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This study explores how newspapers portray domestic violence fatalities, how accurately they reflect the victims' experiences and the broader social problem of domestic violence, and the implications of the patterns of portrayal. Using quantitative content analysis and frame analysis, the authors examined 1998 coverage of domestic violence homicides by all newspapers in Washington State. Overall, the analyses indicate that coverage gave a distorted view of domestic violence and victims' experiences, often supporting common misconceptions about domestic violence. The coverage generally presented domestic violence in terms of isolated incidents, rather than portraying it as a larger social problem. A handful of articles did not fit this mold. These portrayed domestic violence as a social problem with the potential to affect every reader, indicating that domestic violence fatalities can be more accurately portrayed within the boundaries of current journalistic norms and practices and pointing to ways journalists can improve coverage.

Coverage of Domestic Violence Fatalities by Newspapers in Washington State

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According to the most recent figures from the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1,830 people were murdered by their current or former intimate partners in 1998 (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Of those, 72% were women (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Most Americans learn about such violent deaths through the media. News coverage can be framed to give distinctly different views of social problems, influencing how audience members see their world, its problems, and the solutions to those problems (Entman, 1991, 1993; Loseke, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Tuchman, 1978).

Authors' Note: Cathy Ferrand Bullock is an assistant professor in Utah State University's Department of Journalism and Communication, and Jason Cubert is a law student at Cardozo University. Both were graduate students in the University of Washington's School of Communications and research assistants under the direction of Roger Simpson, director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, when this research was conducted. This project was completed with funding from the center, and the authors wish to thank Roger Simpson for his support and guidance. In addition, they would like to thank Margaret Hobart with the Washington State Domestic Violence Fatality Review Project at the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence for her assistance and willingness to share the coalition's file of newspaper articles.

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Thus, news coverage can help determine how society views and responds to domestic violence.

This study explores how newspapers portray domestic violence fatalities, how accurately this portrayal reflects the victims' experiences and the broader social problem of domestic violence, and the implications of the patterns of portrayal. Using quantitative content analysis and frame analysis, it examines coverage of domestic violence homicides by newspapers in Washington State during 1998.

Characteristics of Domestic Violence

Studies in intimate partner violence have considered factors such as psychological abuse to be contributors to violent situations in the home. Fagan and Browne (1994) wrote that "psychological abuse, economic deprivation, threats to others in the family, and threats as a method of coercion" (p. 118) exist simultaneously with physical abuse.

Crowell and Burgess (1996) defined *psychological abuse* as verbal abuse (ridicule, harassment, name calling, etc.), isolation, jealousy or possessiveness, and threats or abuse to a victim's children, friends, pets, or possessions. As Martin (1982) wrote, "In many cases, such psychological abuse is a prelude to physical violence. If unchecked violence escalates in frequency and severity sometimes leading to murder" (p. xviii). In roughly 96% of cases studied, death is the culminating event of a long history of interpersonal tension entrenched in violence (Gelles, 1972; Goetting, 1995).

Many researchers focusing on wife battering blame the setup of society and the household (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Martin, 1976; Pagelow, 1984). In fact, Gelles and Straus (1988) claimed,

Our society and our families are organized to not only allow but often encourage violence between intimates. The combination of social attitudes (that sometimes encourage but often just simply allow violence), with the private nature of the modern family, and the socially structured inequality that is part of every household, makes for a tinderbox of emotions and possible violent outbursts. (p. 35)

Little research has been conducted concerning same-sex partnerships and domestic violence; however, current research is focusing on domestic violence other than that by husbands against wives. When women kill their husbands, a high proportion act in self-defense or in reaction to a history of domestic violence by the husband (Klein, Campbell, Soler, & Ghez, 1997; Kurz, 1993; Straus & Hotelling, 1980; Websdale, 1999). This is not to say that women are not abusers or that domestic violence fatalities do not occur at the

hands of women; however, some research has taken women's retaliation out of context. Studies have also found that women who were abused as children do not seek out abusive relationships as adults (Cascardi, O'Leary, Lawrence, & Schlee, 1995; Pagelow, 1984). This phenomenon is often seen as the result of self-esteem issues rather than those of conditioning.

Research does affirm that violence is learned at home and that men who beat their partners have most likely seen their fathers beat their mothers (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Gelles, 1972; Klein et al., 1997; Kurz, 1993; Pagelow, 1984) and have generally experienced a high level of physical brutality throughout childhood (Gelles, 1972).

