Exploring News Coverage of Femicide: Does Reporting the News Add Insult to Injury?

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Abstract

The news media help shape society's perception of social problems as well as public opinion of victims and offenders. Currently, there is extensive research devoted to the media's portrayal of violence against women but very little examination of femicide (for purposes of this research, defined as the murder of female intimate partners). Using newspaper coverage of femicide cases across the state of North Carolina over a 6-year period (995 articles representing 299 cases), the current study examines the news media's use of direct and indirect victim-blaming language, the sources cited in femicide reporting, and whether femicide cases are contextualized as an individual problem or within the broader social issue of intimate partner violence (IPV). Consistent with previous research, findings indicate that public sources (i.e., law enforcement) were the most commonly cited sources of information in news coverage of femicide compared to private sources (i.e., friends and family); however, domestic violence experts are cited more often than in prior studies. In addition, direct and indirect victim-blaming language is not as pervasive as previous research has suggested. Finally, the percentage of articles that contextualized the femicide as IPV is lower than that found in prior studies of femicide. Implications of these findings and future research are discussed.

Keywords

IPV, femicide, media and crime

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The news media play a substantial role in shaping society's perception of crime as well as public opinion of offenders and victims. According to Kellner (1995), the degree to which the media help shape peoples' views of the world is extensive, affecting "what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil" (p. 24). Some scholars have suggested that the media have the single greatest influence on individuals' attitudes and behaviors, above and beyond all other social forces (Chermak, 1995; Croteau & Hoynes, 1997). Consequently, the ways in which the media choose to cover social problems can have important ramifications, influencing how consumers perceive the dynamics of those problems as well as their solutions.

Feminist research has demonstrated that the presentation of women in the mass media is indicative of women's status in society (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997). This portrayal includes attitudes and representations that support hierarchal gender roles placing women subordinate to men. Men who use violence against their partners may be viewed as living up to societal norms that are entrenched in Western culture—aggressiveness, male dominance, and the submission of women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Likewise, stereotypical images of the female victim imply that women who fail to live up to their prescribed gender roles (i.e., faithful, obedient wives and mothers) precipitate their abuse (Belknap, 2007). In this vein, when the criminality of intimate partner violence (IPV) is diminished or dismissed through victim-blaming language, the media send a clear message to consumers that violence against women is not a serious crime, that women are responsible (or partly responsible) for their victimization, or both.

Sources used by the news media can have a profound impact on the reporting of IPV. Since law enforcement often functions as a gatekeeper to criminal incidents, past research has indicated that crime news is frequently presented from their perspectives (Chermak, 1995; Ericson, 1989; Fishman, 1981; Surette, 2007). Journalists enjoy many advantages when utilizing law enforcement's reports, including access to their investigations as well as their credibility with the public; however, in cases of IPV, relying on statements by law enforcement can be problematic because their opinions are commonly grounded in patriarchal attitudes that are biased against female victims (Heeren & Messing, 2009). Conversely, more qualified informants such as domestic violence experts and/or individuals close to the victim (i.e., friends and family) are rarely used as sources of information in coverage of IPV (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Byerly, 1994; Meyers, 1997; Taylor, 2009). As a result, journalists often perpetuate stereotypes about IPV, victims, and offenders, and "fail to report on patterns or causes of violence in the broader social context" (Heeren & Messing, 2009, p. 208).

How the news media decide to tell the story of IPV is also important. As Lowney and Best (1995) stated, "A key step in social problems construction is linking a troubling event to a problematic pattern, defining a particular incident as an instance of some larger problem" (p. 48). Feminist research on violence against women has demonstrated that the media regularly frame IPV as an individual problem instead of a public concern (Belknap, 2007). As a result, the prevalence of IPV is minimized and violence against women is portrayed as someone else's problem.

Although there is extensive research devoted to the media's portrayal of violence against women, there is relatively little examination of femicide (defined here as the murder of women by male intimate partners), one of the most extreme forms of violence against women. Notably, there has been little systematic exploration of the media's portrayal of femicide perpetrators and victims, the sources used in femicide coverage, and whether or not femicide is framed as IPV. The few existing studies have suffered some methodological limitations. Responding to this relative void in the literature, the study reported here aims to expand our knowledge concerning the media's representation of femicide while addressing the limitations of previous research.

Review of the Literature

Prevalence of Femicide

In the United States, femicide,[1] "the killing of a woman by a male intimate partner" (Dawson & Gartner, 1998, p. 338), is the seventh leading cause of death among women and the second leading cause of premature death for young women aged between 15 and 18 years (Anderson, 2002). Moreover, research suggests that each year somewhere between 40% and 50% of all U.S. female murder victims are killed by current or former intimate partners whereas less than 6% of male homicides involve intimate partners (Browne, Williams, & Dutton, 1998; Frye, Hosein, Waltermaurer, Blaney, & Wilt, 2005; Moracco, Runyan, & Butts, 1998). Specifically, women are 3.5 times more likely to be killed by an intimate partner (i.e., boyfriend, husband, lover) than by a stranger (Maguire, 2007).

According to Moracco et al. (1998) the number one risk factor for femicide is previous IPV. In addition, Campbell et al. (2003) have determined that perpetrators' access to a firearm or use of illicit drugs is strongly related to the perpetration of a femicide. They also found that when a woman does leave an abusive situation or asks the batterer to leave, it heightens her risk of death ninefold. By contrast, previous arrest for IPV, including highly supervised sanctions for offenders, continued safety planning for victims, and coordination of advocates, law enforcement, and the community, serves as protective factor for femicide risk, demonstrating the importance of a collective response to IPV.

