

Framing Deadly Domestic Violence: Why the Media's Spin Matters in Newspaper Coverage of Femicide

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Abstract

The news media play a substantial role in shaping society's perceptions of social issues, including domestic violence. However, minimal research has been conducted to examine whether news media frame stories of femicide within the context of domestic violence. Using frame analysis, the present research compares newspaper articles representing 113 cases of femicide that define the murder as domestic violence to a random sample of 113 cases without coverage defining the femicide as domestic violence. Findings indicate that both groups are represented by multiple frames, including a previously unidentified frame that places the femicide in the context of domestic violence as a social problem.

Keywords

femicide, frame analysis, mass media

Thirty years ago in the United States, the crime of violence against women was not perceived to be a social issue. Women were certainly experiencing abuse at the hands of violent intimate partners, but that violence was not considered a crime by law enforcement, the courts, or society at large. As late as the 1970s, the abuse of women, particularly by male partners, was condoned socially (and even legitimized by the absence of spousal abuse and rape laws) as an acceptable way for husbands to discipline their wives. It was not until the 1970s that claims-making activities by members of the "battered women's movement" convinced the public to recognize the condition of "wife abuse" as a social problem

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and women subjected to this condition as “battered women” (Loseke, 1992). Consequently, women’s experiences with relationship abuse were only labeled a public problem within the last several decades. Previously, the crime of violence had been conceptualized as something that only happened between strangers, not family members or intimates (Bergen, 1998).

According to Best (1989), public issues grow up around private troubles when the experiences of individuals are understood as exemplifying a larger social problem, and the news media, in particular, are positioned to play a vital role in the construction of such problems. 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). At the individual level, constructing or naming a problem is important because it helps individuals define their personal experiences and choose a course of action (Kelly, 1988). At the social level, naming a problem may lead to the formulation of a solution (Mehrotra, 1999). Consequently, the ways in which the news media choose to frame domestic violence can have important ramifications, influencing how society perceives the dynamics of such violence as well as solutions and public responsibility.

Despite the news media’s substantial role in shaping society’s perceptions of social issues, including domestic violence, minimal research has been conducted to examine whether the news media frame stories of femicide (the killing of a female intimate partner¹) within the context of violence against women. Responding to this relative void in the literature, the present study aims to expand our knowledge concerning the media’s representation of femicide and the media’s impact on the construction of violence against women as a social problem. First, previous studies that have explored news coverage of intimate partner homicides will be addressed. Second, existing media frames used by journalists to tell the story of violence will be examined. Finally, the present study will build on the past literature by exploring the media frames employed in stories that define the femicide as domestic violence compared to stories that fail to define the femicide as domestic violence.

Examinations of Domestic Violence and Domestic Homicide in the News

Extant research indicates that the media paid little attention to the abuse of women by their male partners until the latter part of the 1970s; prior to this time, “domestic violence” referred to riots and terrorism. In 1982, Tierney published the first examination of violence against women in the news by exploring the *New York Times* from 1970-1978. Using the *New York Times* index, Tierney (1982) searched headlines for key words including assaults, battered wives, divorce, domestic relations, families, family life, marriages, violence, and women. From 1970-1975 there was very little coverage of domestic violence. However, in 1976, more widespread coverage of violence against women began, including the first discussions of a new innovation: battered women’s shelters. In 1977, 44 articles were identified in the *Times* referencing the “battered women problem,” covering topics such as new trials involving battered women, hotline services, public hearings, and proposed legislation. Most significantly, in 1978, “Battered Wives” appeared as a separate

term in the *Times* index evincing that the *New York Times*, and perhaps its readers, had begun to view incidents of spousal abuse as more than isolated occurrences, as a collective social problem (Tierney, 1982).

Contemporary studies conducted in the vein of Tierney's (1982) investigation of the news media's representation of domestic violence have consisted of analyses of newspaper articles that address instances of (1) domestic violence, broadly; and (2) femicide, specifically. Of particular relevance to the current study are the examinations that have reported on the portrayal of intimate partner homicide or femicide. These are studies that have identified a subset of articles that present the homicide between intimates as domestic violence by discussing the pair's history of domestic violence and/or by using language related to domestic violence.² To date, one empirical study has examined intimate partner homicide in the news (including female victims of male violence and male victims of female violence), addressing whether or not each event was contextualized as domestic violence. Additionally, two studies have specifically examined femicide in the news, reporting on the presentation of those events.

Bullock and Cubert (2002) conducted a quantitative content analysis and frame analysis of 230 newspaper articles (representing 44 cases meeting their criteria for domestic violence fatalities) appearing during 1998 in Washington state. Their focus was directed towards assessing newspaper portrayals of domestic violence, its victims, and how accurately the news reflected the broader social problem of domestic violence. Bullock and Cubert (2002) found that stories that were clearly instances of domestic homicides were often not explicitly labeled as domestic violence (170 articles, or 74%). Articles also tended to present the domestic homicide as an isolated event, often omitting details about abuse histories. Their study found that only 10% of articles described the homicide within the broader context of domestic violence in society, as evidenced by discussion of domestic violence generally or inclusion of domestic violence resource information. Furthermore, Bullock and Cubert identified four media frames that were used and appeared to misrepresent the event as isolated, ignoring the broader social implications. These frames were (1) a police frame or "just the facts," (2) a frame indicating that the current event involved people that are different from "us," (3) a frame that blamed the victim and/or excused the perpetrator, and (4) a frame that implied shock at the identification of the perpetrator because of his normalcy.

Focusing specifically on femicide, Taylor (2009) examined 6 years (1995-2000) of newspaper coverage in the *Orlando Sentinel* resulting in an analysis of 292 articles representing 168 cases. Among other analyses, Taylor explored whether or not cases of femicide were presented as domestic violence. She found that violence was mentioned ambiguously in 42 articles (usually through a vague description of the event as "some type of domestic incident") and in an equal-blame or neutral manner in 57 articles. In sum, approximately 34% of the articles in Taylor's (2009) sample referred to domestic violence in some way; however, it is not clear what portion of these articles further discussed the homicide within the broader context of domestic violence in society.