Characterizations of murderous husbands' having been abused as children often serve as "excuses" or serve to make the men seem deviant, but as research explains, it is the perpetrators' abilities to seem normal that often make recognizing domestic violence such a problem. Herman (1992) wrote,

The perpetrator's most consistent feature, to both victims and psychologists, is his apparent normality. The perpetrator seeks out situations where his tyrannical behavior will be tolerated, condoned or admired. Few people believe that his crimes can be committed by a man of such conventional appearance. (p. 77)

When police and prosecutors encounter these "normal people" in domestic violence situations, they often view arrest and prosecution as unsuitable. Early writings on police responses to family violence indicated the police's refusal to get involved in family disputes, arrest offenders, or impose criminal sanctions. Many police departments had "hands off policies" stating that arrests were to be avoided whenever possible (Moore, Prothrow-Stith, Guyer, & Spivak, 1994).

When police act, they focus more on offenders than on victims (Martin, 1976; Moore et al., 1994; Pagelow, 1984). Wives are frequently advised to drop charges for fear that they may provoke further violence or lose the family's major economic support (Breci, 1991; Gelles & Straus, 1988). In cases that make it to court, the family is treated as a sacred entity that must be preserved.

News Media and Domestic Violence

American mass media have the power to bring awareness to social issues and, researchers maintain, to provide a picture of events people do not experience directly, teach people about their society, and help structure how people see the world (Hartley, 1982; Manoff & Schudson, 1986; Meyers, 1997; Molotch & Lester, 1974; Sherizen, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). Researchers have

developed a long list of factors that may shape the images conveyed through the media. They point to the potential effects of technology, political and economic structures, and news workers' routines, news values, literary forms, and cultural assumptions (for example, see Benedict, 1992; Chermak, 1995; Gans, 1979; Hartley, 1982; Manoff & Schudson, 1986; Meyers, 1997; Molotch & Lester, 1974; Roshco, 1975; Sigal, 1973; Strentz, 1989).

A number of researchers have explored the idea that news is framed in ways that convey certain understandings of reality while excluding others (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Entman, 1991, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Tuchman, 1978). Entman (1993) offered this definition:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

Journalistic texts can make information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable through its placement, by repeating it, or by associating it with familiar symbols (Entman, 1991, 1993).

Given the importance of the media in illuminating social issues and their potential to frame news in different ways, it is worth asking how the media have covered domestic violence. "In one sense," said Loseke (1989), "the mass media formally discovered the 'wife abuse' problem in 1974, the first year the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* began listing articles under the special heading of 'wife beating'" (p. 192). Studies indicate that media sometimes create distorted pictures of domestic violence (for example, see Berns, 1999; Consalvo, 1998a, 1998b; Meyers, 1994, 1997).

Meyers (1994, 1997) suggested that news coverage of domestic violence is framed to support the status quo: a system she saw as grounded in patriarchal ideology and designed to sustain male domination over women. Meyers maintained that coverage she examined in several small-scale qualitative studies positioned antiwoman violence in a context of individual and family pathology rather than relating it to social structures and socially approved gender roles. As a result, the coverage blamed women while helping to relieve society of any obligation to act.¹ To her, news coverage of violence against women implies that good girls follow the rules and avoid trouble and bad girls break the rules and get what they deserve. In Meyers's view, attribution of blame grows out of journalists' attempts to explain the "why" of domestic violence; whether the victim or the perpetrator is blamed depends on the underlying ideology.

Researchers also conclude that news coverage of domestic violence is colored by the sources journalists use (Chibnall, 1977; Sherizen, 1978; Sigal, 1973). As Meyers (1997) explained, journalists see the police as legitimate sources whose views are neutral and, thus, do not need to be balanced with information from those representing opposing opinions. However, the police perspective may not be neutral, as suggested earlier by the focus on the offender, and police goals may not serve the needs of the media, the audience, or crime victims and their families (Chibnall, 1977; Meyers, 1997; Sherizen, 1978). The supposedly value-free, outsider's view journalists sometimes say they adopt is often "based on the police perspective and assumes that the cause of the violence resides within the interactive behavior of the woman and man—a position that implicates the woman in her own abuse" (Meyers, 1997, p. 94). Advocates for victims of domestic violence, on the other hand, could bring a different perspective to the coverage (Jones, 1994; Meyers, 1997).