Over the past three decades, the overall number of intimate partner homicides has been decreasing; however, the most substantial decrease has been in the death of *male* intimate partners, a development that some believe may be related to the increased availability of domestic violence shelters[2] (Campbell, Glass, Sharps, Laughon, & Bloom, 2007). In contrast, from 1976 to 1996 the proportion of female victim intimate partner homicides increased from 54% to 70% (Fox & Zawitz, 2004; National Institute of Justice, 1997) and continued to rise to 78% in 2005 (Maguire, 2007) so that now four to five women die at the hands of an intimate partner for every one male partner killed. However, some studies (e.g., see Bullock & Cubert, 2002) have shown that media

representation of femicide still suggest that when a woman is killed by an intimate partner the incident is an isolated crime and that the victim was somehow "different" from the norm.

Coverage of Intimate Partner Homicide in the News

Only in recent decades has news coverage of IPV been investigated and subsequently identified by researchers as representative of a larger social problem (Meyers, 1997). Studies exploring news coverage of intimate partner homicide have relied exclusively on newspaper articles. Examining newspaper articles is methodologically practical for two reasons: First, online news databases have increased accessibility to newspaper archives, and second, newspaper articles are conducive to both qualitative and quantitative content analyses.[3] The existing research can be categorized in two groups: studies that examine news coverage of intimate partner homicide more generally, and studies that specifically focus on femicide news coverage. The existing studies have largely been exploratory in nature, utilizing limited samples, anecdotal evidence, or simple quantitative methods.

Bullock and Cubert (2002) employed quantitative content analysis and frame analysis to examine news coverage of domestic violence fatalities in Washington State for 1998. A total of 44 cases (230 articles) met the researchers' criteria for a domestic violence fatality.[4] The dyad of female victim/male perpetrator cases represented 69% of the total articles, and the remaining approximately 31% of articles represented cases with a male victim.

Bullock and Cubert (2002) found that news coverage of intimate partner homicide tended to ignore victims' experiences, failed to identify domestic homicides as domestic violence (or to use domestic violence language), and portrayed domestic homicide as an individual problem rather than a larger social issue. Specifically, only 10% of articles described the homicide within the broader context of IPV. In addition, only 22.6% of the articles examined mentioned past problems in the relationship beyond evidence of a protection order. Almost half of the news stories analyzed suggested a motivation or excuse for the perpetrator of deadly IPV, with 17% of stories using language that directly blamed the victim. The researchers also examined the sources used in domestic violence fatality articles. They found that newspapers had relied largely on police as a source of information, rarely interviewing those who knew the victim or perpetrator or domestic violence experts.

Overall, Bullock and Cubert's (2002) findings supported Meyers' (1994) contention that news coverage is highly susceptible to gender myths and stereotypes (discussed in more detail below). Furthermore, their findings emphasized the importance of including a feminist perspective when studying the presentation of domestic violence by the news media. However, though Bullock and Cubert's utilization of all pertinent articles from 1 year was expansive compared with prior work, their methodology did not allow for examination of another potentially important aspect of domestic violence fatality news coverage—the proportion of actual cases that received coverage, or said another way, were deemed newsworthy.

Also analyzing a 1-year period (2000) of news coverage, albeit from only two newspapers, the *San Jose Mercury News* and the *Los Angeles Times*, McManus and Dorfman (2003) compared how IPV and other violent crimes are portrayed in the news. McManus and Dorfman utilized the electronic sources *NewsBank* (for the *Mercury Times*) and *Nexis* (for the *Times*) to identify articles pertaining to criminal violence. A total of 448 articles about IPV were analyzed and compared to a random sampling of stories concerning other types of violence.

McManus and Dorfman found that when compared to the frequency in which IPV occurs (based on county arrest rates), cases of IPV were underreported in the news, with only 1 in 8 IPV cases even eliciting coverage. They also found that in the two newspapers sampled, direct victim-blaming language was rare; however, when victim blaming did occur, it was used more often in cases of domestic violence than in articles covering other types of violent crime. Likewise, though media coverage did not use indirect victim-blaming tactics such as deflecting responsibility from the offender on a frequent basis, coverage exonerating the perpetrator was found more often in stories of IPV than other types of violence. Thus, though the focus of McManus and Dorfman's study was not on news coverage of femicide specifically, their findings illustrated that IPV reporting is different from violence reporting in general and, if generalizable to femicide, has the potential to influence the public's view and attitudes toward this crime. However, their study examined only 1 year's worth of stories from two newspapers, so it was not possible to determine whether there had been a shift in reporting over time.

Coverage of Femicide in the News

Only two previous studies have analyzed the news media's portrayal of femicide victims from a feminist perspective with a focus on how contemporary reporting portrays the dynamics involved in this crime. A thorough examination of these studies is required to understand the development of the current study.

The first study to examine news media coverage of femicide was conducted by Meyers (1994). Meyers's research is one of only two studies, to date, which explicitly focused on femicide in the news. Meyers drew attention to the fact that theorizing about crime reporting had largely ignored instances in which there was a female victim and that news coverage tended to attribute violent female victimization to "individual and family pathology rather than to social structures and gendered patterns of dominance and control" (p. 48). Her study was a contextual analysis of two articles about a specific case of femicide published in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* in 1990 regarding the murder-suicide case of Wanda and Dennis Walters. Meyers applied feminist theory to the textual analysis of the articles and utilized an explicitly feminist framework. She revealed a dichotomy of victim blame, between indirect victim-blaming tactics such as the development of excuses for the perpetrator (mental state due to marriage separation, alcohol use, out of control) and direct victim-blaming tactics such as the negative characterization of the victim (i.e., language painting Wanda as White trash and as the cause of the murder-suicide). Meyers also concluded that news coverage of battering failed to link violence against women to male-dominated social structures and

needed to be reexamined from a feminist framework. However, this initial study was not meant to be representative but an exploration into a specific case of the news media's portrayal of female victims of violence at the hands of a male intimate partner.

A comprehensive study of femicide[5] victim portrayal in the news was recently completed by Taylor (2009) and utilized 6 years of newspaper coverage by a large metropolitan newspaper, *The Orlando Sentinel*. Taylor's goal was to analyze a large sample of articles published over a period of several years, focusing on a local newspaper that covered the greater Orlando, Florida area, as well as carrying stories from other parts of the state. All articles were retrieved from the *NewsBank* electronic archive for the years 1995-2000 using keywords to identify articles that pertained to femicides in the selected time frame. Altogether, Taylor's sample consisted of 292 articles that represented 168 separate cases.[6] Articles covering instances of female-perpetrated and same-sex-perpetrated intimate partner homicides were also included for comparison with the femicide news coverage.