Intending to build upon Taylor's (2009) analysis, Richards, Gillespie, and Smith (2011) analyzed 995 newspaper articles (representing 299 cases of femicide) in the state of North

Carolina from 2002-2007. Richards et al. found evidence of direct and indirect victim blaming in news articles as well as differentiation between articles that present the femicide as domestic violence and those that do not. Findings demonstrated that only 13.7% (137) of articles discussed the homicide in broader terms of domestic violence as a social problem. Richards et al. indicated that articles employing a domestic violence as a social problem context were substantively different from those that did not in two primary ways: (1) They used domestic violence advocates as sources, quoted friends or family giving advice to others in domestic violence situations, and/or included contact information for local domestic violence shelters in the article; and (2) the journalist or sources were more likely to place blame for the incident on the criminal justice system (e.g., failed enforcement of protective orders).

Previous research indicates two distinct presentations of intimate partner homicide in the news: A majority of articles that portray intimate partner homicide as general homicide and a minority of articles that portray intimate partner homicide as domestic violence. Within articles that present intimate partner homicide as domestic violence, a small portion of articles place the incident of intimate partner homicide within the context of a greater social problem (e.g., by referencing additional instances of domestic violence and by providing resources for victims). The current study aims to build on previous research that identified this dichotomy by examining the different media frames used in articles that present intimate partner homicide as a general homicide and those that present it as domestic violence.

Framing Violence and Domestic Violence in the News

In their most basic forms, media frames are prepackaged social constructions that function as fully developed templates for understanding a given social phenomenon. Irrespective of their accuracy, these templates permit the general public to easily categorize, label, and manage a wide range of world events (Surette, 2007). Media frames are often shaped by three components: sources, word choice or language, and context. In regards to media coverage of domestic violence, these components not only shape the frame, but also convey a specific understanding of domestic violence to consumers (Bullock & Cubert, 2002).

Sources. Police function as gatekeepers to information on criminal incidents; as a result, crime news is often presented from a police perspective on crime and the solutions to crime (Chermak, 1995; Ericson, 1989; Fishman, 1981; Surette, 2007). This can be problematic when law enforcement perspectives conflict with social service agencies, victim advocates, and academicians (Taylor, 2009). Unfortunately, this is often the case in reporting on domestic violence. For example, extant research provides evidence that official sources, such as the police, provide information to news outlets of criminal events that reinforce severely limited "official" definitions of what should be considered criminal behavior (Gorelick, 1989; Humphries, 1981). Moreover, research suggests that the frame of reference offered by actors of the criminal justice system in regard to crime problems are rarely questioned, resulting in the marginalization of competing perspectives (Sacco, 1995). Surette (2007) refers to such actors as "authorized knowers," meaning that these sources

are often given ownership over explaining and framing a crime event. Consequently, explanations and solutions to crime offered by law enforcement are frequently accepted as adequate and comprehensive when they may be neither.

Additionally, perhaps as a matter of convenience, the media routinely utilize neighbors who may not know the victim and/or perpetrator particularly well, rather than close friends or family members, as sources in instances of domestic violence (Taylor, 2009). Taylor argues that, as a consequence, the act of violence is often inaccurately portrayed as an isolated event. Friends and family may be more knowledgeable about the history of the couple and the events leading up to the final act of violence. Taylor also notes that by using neighbors as sources, the violent event is likely to be represented as a onetime fluke rather than a larger social problem, perhaps negating social responsibility.

One of the most underutilized sources regarding domestic violence is those with an educated opinion and informed background in the problem, such as victim advocates or academic researchers (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Byerly, 1994; Meyers, 1997; Taylor, 2009). Some assert that journalists often avoid victim advocates and academics for fear of bias. However, by excluding such opinions journalists inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions associated with domestic violence offered by the public and, in some cases, law enforcement (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Taylor, 2009). Sources with an informed background on domestic violence could potentially contextualize such incidents and offer reasonable explanations.

Language. Journalists' word choice or language also influences the framing of domestic violence. Word selection in both the title/headline and throughout an article can potentially influence the general public's understanding of an event and the participants involved (Bullock & Cubert, 2002). In Benedict's (1993) content analysis of how the media portray victims of sex crimes, it is noted that language pertaining to women is often highly sexualized and promotes traditional representations of females or gender stereotypes. Meyers (1997) notes that it is imperative that journalists utilize language that avoids victim blaming when reporting on domestic violence. Additionally, Meyers (1997) asserts that while journalists should avoid the use of some types of language, they must also be sure to include others. For example, it was often the case that headlines failed to include language that distinguished an intimate partner homicide from a homicide between strangers (Bullock & Cubert, 2002). Making this type of distinction about the relationship between the victim and the offender is important for accurately portraying the context of intimate partner abuse that culminates in a homicide.

Context. Finally, when considering how domestic violence is framed by the media it is necessary to examine the context of the incident. As is often the case with intimate violence, the relationship between victim and offender is highly complex, multifaceted, and at times rather tumultuous. As noted by Campbell and colleagues (Campbell, Glass, Sharps, Laughon, & Bloom, 2007), the number one risk factor associated with intimate partner homicide is a prior history of domestic violence. For this reason, it is necessary to comprehensively consider the relationship history of the victim and the perpetrator. Unfortunately, journalistic representations of domestic violence often do not adequately contextualize the incidents of relationship violence (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Taylor, 2009). All too often

details pertaining to a couple's past are either omitted or relegated to the end of an article (McNeill, 1992). Consequently, domestic violence is often framed as being an isolated incident, when in reality this could not be further from the truth (Bullock & Cubert, 2002).