As Entman (1993) suggested, word choice can also help frame the news. Benedict (1992), writing about how the press covers sex crimes, said that the use of sexist vocabulary helps promote traditional images of women. Her research indicates that journalists force set narratives (the woman is a vamp who drove the man to commit the crime or the woman is a virgin sullied by a monster) on sex crimes "through their choice of vocabulary, the slant of their leads, and the material they choose to leave out or put in" (pp. 23-24).

Meyers's (1997) interviews with victims' advocates highlight the importance of labeling in ways that are not misleading. Some advocates objected to phrases such as *domestic disturbance* or *domestic violence*, arguing that these hide that women are generally the victims and men the perpetrators and, thus, separate the crime from societal issues of power and control. Advocates also objected to news coverage that dealt with a domestic violence homicide as just another murder and ignored the context of battering. Meyers wrote, "This denies the pain and abuse that battered women endure, and it makes the cause of death appear inexplicable or the result of a man's suddenly having 'snapped'" (p. 110).

As the research summarized here indicates, news coverage can be framed to convey a particular understanding of reality. This study is built on the idea that journalists can create different pictures of domestic violence and confirm or debunk the myths surrounding it by choosing certain topics, sources, facts, and words over others and by controlling the placement and repetition of information. They can illuminate or obscure domestic violence's role in individual deaths, its importance as a broader social problem, its characteristics and patterns, and its victims' experiences. Our research questions reflect these ideas:

Research Question 1: Did the newspaper coverage acknowledge that this incident involved domestic violence?

Research Question 2: Did the coverage portray the incident as an isolated event or as part of a pattern of abuse between this perpetrator and victim? Also, did it portray the incident as an isolated homicide (or attempted homicide) or as part of a larger social problem of domestic violence?

Research Question 3: Did the coverage give a sense that the case involved physical abuse only or both physical and psychological abuse?

Research Question 4: Did the coverage blame the victim and/or exonerate the perpetrator?

Research Question 5: What sources were used?

The first question grows out of the research that emphasizes the importance of labeling domestic violence in ways that are not misleading. We wondered whether domestic violence would be labeled as such. Questions 2, 3, and 4 were designed to determine whether the coverage passed along some of the common misconceptions about domestic violence, as past studies have suggested, or created a more accurate view. The final question draws on work indicating that the sources journalists use can help determine the frame of an article.

METHOD

Our analysis focused on coverage of domestic violence fatalities by all community and daily newspapers in Washington State in 1998.² With one exception, we included all news and feature articles, companion pieces (such as short articles giving domestic violence fatality statistics), and opinion pieces that dealt primarily with domestic violence–related deaths. The exception was an incomplete clipping for which the full article was not readily available. Approximately 40 of the state's 190 or so newspapers ran domestic violence fatality–related coverage that fit our criteria.³ Roughly half were dailies; most of the others were weekly newspapers. (See the appendix for a list of the newspapers.)

We examined all coverage through the arraignment, if there was one, in each case. Trial coverage, which presumably would shift toward the legal system and events in court, was omitted because we suspected that it would differ significantly from earlier coverage of the crime. The arraignment formed a natural dividing line often followed by a break in coverage.

To be included in the study, a domestic violence case had to meet two criteria. First, it had to involve people who were or had been romantically involved. Cases in which a woman's former boyfriend killed her current boy-

friend were included, as were cases in which one parent killed the children to punish the other parent. Cases in which the perpetrator had not yet been identified were included if a current or former partner was implicated. Second, the case had to involve a death or a clear attempt to kill; we were interested in the coverage of cases that had reached the conclusion of the escalating violence described earlier.⁴

In all, 44 cases met these criteria and were studied. And 3 accounted for a disproportionate amount of the coverage: 55.3% of the units coded. Concerned that these cases might skew the results, we analyzed the 41 smaller cases as a group, the 3 larger cases as a group, and the total data. The 44 cases included 230 articles (119 from the smaller cases and 111 from the larger cases). Almost all were news and feature articles. Of the rest, 4 were letters to the editor, 2 were other types of opinion pieces, and 3 were categorized other.