Taylor utilized a coding sheet that included 10 items of interest that could be tallied for each article. After coding, articles were grouped together based on similar patterns and overarching themes identified in the data. Several aspects of the news coverage of femicide were examined, including the types of sources employed, the use of victim-blaming language, and the contextualization of femicide as domestic violence. Taylor made an important contribution to the study of femicide news coverage by empirically supporting Meyers's (1994) dichotomy between victim-blaming languages (direct and indirect blaming). Taylor also found that the most commonly used sources in femicide articles were police officials, supporting the findings of Bullock and Cubert (2002). In addition, she examined the context of domestic homicide articles, finding that only 34% of the sampled articles discussed the murder in the broader context of domestic violence; of those, about half were ambiguous about who was responsible for the crime. Summarizing her findings, Taylor found evidence supporting the findings of previous IPV and femicide studies illustrating that news media tend to use victim-blaming language in femicide cases.

The Present Study

As suggested in the foregoing review, the few existing studies of femicide indicated a tendency by the news media to blame female victims of domestic homicides through blaming language, by utilizing sources that cannot accurately represent the victim, and through limited use of domestic violence language in context. As noted, however, this research has varied considerably in regards to methods of sampling and time frame of the analyses. To date, no study of femicide in the news has utilized coverage of a known population of femicide cases and coverage from multiple newspapers simultaneously. Utilizing a population of femicide cases is valuable because it allows the researchers to identify the cases that receive media coverage as well as those cases that are overlooked by the media. Cases that are omitted from the news may be inherently different from those that receive coverage; thus, knowing the percentage of missing cases is important to assessing the reliability of the findings. In addition, analyzing coverage of the same case across

multiple newspapers enables researchers to examine the entire breadth of coverage by the media for each case, coverage that might vary according to different newspaper's location (urban vs. rural), the journalist who wrote the article, and/or other events (deemed more or less newsworthy) that occurred contemporaneous to the femicide incident.

To add to the current body of knowledge concerning newspaper portrayal of femicide, the present study provides an analysis of articles drawn from multiple newspapers in North Carolina over a multiyear time frame (2002-2007), seeking out stories from a list of all known femicides during that period. The following questions will guide our analyses:

> *Research Question 1:* Did news coverage tend to blame the victim for her murder through direct or indirect victim-blaming language?
> *Research Question 2:* Did different sources cited in the news coverage—public, private, and domestic violence experts—vary in terms of their portrayal of the femicide?
> *Research Question 3:* Did the articles portray the event as isolated or within the context of IPV as a societal issue?

As previous research has shown, North Carolina is a particularly relevant setting in which to conduct such an analysis. For example, a statewide study by Moracco et al. (1998) found that between 1991 and 1993, 293 women were victims of femicide. In 196 of the 293 cases, there was a documented history of IPV with more than half ($n = 106$) of the women having contacted law enforcement in the 12 months prior to their deaths. Most frequently (45% of cases), contact with law enforcement constituted police response to a domestic violence call, with multiple-incidence calls to law enforcement present in 80% of cases. In addition, 31% of women had filed battering-related criminal charges against their intimate partners and 9.2% had filed a protective order.

More recently, the Violence Policy Center (2004a) found that North Carolina ranked ninth nationally for female homicides perpetrated by men, with 88 incidents in 2002 alone. According to FBI statistics for 2002, the national homicide rate of female victims murdered by men was 1.37 per 100,000, whereas the North Carolina rate was 2.08 per 100,000 (Violence Policy Center, 2004b). In the years to follow, North Carolina's female homicide rate declined but held steady above the national average: 2003, 1.38; 2004, 1.58; 2005, 1.72; and 2006, 1.63 (Violence Policy Center, 2004b, 2005, 2006, 2007). Although these rates do not reflect just femicides, taken in light of the large proportion of female homicide victims who are killed by male intimate partners versus others, these statistics reveal a significant risk for women in North Carolina.

Method

Design

Similar to prior scholarly research on the news media, content analysis was used to examine newspaper coverage of femicide cases in North Carolina. According to Berg,

content analysis can be a useful method for "identifying, organizing, indexing, and retrieving data" (p. 225). Content analysis requires careful consideration of data to link codes with words or passages within the text in order to explore overarching themes and/or patterns. Researchers have the ability to learn about how subjects or authors of textual materials view their social worlds through the use of content analysis (Berg, 2004) as well as discover and describe the focus of social attention by individuals, groups, or whole institutions (Weber, 1990). Content analysis may encompass the investigation of either manifest content or latent content; as distinguished by Berg, "Manifest content refers to those elements that are physically present and countable while latent content refers to an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physically presented data" (p. 229). A combined analysis of both manifest and latent content of each article was performed in the research to be described below.

Data Collection

The initial step in data collection was to isolate the population of femicide cases for the state of North Carolina by obtaining a list of domestic homicides from the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCCADV) for the years 2002 (the first year of their work) through 2007.[7] This group is comprised of a network of service providers and law enforcement personnel who systematically identify domestic violence murders across the state by conducting daily searches of news media stories.

The next step in the process was to exclude all cases that could not be identified specifically as cases of femicide. As described later, this resulted in a list of 324 cases. Items of interest were then recorded for each case from NCCADV records. These included the name of the victim and perpetrator, the date of the incident, the relationship of the victim and perpetrator, the weapon used, and the age and race of the victim and the perpetrator. The final legal outcome for each perpetrator (i.e., manslaughter, first-degree murder, etc.) was confirmed using the North Carolina Department of Corrections offender database. Perpetrators who committed suicide in conjunction with the femicide incident were also noted.

