days in the hospital and seven days of PHP, Andrea was discharged. Family members say that two weeks before the murders, Saeed took Andrea off Haldol.   
  
"What do you think about Mr. Emotional?" Andrea's brother Brian Kennedy, 45, asked me. He was referring—not kindly—to Rusty. "I couldn't sit there [in court] behind my wife or girlfriend or someone I loved and not touch them, not talk to them." He shook his head. "I remember looking into Andrea's eyes when I saw her two weeks before it happened. It was like looking into the mirror and seeing my own eyes." Brian paused. "I'm the black sheep of the family. When they talk about the brother with mental illness, that's me. I'm bipolar—the first to get arrested, the first to do drugs, you know, the troublemaker."  
  
Another sibling suffers from depression, as did Andrea's father; the family medical history notes some alcohol problems. Brian told me his mother, Jutta Karin Kennedy, 72, lived through World War II in Germany and did not come out unscathed. She is a small, grandmotherly woman with thinning white hair who wears a white crucifix around her neck. Every day of the competency hearing, she sat in the row behind her daughter, using a small burgundy lower-back pillow for support. It's no wonder she looked shell-shocked: In six months' time she had lost her husband, five grandchildren, and a daughter.  
  
By the time Andrea Yates killed her children, she apparently believed Satan was inside her and had irrevocably damaged her children. According to Steve Rubenzer, a Harris County forensic psychologist who interviewed her, she believed that after the drownings, the children would go to paradise. George W. Bush, who she believed was still governor of Texas, would see to her execution. Where she had failed to kill herself, the government would not.