Because they are able to legitimize some views and to marginalize others, the news media are an important part of this framing process. Surette (2007) suggests that the media function as a filter in this capacity. Any particular social problem can be framed in multiple ways, and these various frames imply different causal attributions and prospective solutions (Gusfield, 1989; Schneider, 1985). Recurring patterns of news tend to highlight only certain kinds of criminals and their victims, while ignoring or downplaying others, thereby transmitting messages about who matters most in society. Media representation creates an interpretive framework for solutions to the social problems of crime that favor some social reaction and/or reaction over others (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991).

Due to the utilitarian nature of frames, there are several frames frequently found in crime and justice media. These include, but are not limited to (1) blaming a crime event on a faulty criminal justice system; (2) suggesting the victim or offender has experienced blocked opportunity at a structural level; (3) noting social and moral breakdown in the recent past; (4) considering institutional racism; and finally, (5) placing blame on violence portrayed in the media (Surette, 2007).

There are also five media frames specifically associated with domestic violence. These include (1) focusing on the behavior of the victim, including blaming the victim or excusing the perpetrator; (2) normalizing the event as commonplace; (3) suggesting the incident was an isolated event; (4) indicating the victim and/or perpetrator are somehow different from the norm; and (5) asserting that domestic violence perpetrators are "disordered" and should be easily identifiable.³ The first frame focuses on the behavior of the victim prior to the incident and typically assesses at least partial blame, citing the personal responsibility of the victim (Berns, 2001; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; McManus & Dorfman, 2003). Bullock and Cubert (2002) broaden this frame to include excusing the perpetrator as an indirect form of blaming the victim. The second frame tends to homogenize the homicide as a routine event. For example, according to Meyers (1997), many journalists view domestic violence as so common that even when it results in murder it is often not considered to be significant enough to merit media attention. She contends that "women who . . . are battered, raped, or even murdered appear to be journalistically unimportant unless they are white and middle class—or if they can serve as a warning to other women" (p. 98). The third frame is the antithesis of the second frame, as the third frame suggests that the incident was an isolated event or one-time occurrence. Articles utilizing the third frame do not treat the intimate partner homicide as the culmination of abuse,⁴ but rather as happening "out-of-the-blue" (Bullock & Cubert, 2002). The fourth frame indicates that the victim and/or perpetrator are somehow different from normal people, suggesting to consumers that domestic violence only happens to certain people, such as individuals in certain ethnic or socioeconomic groups, or people involved in other types of crime (Bullock & Cubert, 2002). Related to the fourth frame, the fifth frame implies that perpetrators of domestic violence are disordered, and thus should be easily recognizable, by citing sources that are shocked at the perpetrator's violent actions (Bullock & Cubert, 2002).

The Present Study

Existing research examining the representation of femicide in the news has primarily taken the form of content analyses assessing the portrayal of the crime, the perpetrator, and the victim; any examination of media frames has been tangential at best. Recently, Richards et al. (2011) asserted that the failure of the news media to frame femicide within the broader social problem of domestic violence deserves research in its own right. The media's presentation of femicide as domestic violence is important at both the individual and societal levels. For individuals, the explicit framing of femicide as domestic violence assists victims in identifying their own experiences as violence. For society, the recognition of femicide as a shared social problem can lead to better public policy initiatives, including resources for victims (Richards et al., 2011). The current study specifically examines the use of frames in media coverage of femicide stories. As suggested above, there are five frames commonly used in crime and justice media and five frames commonly used in reporting domestic violence. We examine the applicability of these existing frames to the most serious type of domestic violence, femicide, by analyzing the components of these frames—the sources used, language and word choice, and the context of the incident—in a sample of North Carolina newspaper stories.

As evidenced by the existing studies examining intimate partner homicide and femicide in the news, there appears to be a duality in the representation of intimate partner homicide by the media such that the majority of stories do not define the event as domestic violence; only a minority does so. The present study contributes to the literature on the representation of domestic violence in the news by examining the framing of femicide cases over a period of six years in a single state. The following research questions guide the current study:

- (1) How are femicide cases framed in news reporting?
- (2) Do news articles that define the femicide as domestic violence use a different frame(s) than those that do not define the femicide as domestic violence?

Method

Data Collection

A list of domestic homicides was obtained from the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCCADV) for the years 2002-2007. There were 462 domestic homicides in North Carolina recorded by the NCCADV for this six-year period; 312 of those were determined to be femicides. After an exhaustive electronic search for newspaper articles about these cases, a sample of 299 cases was developed for which at least one article could be located.⁵ A quantitative dataset of femicide cases, including information such as name of the victim and perpetrator, the date of the incident, the relationship of the victim and perpetrator, the weapon used, the age and race of the victim and the perpetrator (if available), whether or not a child was present, whether or not others were injured or killed in conjunction with the femicide, and the final legal outcome of the case (confirmed using the North Carolina Department of Corrections offender database) was developed. A

sample of articles meeting previously determined criteria (general editorials, opinion pieces, and duplicate stories were eliminated)⁶ were compiled into a qualitative dataset using *Atlas.ti V5.0*.

Missing Data

Having exhausted all search options, newspaper coverage for a total of 13 cases (4% of femicides) could not be recovered. In some cases, 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, electronic archives were not a feature provided by the newspaper. For some cases, there simply may not have been any newspaper coverage of the incident. However, the proportion of cases for which coverage was obtained (96%) represents a near population of femicides that occurred in North Carolina during the six years of 2002-2007.