Once a complete list of known femicides was compiled, the researchers performed a news article search using the electronic newspaper databank, *Access World News*. *Access World News* currently includes 30 newspapers serving both rural and metropolitan areas of North Carolina. News articles were identified using two search terms for each case: (1) the victim's name paired with the key word "murder," and (2) the perpetrator's name paired with the key word "murder." Following this search method, cases for which coverage could not be found were subject to a wider internet search that focused mostly on the websites of small-town or regional newspapers near the setting of the femicide. Articles authored by specific writers as well as anonymously authored "wire" stories were included. A final sample of 995 newspaper articles was generated for the 299 cases.

Having exhausted all Internet search options, newspaper coverage for a total of 25 cases (7.7% of femicides) could not be recovered. This missing data can be classified into two categories: (1) three cases where a story about the femicide did not appear in

the newspaper, and (2) 22 cases where archives for the most likely source of coverage were not available, usually because they did not extend back to the time of the murder or, in a few cases, because archives were not a feature provided by the usually small-town/regional newspaper. Overall, though, the large proportion of cases for which coverage was obtained (92.3%) represents a major population of femicides that occurred in North Carolina during the 6-year period between 2002 and 2007.

Analytic Technique

Content analysis was conducted utilizing *Atlas.ti V5.0* (Muhr, 2004), a qualitative data management package. Each news article was uploaded to an *Altas.ti* database and then electronically coded by one of two researchers. The initial coding scheme for the present research was taken, in part, from Taylor's (2009) work on femicide coverage in the news (see the appendix for the coding scheme employed).

For the first level of coding, the 2 researchers reviewed 20 news articles independently, noting key constructs established by Taylor (2009) as well as additional concepts identified by the current coders. After this initial step in coding, both researchers discussed their individual coding to determine a unified coding schema that could be followed. At this time, the coders independently applied the coding scheme to every fifth article for a total of 100 articles (10% of the final sample) in order to establish an interrater reliability. A comparison of coding decisions yielded a Cohen kappa of .78, a level that exceeds the established range of acceptability (.50; Landis & Koch, 1977). Once interrater reliability was established, each coder independently coded approximately half of the remaining sample.

Analyses proceeded over several phases. First, each article was carefully read to explore the latent content or overall tone of the coverage. Using *Atlas.ti*, the coders wrote electronic memos for each article concerning their first impression of the news coverage. Coders established the overall theme of the article with expressions such as "expresses shock and outrage at the perpetrator," "conveys indifference towards the victim because of her failure to leave a longstanding abusive relationship," or "includes factual information on the crime only." The latent content of each article is important because often times language used by individual sources (to blame the victim or not) conflicted with the journalist's general tone of the story. For example, a given article may be overall sympathetic to the victim but contain a quote from a source that directly or indirectly blames the victim. Thus, assessing the latent content of each article provides additional descriptive information that may be overlooked by focusing solely on source contributions.

Next, each article was reread according to the coding sheet and its manifest content (words and phrases in the text) was coded. Frequencies for each code were perpetually calculated by *Atlas.ti's* coding tool that keeps a running count of codes. In addition, passages of the article containing constructs of interest such as *victim* or *perpetrator characteristics* were identified and highlighted within the text using the "quotations" tool. *Atlas.ti* copies quotations into a separate quotations window so that each passage can be assessed individually as well as simultaneously within the context of other quotations.

In research conducted on newspaper coverage of femicide cases, it has been discussed that both direct and indirect tactics are employed to blame the victim. To make the findings from this research comparable to previous studies we have adopted the following operationalization of direct and indirect victim blaming.

Direct victim-blaming tactics include (a) highlighting the victim's failure to report past violence by the perpetrator, (b) highlighting the victim's failure to prosecute past violence by the perpetrator, and (c) highlighting the victim's actual or suspected infidelity.

Indirect victim-blaming tactics include (a) highlighting the perpetrators mental, physical, or emotional problems; (b) highlighting the victim's mental, physical, or emotional problems; and (c) highlighting alcohol or drug use by the perpetrator and/or the victim.

In addition, the sources used by the journalist and whether or not the article was framed in the context of IPV also had an impact on the extent to which victims were blamed. These items were coded and analyzed in terms of raw numbers and context within the story to identify patterns or trends within femicide coverage.

Results

Description of Sample

As described previously, there were 462 domestic homicides in North Carolina recorded by the NCADVC for the period 2002-2007; 324 of these were determined to be femicides. The final sample consisted of 299 cases for which at least one article could be found. In total, 995 newspaper stories were found for the 299 cases. An overview of the characteristics of the femicides reviewed and of the subsequent newspaper coverage is provided in Tables 1 and 2, a brief description of which is provided in the following paragraphs.

As can be seen in Table 1, approximately 76% of the femicides in the sample took place in rural counties (population less than 50,000 people), whereas the remaining 24% occurred in urban counties (population of more than 50, 000 people; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In descending order of frequency, husbands represented 37.5% of perpetrators, boyfriends 31.7%, ex-boyfriends 15.7%, estranged husbands (separated but not divorced) 10.2%, and ex-husbands 4.8%.

The majority of the perpetrators in the sample (54.5%) utilized guns to kill their female victims, and knives were employed in 20.7% of the cases. In addition, 13.9% of perpetrators used physical force, such as cases of strangulation or deadly beatings. Another 9.2% of cases were categorized as "other"; these cases employed means such as drowning, burning, or vehicular homicide. Finally, in 5 of the 299 cases the method used by the perpetrator to murder their intimate partner could not be identified. Also, it was determined that 27.2% of the perpetrators in this sample committed suicide after murdering their female intimate partners.