Description of the Sample and Sampling Procedure

The *Atlas.ti* database containing all articles for which there were electronic copies was utilized to determine which news stories defined the femicide as domestic violence. Nineteen articles that were only available as hardcopies were also analyzed. A content search using the terms “domestic dispute” ($n = 21$), “domestic-related violence” ($n = 11$), “domestic violence” ($n = 63$), “intimate partner violence” ($n = 0$), “domestic-killings” ($n = 5$), “domestic disturbance” ($n = 3$), “abusive relationship” ($n = 3$), “domestic assault” ($n = 2$), and “domestic homicide” ($n = 5$) resulted in 113 cases containing news coverage that utilized domestic violence language to define the femicide. These cases comprised the group of interest for the current study because logically a case must first acknowledge the femicide as domestic violence to have the potential to discuss the femicide within the social problem of domestic violence. Cases that exhibited at least one story defining the femicide as domestic violence were included in this first group. A dichotomous variable (coded 0, 1) was then created in a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) dataset to distinguish the 113 cases acknowledging domestic violence from the 185 cases that did not. The SPSS randomization function was utilized to create a random sample of cases that did not define the femicide as domestic violence ($n = 113$; termed here the non-domestic violence [DV] defined group) in order to make comparisons with the cases that did ($n = 113$; termed the DV defined group). Using the chosen method, the comparison group (cases with no articles acknowledging domestic violence) is a *pure control group* in terms of containing cases that were represented in the media as a homicide only, not as domestic violence. This approach is believed to lend more credibility to the results of the study in terms of any framing differences found between the two groups of cases.

Analytic Technique

Quantitative analyses. First, SPSS was used to determine descriptive statistics for the cases acknowledging domestic violence ($n = 113$) and the cases in the control group ($n = 113$). To determine if the partitioning of the stories into DV defined and non-DV defined categories created datasets that were substantively different in terms of characteristics of the cases, we compared the distribution of a number of attributes of each case across the two categories. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1, where it can be seen that the cases were quite similar across a wide variety of dimensions. These include the victim–offender relationship, race of the perpetrator, urban versus rural location of the crime, type of weapon used, whether a child was present, whether others were injured in conjunction with the murder, and whether others were killed in addition to the femicide victim. Thus, any difference in news coverage between the two groups may be attributed to whether or not the case was defined as domestic violence.

Qualitative analyses. Once the sample cases were identified in the quantitative dataset, an *Atlas.ti* V5.0 dataset was created using the stories representing the 226 cases. For cases with only one news article, that individual article represented the case and was uploaded into the *Atlas.ti* V5.0 database. For cases yielding more than one article, the second article from each case was chosen and uploaded for analysis. The rationale for choosing the second article was twofold: (1) Cases with multiple stories had at least, but not necessarily more than, two stories referring to the femicide, and (2) analyzing the second article from multiple story cases was determined to be more systematic by introducing less bias than alternative methods (e.g., choosing the lengthiest article or the most detailed article).

Articles were coded according to a coding scheme adapted from past research examining newspaper coverage of femicide. Each article was read for content specifically relating to the three components of domestic violence frames, sources of information, language (e.g., word choice in titles, characteristics of the victim and perpetrator), and context (e.g., couple's history, perpetrator's history of violence) as well as other potentially influential content such as extraordinary circumstances of the case.⁷ Table 2 presents a distribution of components within those frames that will be referenced in the discussion of results to follow. We note here that if an article was found to demonstrate more than one frame, each frame was coded.

Results

The following results describe how femicide articles are framed by first enumerating the frames identified in the control group of cases (i.e., those that did not define the femicide as domestic violence) and then second, the cases that did define the femicide as domestic violence. The similarities and differences between the frames identified for the two groups are then articulated, and the implications regarding the social construction of femicide in society are discussed.

As presented in Table 3, six frames were identified among the articles that did not define the femicide as domestic violence. These frames include four that have been identified by

Table 1. Case Demographics (N = 226).

	Total sample ^a		DV defined (N = 113) ^b		Non-DV defined (N = 113) ^c	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Relationship status						
Husband	86	38.1	40	35.4	46	40.7
Boyfriend	68	30.1	35	31.0	33	29.2
Ex-husband	11	4.9	7	6.2	4	3.5
Ex-boyfriend	36	15.9	20	17.7	16	14.2
Estranged husband	25	11.1	11	9.7	14	12.4
Perpetrator race						
White	52	35.6	23	39.1	27	40.3
Black	78	53.4	44	55.7	36	53.7
Hispanic	5	3.4	3	3.8	2	3.0
Other	11	7.5	9	11.4	2	3.0
Urban (>50,000)						
Yes	171	75.7	84	74.3	87	77.0
No	55	24.3	29	25.7	26	23.0
Weapon						
Gun	124	55.9	55	50.0	69	61.6
Knife	44	19.8	22	20.0	22	19.6
Person	32	14.4	22	20.0	10	8.9
Other	22	9.9	11	10.0	11	9.8
Child present						
Yes	67	29.6	28	24.8	39	34.5
No	159	70.4	85	75.2	74	65.5
Others injured						
Yes	16	7.1	5	4.4	11	9.7
No	210	92.9	108	95.6	102	90.3
Others killed						
Yes	20	8.8	9	7.1	12	10.6
No	206	91.2	104	92.9	101	89.4

Notes: ^aM (s.d.) = 36.3 (Perpetrator age = 38.9) M (s.d.) = 34.4 (Perpetrator age = 37.0)

^cM (s.d.) = 38.36; Perpetrator age = 40.78; DV = domestic violence; Due to missing data, variable attribute may not equal total articles examined.

prior research: (1) Normalizing the event as commonplace, (2) framing the event as an isolated incident, (3) finding some fault in the criminal justice system, and (4) victim blaming. Two additional frames not previously delineated were also identified as (5) personal loss of control or moral breakdown by the perpetrator, and (6) minimizing the event by focusing on a broader issue.

Table 2. Characteristics of Femicide News Coverage.