As revealed in Table 2, 34 newspapers were represented in the sample of stories. Not surprisingly, the majority of articles (73%) came from six of North Carolina's

Table 1. Characteristics of Femicides in the Sample

Case characteristic	Percent ($n = 299$)
County of murder	
Urban	24.0
Rural	76.0
Perpetrator relationship to victim	
Husband	37.5
Boyfriend	31.7
Ex-boyfriend	15.7
Estranged husband	10.2
Ex-husband	4.8
Means by which murder committed	
Gun	54.4
Knife/cutting instrument	20.7
Physical force/blunt trauma	13.9
Other (e.g., drowning, burning)	9.2
Type of incident	
Femicide only	73.0
Femicide/perpetrator suicide	27.0

Table 2. Distribution of Articles Providing Femicide Coverage, by Newspaper

Newspaper ($n = 34$)	Percent of articles ($n = 995$)
Raleigh News & Observer	24.4
Charlotte Observer	14.0
Fayetteville Observer	12.0
Winston-Salem Journal	8.0
Greensboro News & Record	7.6
Herald-Sun [Durham]	7.0
All other	27.0

largest newspapers, all of which provide regional (multicounty) and well as local (city-based) coverage—*The Charlotte Observer*, *The Fayetteville Observer*, *The Greensboro News and Record*, *The [Durham] Herald-Sun*, *The Raleigh News and Observer*, and *The Winston-Salem Journal.* The estimated combined daily readership (excluding Sundays when readership is greater) for these 6 newspapers is 563,502 (Echo Media, n.d.). Among these newspapers, the largest representation of stories (24.4%) came from *The Raleigh News and Observer*, followed by *The Charlotte Observer* (14%), *The Fayetteville Observer* (*12%*), *The Winston-Salem Journal* (8%), *The Greensboro News and Record* (7.6%), and *The [Durham] Herald-Sun* (7%). The remaining coverage came from 28 other newspapers scattered across the state.

Direct Tactics of Victim Blaming

In a similar vein as previous femicide research, the most often used tactic to blame victims was to suggest that they had failed to take appropriate measures to protect themselves from abusive partners by not reporting past domestic violence, not filing charges or pressing charges for previous abuse, failing to show up for court dates, and/or not leaving an abusive situation. Although these 110 articles only represented 11% of the sample, they were a powerful representation of direct victim blaming.

Articles quoted multiple sources such as friends and family, police officers, and judges blaming the victim for not taking action or not taking *serious enough* action against her abuser. Articles suggested that if the victim had simply done something differently, her death could have been prevented. For example, one article cited that "the two [victim and perpetrator] had an ongoing domestic dispute" but that the victim had never called authorities (Eckard, 2005) and another article revealed that the victim had been urged to get a restraining order by her mother but never did (Weir, 2005). Other articles indicated that family and/or friends had previously begged the victim to leave the abusive situation, but she refused to leave or had left but eventually returned to the abuser (Ovaska, 2009; Stevenson, 2005; Wootson & Manware, 2007).

Another tactic of direct victim blaming that is discussed at length in previous femicide research is infidelity preceding the incidence of femicide (Taylor, 2009). Consequently, we were surprised to find that discussion of infidelity or affairs was quite rare in the present research. A total of 46 articles (4.7% of the sample) mentioned affairs or infidelity. Of these 46, 32 articles (69.5%) discussed infidelity by the perpetrator, 6 articles (13.1%) discussed alleged infidelity by both the victim and the perpetrator, and the remaining 8 articles (17.4%) discussed alleged victim infidelity only. In terms of comparison with past research, we are particularly interested in blaming language used in articles discussing victim infidelity. Six of the 8 articles refer to a specific case where the victim's *ex*-boyfriend (described as an alcoholic with brain damage by his lawyer) believed that his *ex*-girlfriend was having an affair with his best friend (his reason for murdering them both). In most of these articles the tone is actually sympathetic to the victims. Although the lawyer is quoted in courtroom dialogue using his client's brain damage and alcoholism as excuses for his actions, the reporter's tone admonished the perpetrator's actions and cited many sources who said the two victims were not romantically involved as the perpetrator claimed (Woolverton, 2006). The other two articles referenced a second case where the victim was separated from the perpetrator but still living at his residence because she could not support their two young children independently. The article reported that the perpetrator became enraged when he learned that she had started a new relationship with another man and had become pregnant with his child (Wootson, 2007). The overall tone of these two articles is sympathetic toward the victim, but both a judge and a police officer used some blaming language in reference to the victim's new relationship. For example, the judge quoted the perpetrator's words ("What really made me [the perpetrator] angry was that when I got home from 12-hour days at work, her [the victim] boyfriend would be sitting on my couch") as central to her decision to previously

deny the victim a restraining order against the perpetrator (Wootson, 2007). Infidelity was used largely in conjunction with language blaming the perpetrator, as a suggested motive for perpetrator's actions (but not an excuse), as a factual element of the case (in one instance the perpetrator's mistress was the trigger person, but the husband was charged with first-degree murder), or to illustrate potential marital issues in cases where both the perpetrator and victim had suspected each other of infidelity.

Indirect Tactics of Victim Blaming

The use of drugs and/or alcohol as well as mental health issues by the victim and/or the perpetrator have been identified as potential sources of indirect victim blaming in past research (Meyers, 1994; Taylor, 2009). In the current study, 140 articles (14% of the sample) used indirect blaming language. First, a total of 60 articles (6% of the sample) discussed drug and/or alcohol use by the perpetrator or victim. Among these articles, approximately 83% refer specifically to drugs or alcohol used by the perpetrator, 15% refer to drugs or alcohol use by both the perpetrator and the victim, and 2% (one story) referred to victim use only. However, the majority of the articles discussing drug and alcohol use were either neutral in tone (28%), mentioned drug use as a mitigating factor or excuse being presented by the perpetrator during the trial phase (40%), or discussed drug use specifically to *admonish* the perpetrator (18%).

Overall, findings highlighting the use of drugs and/or alcohol in the media coverage of femicide cases are mixed in terms of the past research. Results demonstrating that the perpetrator's culpability was mitigated based on pathological conditions such as drug or alcohol use is consistent with the existing literature; however, contrary to previous studies, these findings suggest that for the current sample of articles, the discussion of drug and alcohol use by the victim was rare.