	Total sample		DV defined		Non-DV defined	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sources						
Official/public	311	57.4	161	54.4	150	61.0
Neighbors	45	8.3	19	6.4	26	10.5
Friends/family	140	25.8	70	23.7	70	28.5
DV advocates	46	8.5	46	15.5	0	—
Language						
Substance use	16	34.0	11	45.8	5	21.7
Medical/mental health issues	20	42.6	7	29.2	13	56.6
Infidelity	11	23.4	6	25.0	5	21.7
IPV as a social problem						
National or state stats for IPV	37	62.7	37	62.7	0	—
Info on IPV rallies or vigils	14	23.7	14	23.7	0	—
Mentioned other local femicides	8	13.6	8	13.6	0	—
Article titles						
Labeled domestic homicide	26	22.8	26	36.1	0	—
Implied domestic homicide	19	16.7	17	23.6	2	4.8
Acknowledged relationship but not domestic homicide	69	60.5	29	40.3	40	95.2
Context—prior IPV						
Legal history of DV	51	38.1	38	39.2	13	35.1
Non-legal history of DV	25	18.7	17	17.5	8	21.6
Active protective orders	27	20.1	20	20.6	7	19
Use of a DV shelter	4	3.0	4	4.1	0	—
Past mandates to batterer intervention treatment	8	6	7	7.2	1	2.7
No history of DV	19	14.1	11	11.4	8	21.6

Note: DV = domestic violence; IPV = intimate partner violence; Due to missing data, variable attributes may not equal total articles examined.

Among the articles that did not define the femicide as domestic violence, 85 articles (75%) used a frame that “normalized the event as commonplace.” These articles employed two main strategies to normalize the incident: (1) They characterized the incident as one of many homicides or just another homicide, and therefore, commonplace; or (2) they indicated that the incident was preceded by violence, but not domestic violence. Examples of framing the femicide as commonplace include, “Three other homicides have been investigated by the Sheriff’s Office in March” (Donila, 2006), and “It was the city’s

Table 3. Distribution of Frames Used in DV-Defined ($N = 113$) and Non-DV Defined Articles ($N = 113$).

	n	% within DV defined or non-DV defined ($N = 113$)	% within total sample ($N = 226$)
		%	%
Frames appearing in both DV & non-DV			
DVCP	33	29.2	14.6
NDVCP	85	75.2	37.6
DVII	30	27.2	13.3
NDVII	9	8.0	4.0
DVFCJ	12	10.6	5.3
NDVFCJ	5	4.4	2.2
DVVB	18	15.9	8.0
NCVVB	8	7.1	3.5
Frames appearing only in DV or non-DV			
DVSP	28	24.8	12.4
NDVSMB	8	7.1	3.5
NDVMM	6	5.3	2.7

Note: DV = domestic violence; Percentage totals may not equal 100% because some articles illustrated multiple frames.

Key to frames

DV prefix	DV-defined articles.
NDV prefix	Non-DV defined articles.
CP	The event as presented as commonplace.
II	The event presented as an isolated incident.
VFCJ	Finding fault with the criminal justice system.
VVB	Victim blaming.
SP	Domestic violence as a social problem.
VMB	Personal loss of control or moral breakdown.
VMM	Minimizing the event by focusing on broader issue.

30th homicide of the year” (Olson, 2004). The second strategy included depictions of the perpetrator as a violent or dangerous person by discussing the perpetrator’s record as evidence of his criminal propensity; for example: “[The perpetrator] had already served a prison sentence for murder when he allegedly shot his wife earlier this week. According to authorities, [the perpetrator] was convicted of murder in Beaufort County in 1984. The murder may have stemmed from a domestic violence incident” (Goldstein, 2007). This example highlights media’s use of domestic violence terminology to describe past events without explicitly relating those terms to the current femicide. These commonplace frames fail to discuss the complexity of domestic violence and/or falsely identify perpetrators as criminals that are easily distinguishable from other individuals.

The second frame, “isolated incident,” portrays the crime as unexpected, without any discussion of the likely history of abuse between the victim and perpetrator. This frame was used in 9 articles (8%). For example: “[A neighbor] said the sight he saw in that house isn’t something anyone would expect to see in their close-knit neighborhood. ‘Everyone on this street is related,’ he said. ‘You see stuff like this on the news, but you don’t expect it to happen here’” (Hodges, 2002), or “‘It is pretty shocking. This is something you would see on Court TV,’” she said. ‘If you had known him, you would not have expected this outcome. He was such a nice man’” (Jenkins, 2003).

A third frame, “a faulty criminal justice system,” was used in 5 articles (4%). These articles shifted blame for the femicide to the criminal justice system, but without describing the femicide as domestic violence. For example: “Authorities said they tried to serve a stalking warrant on [the perpetrator] more than a dozen times since May, but he always dodged the deputies” (Ekard, 2005a). Two of the 5 stories employing this frame used it in conjunction with elements of the commonplace frame: “And the most tragic thing, something straight from a ‘Law & Order’ script, is this: [the perpetrator] got out of jail on a Monday. A 31-year-old mom, known as [the victim] to her friends, was killed on a Friday” (Rowe, 2006). This quote emphasizes that the justice system should be blamed for the victim’s death, while at the same time normalizing the femicide as “straight out of” a television script, as opposed to the tragic murder of a woman.

A fourth frame, “victim blaming,” includes stories that either directly blame the victim or indirectly blame the victim by minimizing the perpetrator’s actions. This frame was used in 8 (7%) articles. In an example of direct victim blaming, a “friend” of the victim was quoted in a story as saying, “It’s not no shock to me that she was killed. She would always be beat up by the men she was with” (Ball, 2003). In an example of minimizing the perpetrator’s action by focusing on the behavior of the victim, one article explains, “[The perpetrator] said he overheard a Jan. 16 telephone conversation confirming his wife was cheating on him with her ex-husband” (Clancey, 2002).