To varying degrees, previous studies have examined mental health–related issues discussed in news articles and in reference to assessing victim-blaming language. A total of 80 articles (8% of the sample) addressed victim or perpetrator mental health problems within the context of a femicide case, and 6 of these articles (7.5%) solely discussed victim mental health problems. Each of these 6 articles highlighted the victim's mental health as the cause of the perpetrator's behavior. For example, in one case involving an elderly husband and wife, the wife had been suffering from severe Alzheimer's disease, and a source was quoted stating that "I'm sure every man has his breaking point" (McDonald, Ovaska, & Brevorka, 2005). The article goes on to discuss the difficult job faced by caretakers, and in this case, the victim's husband was just too proud to ask for help.

As was the case with drug use descriptors, the majority of stories (90%) that discussed mental health did so in terms of the perpetrator. Approximately 49% of these articles quoted sources (such as defense attorneys) that used mental health issues as a mitigating factor (or as an excuse) during trial coverage; an additional 12.5% discussed mental health from a purely legal standpoint in terms of competency to stand trial and death penalty eligibility. A quarter of the mental health coverage referred specifically

to attempted suicides and perpetrators on suicide watch. Although the majority of these suicide-related stories were factual or balanced in tone, the discussions of suicide, in addition to the cases in which the perpetrator actually committed suicide, are an interesting component of domestic homicide.

Sources of Information About the Cases

Similar to previous femicide research findings, the present study found that articles most often employed (57%) "public" sources of information about cases from individuals who were connected to the state, primarily the criminal justice system. These included jurors, judges, court records, law enforcement, prosecutors, defense lawyers, medical examiners, and other officers of the court. In contrast, "private" sources were lesser quoted sources of information (37%); these included friends, family, pastors, family doctors, neighbors, employers/coworkers, and teachers/professors. In addition, domestic violence experts, such as advocates or shelter workers (6%), were used to provide background information and statistics on violence against women as well as specific information about the cases in which they had assisted the victim and/or the victim's family. Domestic violence experts were considered qualitatively different from other sources because they have an authoritative voice (in terms of domestic violence) like a public source as well as, in some cases, a personal relationship with the victim similar to that of a private source.

Law enforcement officers, the most often used "public source" of information pertaining to the femicide cases, were cited in 39% of articles. Law enforcement officers were repeatedly used as gatekeepers to crucial information regarding the femicide, such as background information on victims and perpetrators, crime scene descriptions, and the apprehension of offenders. Law enforcement also provided explanations for "why" the femicide occurred. Many times, officers offered overly simplistic descriptions of deadly domestic violence, indicating single, specific reasons for why men killed their female intimate partners. For example, one article's opening line read, "A Lumberton man was charged Monday with first-degree murder, accused of shooting his wife during an argument over cigarettes, police said" ("Lumberton Man," 2006). In another article, detectives suggested that establishing why a man had killed his wife and then himself was impossible; however, the author refutes law enforcement's ambiguous account of the perpetrator's motivation for the murder-suicide, citing court records demonstrating a long history of domestic violence, child custody disputes, and extramarital affairs (Scott, 2003).

Defense attorneys were also cited in 20% of the articles. In accordance with Taylor's findings (2009), in the present research defense attorneys were the most likely source to employ victim-blaming language. Defense attorneys used negative adjectives (i.e., *crazy*, *violent*) and/or pathological conditions, such as drugs, alcohol, mental illness, or jealousy, to place blame on the victim. In one article, the defense attorney describes the victim as "always asking him [the perpetrator] for money, for something . . . she viewed him as an old man who had money" (Vandiver, 2005, p. B1). In another

article, the defense attorney stated this about the perpetrator, "He was jealous. The two were about to break up. It was an impulsive crime. He went into a rage" (Sawyer, 2005). However, defense attorneys are fundamentally driven to minimize the culpability of the perpetrator through any means necessary. Our findings indicated that in the majority of cases referencing defense attorneys, defense attorneys' quotes did not affect the overall tone of the story because they were balanced by voices on behalf of the victim, such as neighbors, friends, and family.

Private sources were also found to use victim-blaming language. In one article, relatives stated that the perpetrator had shot his wife, her dog, a neighbor, and an elderly woman because he was "out-of-work, bankrupt, and depressed" (Manware, 2004). In another article, a family member described the perpetrator's fit of jealousy as an accident, saying he was, "The best father I have ever known and would never take away his children's momma on purpose" (Humphries, 2006, p. 1). Other articles used private sources to make excuses for the perpetrator. In one article, a family member stated the following about a perpetrator who had been under a past protective order for threatening his wife, "He's not a bad person. Something had to have triggered this. He's not going to do something like that for no reason" (Fuchs, 2003, p. A1). Another article quoted a neighbor's thoughts about a former law enforcement officer who murdered his ex-wife, their 9-year-old child, and her new boyfriend, "He cracked. He wanted her for himself. He had another wife, but he just couldn't stand for her to have someone for herself" ("Threats, Jealousy," 2003, p. 4B).

In addition, wide ranges of private sources were used to positively describe the victim or to display sympathy for the victim. For example, victims were described as beautiful, strong, generous, and vibrant as well as loving mothers and hard working. Private sources were also used to describe the femicides as senseless acts of violence that the victim did not deserve. One mother exclaimed, "My little girl is dead and she loved everyone. She never harmed anyone . . . I want to know why. Why did he do this?" (Barnes, 2002). Multiple articles also employed private sources to pay tribute to victims. In one such article, the victim's college professor described her as "a fun person in class that could always be relied on to find humor in most situations, even when things were bad" (Townsend & Hardin, 2005, p. B1). In another article, a coworker described the victim as "having a charming personality that always drew you to her" further saying, "She was always smiling" (Montgomery, 2006).