Two additional frames were discovered in the present research that have not been identified in previous frame analyses of domestic violence, and thus, may be unique to femicide cases. The fifth frame, derived from the concept in violence framing of “noting social or moral breakdown in the recent past” (Surette, 2007), indicates that the femicide occurred because of some personal breakdown experienced by the perpetrator. This frame was used in 8 articles (7%). These articles may include indications that the perpetrator was suicidal or overwhelmed by failures or burdens. The following are examples of this frame: “[The perpetrator] has emotional and mental problems, deputies said, and had recently sought psychiatric help. [The perpetrator] had no health insurance” (Youngquist, 2007); and “[The perpetrator] was out-of-work, bankrupt, and depressed Wednesday when he went on a shooting rampage that left three people dead, including himself, and two wounded, a relative said” (Sung, 2004).

A sixth and final frame used in the comparison group of articles minimized the femicide event by focusing on a dilemma in the lives of the victim and perpetrator. Similar to the victim-blaming frame, articles presented within this frame displaced blame for the femicide from the perpetrator; however, the 6 articles (5%) presented within this frame also

shifted the primary focus of the article away from the femicide to another social problem. Oftentimes the focus of these articles was health-related as this frame was primarily used in cases involving an elderly couple. One example of this frame referenced the bereavement coordinator from a hospice center stating, "It is, I think, really very difficult in the care-giving role. There are people who reach a point where they say they're ready for death." She went on to explain that the perpetrator may have said, "This is best for us" (Welch, 2004). In another case, the director of an Alzheimer's Association said this about a man who had murdered his ailing wife: "I hate to see something like this happen. I'm sure every man has his breaking point. It's a frustrating disease, in which people can lose even basic recognition of their loved ones, can cause desperation in those who care for victims" (McDonald, Ovaska, & Brevorka, 2005).

Of particular interest to the current study was the identification of frames used in cases where the news coverage defined the femicide as domestic violence. Five frames were identified among these articles. The first four frames have been previously identified by research and were also present in the comparison group: (1) Domestic violence as commonplace, (2) domestic violence as an isolated incident, (3) faulty criminal justice system, and (4) victim blaming; however, the current research identified a novel fifth frame, (5) domestic violence as a social problem. While articles from both groups shared four frames in common, these frames exhibited some differences depending on whether or not the femicide was defined as domestic violence.

As presented in Table 3, 33 articles (29%) framed the femicide as "routine" or "commonplace" domestic violence. These articles employed one of two strategies to minimize the femicide: (1) They indicated that the couple had had a history of domestic violence [i.e., "Suspect in murder-suicide had previously assaulted wife" (Burgess, 2004)], and/or (2) they indicated that the current femicide was another in a long list of femicides in the state or county [i.e., "Police charge husband in wife's killing in Northeast neighborhood—Authorities investigate two domestic homicides in less than 24 hours" (Michels & Rizzo, 2004)] but did not speak to the nature of domestic violence as a social problem. Often the perpetrator's criminal record was included to indicate the "dangerousness" of the particular perpetrator. For example, "[The perpetrator] also has a prior criminal record and is scheduled to appear in court next month, records show, on charges of first-degree burglary, simple assault, cruelty to animals and possession of drug paraphernalia" (Weir, 2005). A minority of these articles listed domestic violence advocates as sources and/or include information for victims regarding local resources.

Second, 30 articles (27%) framed the femicide as an "isolated incident" whereby the femicide came "out of the blue." Many times these articles relayed that the couple had seemed to friends or neighbors to be happy; for instance: "It was the first time police had been called to their house, and there was no evidence of previous domestic violence. From all indications, everyone said they seemed to be a very happy couple" (Coto, 2005). Other articles noted how the perpetrator had no criminal history or no past charges of domestic violence. For example: "Authorities are calling this a domestic-related murder, but there is no indication that the couple, who did not live together, had any problems in the past" (Ekard, 2005b); or, "Police believe the couple had been fighting and that [the victim] died

by use of physical force alone. Law enforcement has no information on prior domestic violence calls to the home” (Wolford, 2002).

Third, 12 articles (11%) framed the femicide as a result of a “faulty criminal justice system.” In each of these articles the victim had either been awarded a protective order against the perpetrator or had attempted to obtain a protective order. As such, 3 of the 12 articles focused on the failure of judges to protect victims. In one such article, a judge who had opted to issue a less restrictive restraining order against the perpetrator defended himself saying, “There was no way, based on the evidence in front of me, to fathom that this guy would snap the way that he snapped” (Wootson, 2007). In the other articles, sources lamented the current criminal justice system practice of administering protective orders to victims as a response to domestic violence. For example, one advocate reflected sadly, “While it is important for victims to seek restraining orders, such efforts provide no guarantees. It’s just a piece of paper” (Vandiver, 2005).

Fourth, 18 articles (16%) framed the femicide as the result of something the victim did or did not do, representative of the “victim blaming” frame. One such victim-blaming tactic was to indicate specific ways in which the victim failed to protect herself, such as by staying with the perpetrator or not filing charges for past domestic violence. For example, one article’s opening line stated, “A Chapel Hill man arrested in October for allegedly attacking the woman with whom he lived, and who then went free days later when she recanted, was charged Friday with her murder” (Shapard, 2006). However, even when victims took measures to protect themselves they were sometimes blamed for not doing enough. One advocate argued that, “When applying for a restraining order, it is important that victims seek help from support organizations. . . . Such groups can give advice and help victims find free legal representation” (Vandiver, 2005).

Finally, a fifth frame, “domestic violence as a social problem,” was used to frame 28 articles (25%). News stories framing the femicide as a social problem talked specifically about the pervasiveness of domestic violence, utilized domestic violence advocates as sources, talked about the current mechanisms in place to protect victims from domestic violence, and included information regarding resources for readers who may be in violent relationships or know someone in a violent relationship. One article said this about the femicide: “‘We can also use this to galvanize the community to make sure this never happens again,’” [a domestic violence advocate] said, mentioning that most people don’t realize that women 16 to 24 years old are at highest risk for domestic abuse. ‘Our young people are dying of this terrible, terrible problem’” (Scott & Welch, 2004). Another article revealed that, “For the past two weeks, as news of a trio of domestic violence-related killings has swept through Charlotte, the phone at the city’s Shelter for Battered Women has rung almost continually—‘It’s no coincidence. It’s a real case of the ripple effect,’ said [the shelter Director]. ‘I think it’s opened a lot of eyes. Unfortunately, we have to have the awful happen to take notice’” (Manware & Lacour, 2007). This frame, found in approximately 12% of the 226 cases comprising the current sample, has important implications regarding the framing of femicide in news media and domestic violence more broadly.

For several cases of femicide, frames were not mutually exclusive. Sixteen of the 226 articles contained attributes representing two different frames. Among the non-DV defined

cases, six articles used the commonplace frame in conjunction with another frame, including four articles that also used the victim blaming frame, two articles that also used the minimizing the event frame, two articles that used the faulty criminal justice system frame, and one article that also used the perpetrator loss of control/breakdown frame. In addition, two non-DV defined articles portrayed the femicide using aspects of the victim blaming frame and the perpetrator loss of control/breakdown frame and one used the victim blaming frame and the faulty criminal justice frame. Within the DV defined cases, four articles used both the domestic violence as a social problem frame and the faulty criminal justice system, and one article used both the victim blaming frame and the faulty criminal justice system frame.

Discussion

The current study compared the media frames in a group of 113 cases of femicide from North Carolina spanning a six-year period that contained at least one news article defining the femicide as domestic violence to 113 randomly chosen cases of femicide with no news articles defining the femicide as domestic violence. In regards to the first research question, findings indicate that a total of seven frames were identified, four of which had been identified in previous research and were present in both groups: (1) A commonplace frame, (2) an isolated incident frame, (3) a frame that blames the criminal justice system, and (4) a victim blaming frame.

In regards to the second research question, distinct frames were used in the DV defined and non-DV defined samples. First, among articles that did not acknowledge that the femicide was domestic violence, two additional frames were identified as (5) a frame blaming perpetrator loss of control or moral breakdown, and (6) a frame that minimized the femicide by focusing on a crisis in the lives of the victim/perpetrator. Second, among articles that defined the femicide as domestic violence, one additional frame was used, (7) a domestic violence as a broader social problem frame. The identification of this frame is a significant finding in the current study. This frame was used in 28 cases of femicide that were not only defined as domestic violence, but were also linked to the broader issue of violence against women in the community. These findings require further explication in order to assess their contribution to the domestic violence literature.

First, results indicate that defining femicide as domestic violence is a key step in the interpretation of a media frame. While both groups of articles used a commonplace, isolated incident, faulty criminal justice system, and victim blaming frame, the presentation of these four frames were affected by whether or not the femicide was first defined as domestic violence. The most pronounced differences in the shared frames were between the two uses of the commonplace frame. For articles that did not acknowledge the femicide as domestic violence, the commonplace frame described the femicide as “just another homicide.” However, in articles that defined the femicide as domestic violence, the commonplace frame described the femicide as “just another instance of domestic violence.” While both have a shared orientation, the first obscures consumers’ identification of the problem of domestic violence, while the latter could be interpreted by consumers to mean that domestic violence is a proverbial lost cause. In both cases, news coverage using this frame

conveys an overly simplistic (and fatalistic) interpretation of femicide and fails to identify individual perpetrator responsibility and/or supply information about victims' resources.

Next, distinct frames were identified within the two groups. First, among the non-DV defined sample, a total of 14 articles utilized either the minimizing the event frame or the perpetrator loss of control/breakdown frame. For example, in articles minimizing the event by focusing on a broader social issue, the femicide was almost completely obscured by intense focus on the causes, side effects, and difficulties of care-giving in reference to degenerative or terminal diseases. In other words, consumers are left to interpret the femicide not as a murder, but rather as the inevitable outcome of caregiver stress, particularly in elderly couples. In fact, the femicide becomes a secondary concern as the article's central focus is describing the experience of caring for someone with a long-term disease. While using a femicide event to draw attention to other social issues was relatively rare, it speaks volumes about the media's perceived newsworthiness of these phenomena compared to that of femicide.

One discrete frame was also identified among the DV defined sample, a frame that connected the femicide incident to the broader social problem of violence against women and discussed the social implications of such violence. The current study found that approximately 12% of articles framed the femicide within the context of a broader social problem. This percentage is slightly higher than the 10% of articles found by Bullock and Cubert (2002). These articles were substantively different from other articles and deserve in-depth discussion.

In terms of framing components, these articles described the history of violence between the couple, cited domestic violence advocates as sources, offered advice for other victims of domestic violence, and/or included contact information for local advocates and shelters. These articles made the greatest effort to accurately portray the victims' experiences as well as the complexity of domestic violence. In such articles, information from friends, family, and/or court records illustrated the lengthy abuse endured by specific victims while victim advocates described the nature of domestic violence—you're not safe if you stay, and you're even less safe when you try to leave. In addition, multifaceted descriptions of the victim (e.g., describing her as a great mother, dedicated teacher or student) were included. Using this frame, journalists portrayed femicide as the deadly end to domestic violence—violence that is not an individual problem, but a community problem. Findings related to this frame suggest that the media's tradition of treating domestic violence as an individual issue has changed. By using this frame, journalists and, by extension, consumers, are forced to consider the role society plays in both perpetuating and preventing violence.