Finally, domestic violence advocates were utilized as sources in 6% of articles. Frequently, they helped to establish the extent of the problem locally for readers by reporting the number of femicides that had recently occurred in the state or the county. Advocates also offered powerful statements regarding the impact of femicide in the community. For example, one advocate exclaimed, "We are outraged that another woman was murdered. We are saddened that another mother will not be here to raise her child" (Williams, 2002). In addition, advocates discussed the struggle that victims undergo to sever abusive relationships, captured in quotes such as, "It's very difficult for a victim to leave an abusive relationship. It takes a great bit of strength, faith and courage" (Boone & Hewlett, 2007, p. B1) and "When a victim leaves the

relationship, the abuser views that as a loss of power and control. Family members should support the victim's choices, even if that means waiting" (Oliver, 2003).

Femicide Is IPV

The current study found that the majority of articles failed to present the murder of a woman by a male partner within the context of IPV, even when there was a documented history of violence by the perpetrator toward the victim. Of the total sample, 220 (22.1%) articles specifically cited a history of violence by the perpetrator, but only 135 of these articles (13.6% of the total sample) utilized IPV language when covering femicide cases. Articles that did present the femicide as the final act of violence by a male partner were clearly different than those that presented the murder in the context of a homicide.

More important, articles framing the femicide as IPV frequently included contact information for the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence and/or a local domestic violence shelter. In addition, articles noted messages from the victim's friends and family to other victims of IPV, such as "If you're in a relationship where there is domestic violence, you need to get out of it because the person is not going to change" (Karr, 2003) or "The first time it happens, call the person out on it. Or get out, whatever you have to do. It's not worth it" (Lacour, 2007, p. B1).

Articles employing a framework of IPV were also more likely to place some of the blame for the femicide on the criminal justice system. Advocates, friends, and family of the victim talked about the victim's failed attempts to obtain help from the police and court systems. In one case, a woman was denied the protective order she requested and instead was given a less restrictive restraining order that allowed the perpetrator to continue living in the residence with the victim and their children. At the protective-order hearing, even after the victim cited that her husband had "pushed her to the ground, put his knees in her back, and choked her," the judge was quoted as questioning whether "she should kick a man without a violent history out of his own house, and order him to stay away from (the victim) and their children" (Wootson, 2007, p. 1B). In addition, multiple articles referenced the uselessness of protective orders. One advocate lamented that "the sad reality is that a restraining order is just a piece of paper" (Wootson, 2007), and an advocate in another article admitted that "it is a piece of paper, and the court may have good intentions of putting the order into effect, but it doesn't put a guard on their door every day" (Wilson, 2005, p. 1B). In a third article, the police officer working the case stated, "I've seen a lot of protection orders that weren't worth the paper they were written on. It is almost as useless as a citation. The best thing a woman can do is go to a shelter where she can't be found" (Hess, 2002).

In addition, these articles oftentimes referenced friends and family member's frustration with the criminal justice system's current response to IPV. One such article quoted the aunt of a victim who had an active protective order at the time of her death exclaiming, "When we get enough strength to go through the court system and tell them to get out of our life, that man can still get into our home and kill her . . . If he can't have you, no one can" (Chambers, 2007, p. B3).

Discussion

Overall, our analysis of femicide coverage in North Carolina exhibited the same dichotomy between victim-blaming languages as past research; however, the degree of victim blaming, both direct and indirect, was less prevalent than previous studies (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Taylor, 2009) have indicated. Also in line with these existing studies, the present research found that public sources, such as law enforcement and criminal justice system actors, were used more often than private sources, such as friends or family members, to provide information on femicide cases. However, divergent from previous research, domestic violence experts were used in 6% of articles in the current sample compared to 4% of articles in Bullock and Cubert's study and less than 1% of articles in Taylor's study.

The present research supports past findings that private sources are less blaming than public sources and are used less often as sources of information in femicide news coverage. Relying on public sources can be problematic because many public sources may be inherently biased against the victim, especially in cases where the victim has refused to press charges or testify against the perpetrator in previous domestic violence cases or in the case of defense attorneys hired on behalf of the perpetrator. Although some instances exist where private sources (usually close to the perpetrator) used victim-blaming language, they are most often used to provide the victim's side of the story or to honor the victim. In addition, domestic violence experts supplied information about the nature and prevalence of IPV, encouraged victims to seek help, and cited resources available to assist victims and their families. Domestic violence advocates also acknowledged the truth about leaving an abusive relationship—that it is difficult and often dangerous—a reality that friends, family, and criminal justice practitioners often fail to understand.

In regards to the whether or not femicide cases were framed within the broader context of IPV, the current study found that 13.6% of articles were framed as IPV. This result is similar to Bullock and Cubert's (2002) finding that 10% of articles in their sample were framed as IPV, which is substantially lower than Taylor's (2009) finding of 34% of articles. Articles that were framed as IPV were contextually different than those that were not framed as IPV. First, these articles included the perspective of domestic violence advocates, statistics on the prevalence of intimate partner abuse, and resources for victims and their families. Second, articles framed as IPV frequently placed blame for the femicide on inadequate response by the criminal justice system or faulty criminal justice practices. Interestingly, a wide range of sources, including public and private sources as well as domestic violence experts, lamented the current criminal justice response to IPV.

Considerations and Limitations

The present research's methodology diverged in several ways from the previous studies on femicide, and these differences should be noted. First, we utilized a large, near

population of femicide cases as opposed to carrying out keyword searches to gather news articles. Searching for femicide articles by way of a population list enabled the research team to establish the news coverage of femicide in terms of total prevalence of femicides committed during the research timeframe. In addition, using a population list ensured that the sample coverage was not biased toward certain "types" of femicides that were deemed more newsworthy than others and, thus, merited news coverage.

Second, the present research captured the full spectrum of newspapers for an entire state over a period of 6 years, resulting in a large representation of journalists' voices, and perhaps, even substantial variation in the newspapers' sociopolitical leanings. Past research has included only one newspaper or a small range of newspapers, oftentimes for the period of a single year. The consequence may have been to minimize the number and potential variation of different approaches to the presentation of articles concerning femicide cases.

Finally, our study's findings were most likely influenced by the presence of an organization such as the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence. As mentioned earlier, the NCCADV actively collaborates with local domestic violence shelters, law enforcement, and the North Carolina media to collect data on news coverage of domestic homicides across the state. This partnership may have the educational effect of facilitating a neutral—or at least less victim-blaming—tone for coverage of intimate partner homicide. In addition, domestic violence advocates were cited in the present study much more often than was found in previous research. However, even with the efforts by the NCCADV, very few articles in the present study contextualized femicide as IPV. The failure of the media to frame femicide within the broader context of violence against women demonstrates a significant disconnect between activists/advocates and the media in regards to domestic violence as a social problem.

As in all research, this study is not without limitations. First, given the strong presence of the domestic violence coalition in North Carolina the present research may have limited generalizability to other states, especially those with little domestic violence activism. Second, though news coverage was gathered for the vast majority of cases, missing cases still exist. Most likely these cases of femicide did not result in any news coverage, but because several smaller newspapers did not have archives extending over the study period, there is a chance the coverage was missed. In addition, since the present study focused solely on newspaper coverage it cannot address the portrayal of femicide in other types of media such as television news. Finally, the study may be subject to biases by the researchers themselves; however, the strong interrater reliability speaks to the findings' foundation in both previous research and feminist theory.

Future Research and Implications

Future research should focus on femicide news coverage in other states. Specifically, research may compare news coverage of femicide cases in states with stronger versus weaker domestic violence coalitions or states that spend more versus less money on education and advocacy for violence against women. In addition, research may attempt to survey

the journalists who have written stories covering femicide cases and ask them how they choose the sources to include the language to describe victims and perpetrators and whether or not to contextualize a femicide as domestic violence. Finally, this line of research must expand to include other types of news sources such as television. With the 24-hr TV news cycle and "news bites" that run continuously on news channels, the presentation of IPV on television may have an even greater impact on public perceptions than newspaper coverage.

The failure of news media to frame femicide as IPV deserves research in its own right. The news media provide a unique forum in which personal troubles are "selectively gathered up, invested with a broader meaning, and made available for public consumption" (Sacco, 1995, p. 142). Framing femicide as IPV is essential to informing society in general, and other victims specifically, about the nature of violence against women. At the individual level, constructing or naming *femicide* as *IPV* is important because it helps individuals define their own experiences with violence and choose a course of action (Kelly, 1988). At the social level, recognizing femicide as IPV may initiate better public policy responses to IPV.

Educating journalists about their power to help facilitate accurate information on violence against women is a practical and attainable goal for this line of research. Comparably, research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has generated recommendations for journalists to responsibly report on suicides (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994). Some success in training journalists how to report on violence against women has already been demonstrated by advocates in Rhode Island (see Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006). Thus, the academic community must continue this line of research to develop a comprehensive strategy for reporting violence against women generally, and femicide specifically, in both print and television news.

Conclusion

IPV is a far too common, and often, deadly concern for women in the United States. The media have a unique influence in raising awareness of the issue and in developing the general imagery that accompanies it. The presentation of this imagery, particularly that which blames victims, may be an even more complex phenomena than the existing literature has described. Victim blaming is not a condition of a certain journalist, newspaper, or state—even the effort of a strong domestic violence coalition does not protect against victim blaming. The present research demonstrated that across the state of North Carolina, femicide news coverage varies depending on journalistic tone, the sources cited, and the way femicide is contextualized. These important differences in coverage offer readers divergent perspectives as to the nature of femicide, who is to blame, and how to access resources. However, ideal femicide coverage, utilizing the perspectives of domestic violence experts and framing femicide as IPV, was also discovered. These articles could be used as a model for responsible news coverage of IPV. It is our hope that research in this area will continue to raise awareness of the dangers of IPV and to present public policy directions that encourage meaningful partnerships between researchers, advocates, and the media.

Appendix

Femicide Codes

1. VICTIM MENTAL HEALTH
2. PERP MENTAL HEALTH
3. VICTIM DRUG USE
4. PERP DRUG USE
5. PERP ALCOHOL USE
6. VICTIM ALCOHOL USE
7. DV LANGUAGE/NO DV LANGUAGE USED
8. HISTORY OF DV
9. ACTIVE PROTECTIVE ORDER
10. PAST PROTECTIVE ORDER
11. CHARGES FILED
12. DROPPED COMPLAINT
13. SOURCES REFERENCED
14. VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS
15. PERP CHARACTERTICS
16. OVERALL TONE

Notes

1. We recognize that though the term *femicide* has been used more broadly in regard to "all killings of women, regardless of perpetrator status" (Campbell & Runyan, 1998, p. 348), for purposes of this work, we have adopted the more narrow meaning utilized by Dawson and Gartner (1998) that restricts the definition to "the killing of a woman by a male intimate partner" (p. 338).

2. Scholars such as Campbell et al. (Campbell, Glass, Sharps, Laughon, & Bloom, 2007) suggest that increased access to battered women's shelters have provided a nonlethal alternative for abused women, who, without such shelters, could have turned to violence as a means of escape or protection from their abusive partners.

3. We acknowledge that other media forms such as television news also play an important role in shaping public opinion and, arguably, public policy responses. Research has yet to examine coverage via other mediums, and we encourage study in this area.

4. Three cases accounted for 55.3% of the news coverage. Therefore, the researchers analyzed those 3 cases as a group and the other 41 cases as a group as well as analyzing the total data.

5. Taylor used Dawson and Gartner's (1998) definition of femicide as "the killing of women by a male intimate partner" (p. 383).

6. Of the total 292 articles, 124 (42.5%) were coverage of the same highly publicized incident.

7. One purpose of the original data collection was to collect adjudication outcomes for each case, and at the outset of the project, 2007 was determined to be the latest year for which the largest proportion of cases had reached some legal settlement (excluding subsequent appeals). Although adjudication outcomes are not explored in this particular analysis, the limits of the availability of this variable served to establish the cutoff year. The database will be expanded with subsequent years for purposes of future analyses.

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