While the use of a social context frame to describe individual femicides is promising for the accurate transmission of information regarding domestic violence, the majority of articles (even the majority of articles that defined the femicide as domestic violence) were not written using this frame. Thus, there remains a critical disconnect between coverage of individual femicide cases and the broader social problem of domestic violence. Proper contextualization is necessary for educating the general public about the role of domestic violence as a precursor to femicide. While it is requisite to consider the limitations of the present study, these results are novel in three aspects. First, differences in the

representation of a single frame, such as the commonplace frame, between the two groups of articles analyzed in this study indicate the importance of defining femicide as domestic violence in both research and practice. Second, the inclusion or exclusion of domestic violence terminology may influence the frames used by journalists as evidenced by the two frames unique to the femicide articles in the non-DV defined sample and the social problem frame unique to DV defined sample. Third, the variation in frames within the 113 articles representing cases of femicide defined as domestic violence illustrates that there are substantive differences between articles that just acknowledge femicide as domestic violence and articles that actually contextualize femicide within a broader social problem.

Limitations

First, it is necessary to consider that the findings may be influenced by the social climate and level of activism in the state from which the data were derived. The North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCCADV) may create higher levels of awareness in North Carolina than domestic violence groups in other states by reaching out to local media outlets and law enforcement agencies. It is reasonable to suggest that the prevalence of DV defined articles framing the femicide within the context of a broader social problem (about 25% within DV defined articles and about 12% of the overall sample) may be influenced by the partnership that has developed between the NCCADV, law enforcement, and the media. Therefore, the findings reported here may not be generalizable to other states. Additionally, as in all qualitative examinations, the interpretations presented here cannot be wholly free from potential researcher bias. However, to minimize that potential bias, we relied heavily on previous research to guide our coding and ensuing interpretations of the results that have been presented here.

Implications and Future Research

The *domestic violence as a social problem* frame is a positive development for the accurate transmission of information regarding femicide between journalists and consumers. However, the low prevalence of this frame indicates there is a need to cultivate partnerships between advocates, law enforcement, and the media in order to facilitate social awareness. There is evidence that coalitions working with journalists to develop practices for the proper identification of domestic violence and the use of domestic violence experts (such as advocates) as sources can be successful (see Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006). Future research should consider the role domestic violence advocacy plays in journalistic interpretations of femicide. However, while coalitions such as the NCCADV have surely affected their contacts in the news media, widespread utilization of a domestic violence context frame may only result from formal best practices on domestic violence reporting (see Ryan et al., 2006). Comparably, research from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has generated recommendations for journalists to responsibly report on suicides and such recommendations have had positive effects (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994).

Extended research on frame analysis of domestic violence news coverage is needed to compare the findings of this study across states. In particular, comparing media frames

used in states without an active coalition to states with more active advocacy may be useful in identifying the influence coalitions have on the media. In addition, future 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 frame a femicide within the broader social problem of domestic violence. Further, it is necessary to identify whether journalists consciously frame femicides, or any act of violence against women, a certain way and whether the frames they use are a result of journalistic training or personal biases.

Finally, frame analysis of femicide in other forms of media is needed. In an increasingly digital age, print journalism may be becoming less influential than Internet news sources, television news programs, and social networking outlets. Addressing the evolving methods for the dissemination of news and the influence these various types of media have on the collective social construction of the problem of domestic violence is necessary to this line of inquiry.

Conclusion

When considering the influence that the news media have on our criminal justice system and public opinions toward it, Surette (2007) suggests that the power of the media is both the problem and the solution. The news media have the ability to disseminate information more rapidly than any other entity in our society and the potential to drastically influence public opinion. In the context of the current research it is clear that the media are, in fact, both the problem and the solution. While there is optimism in the finding that about 25% of the sampled DV defined femicides are framed in the context of domestic violence as a greater social problem, the fact remains that many femicides continue to be explained away as commonplace or their magnitude is obscured by placing blame on the victim, failing to hold the perpetrator fully responsible, or by diverting attention to more easily championed issues (e.g., caretaker stress). In many cases the media miss the opportunity to use their influence to portray femicide as an issue deserving of public outrage and intensified policy development. It is our hope that research in this area will continue to encourage meaningful partnerships between researchers, advocates, and the media and that best case practices for reporting on violence against women will be developed and disseminated on a national level.

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Notes

1. The term femicide has been used broadly in regard to “all killings of women, regardless of perpetrator status” (Campbell & Runyon, 1998). For purposes of this work, however, we have adopted the more narrow meaning utilized by Dawson and Gartner (1998, p. 338), which restricts the definition to “the killing of a woman by a male intimate partner.”
2. Additionally, there are two studies that have examined news coverage of intimate partner homicide or femicide but did not report on whether the violent act was portrayed as domestic violence or homicide (see McManus & Dorfman, 2003; Meyers, 1994). While these studies do provide important information regarding victim blaming language and the portrayal of victims in news articles, they will not be explicitly discussed here.
3. Bullock and Cubert (2002) refer to a police or “just the facts” frame, which is described as including articles that describe the homicide event with no discussion of the relationship between the victim and offender and/or no indication that the homicide was part of a social problem, or describe the homicide event as an isolated incident as opposed to a culmination of events. This frame, therefore, is represented here as the two separate frames identified in additional literature on the topic: the commonplace frame and the isolated incident frame.
4. A lengthy literature indicates that femicide is most often the conclusion of a long history of abuse (for examples, see Campbell, 1992; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Websdale, 1999).
5. A news article search using the electronic newspaper databank, *Access World News*, an Internet search for articles written about cases not appearing in *Access World News*, and newspaper articles provided by the NCCADV resulted in near population of news stories.
6. For a more detailed description of the initial data collection process refer to Richards and colleagues (2011).
7. Case components were utilized to identify the frames among femicide articles; however, an in-depth analysis and discussion of the distribution of case components among frames was beyond the scope of the current research. The role of case attributes, such as victim/offender relationship and/or race/ethnicity, in the framing of femicide cases is a valuable line of inquiry and should be a focus in future research.

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