Articles were broken into units for coding. Headlines, subheads, and leads⁵ were coded as separate units. Within the body of an article, each paragraph was coded as a unit. A total of 3,053 units (1,365 in the smaller cases and 1,688 in the larger cases) were coded.

The overall file included a variety of domestic violence cases, as shown by the breakdown of the 42 cases in which the perpetrator had been identified (figures do not total 100% due to rounding error):

Female victim, male perpetrator: 29 cases (69.0%)
 Male victim, female perpetrator: 9 cases (21.4%)
 Male victim, male perpetrator: 4 cases (9.5%)
 Female victim, female perpetrator: 0 cases (0%)

Of the 9 cases in which women killed men, 5 were described as self-defense, as would be expected based on the literature. The 4 cases in which men killed men all involved women. For example, a woman's estranged husband killed her boyfriend in one case. We found no domestic violence fatalities involving same-sex relationships.

The coverage was analyzed using quantitative content analysis and frame analysis. For the former, we developed a set of quantitative items based on the literature. Measures were pretested several times, and intercoder reliability was 85% or better for all closed-ended items. During the study, coders discussed any questions they had about coding to ensure that reliability remained high.

We used frame analysis to identify the themes or patterns in the coverage. All articles were read at least once by both authors, key ideas were listed, and the ideas were synthesized into the primary frames for the coverage. Because the 3 larger cases included so much coverage, each was analyzed separately.

RESULTS

Quantitative Content Analysis

Key terms signifying that an incident reflects domestic violence were seldom used. Phrases such as *domestic violence*, *domestic abuse*, *violent history*, and *battered women* appeared in only 4.3% of the units (3.9% of the units in the 41 smaller cases and 4.7% of the units in the 3 larger cases). These were spread among 22.6% of the articles, or 52 articles. Also, 1 of the 3 large cases accounted for 53.8% of the units that mentioned domestic violence.

Abuse was mentioned even less frequently. For instance, 4 units scattered among 3 articles included the phrase *physical abuse*, and 2 units in 1 article specifically mentioned verbal or emotional abuse. (Psychological abuse was never mentioned.) All 6 units were in 2 of the large cases. However, if the more generic *abuse* is included, the term was mentioned in 33 units, or 1.1% of the total units, distributed among 18 articles (6 from smaller cases and 12 from larger cases). So, the term *abuse* was used in only 7.8% of the articles.

Trauma was specifically mentioned in only 7 units, or 0.23% of the total. These were distributed among 6 articles (2.6%) in 1 smaller case and the 3 larger cases.

To further explore the first research question, we examined whether stories made it clear that they dealt with domestic violence without labeling it as such. Journalistic pieces are generally constructed to make the focus clear by the end of the lead, so we looked at whether the fact that the case involved domestic violence was evident from the headline, subhead (if any), and/or lead. We counted all articles in which (a) domestic violence was specifically mentioned or (b) the victim's current or former romantic partner was implicated in the crime.

By the end of the lead (taking headline package and lead into account), it was evident that 170, or 74.0%, of the stories dealt with domestic violence although it was not labeled as such. The percentage was higher for the large-case articles (85.6%) than for the small-case articles (63.0%). As these percentages indicate, a majority of the articles made it clear early on that the story involved domestic violence. This was done by describing the crime and the victim-perpetrator relationship.

We examined seven other items—such as whether there was any evidence of past domestic problems between this perpetrator and victim (other than a protection order), whether the victim had obtained or tried to obtain a protection order against this perpetrator, and whether there was any description of psychological abuse between this perpetrator and victim—to determine whether the idea of domestic violence cropped up indirectly in the coverage.

As Table 1 indicates, much of the coverage did little to develop the idea that the case involved domestic violence. The most common item, evidence (other than a protection order) of past problems in this relationship, appeared in only 22.6% of the articles. When items were considered together, 30.0% of the articles contained at least one measure that showed domestic violence. More than two thirds of the articles elaborated little on the idea that they involved domestic violence.

In answer to our first research question, the coverage seldom labeled a killing as domestic violence. Instead, it described the crime and the victim-perpetrator relationship early on and largely let readers draw their own conclusions.

Our second research question asked whether the coverage portrayed the incident as an isolated event or as part of a pattern of abuse between this perpetrator and victim. As some of the items in Table 1 help illustrate, the coverage tended to omit the idea of a pattern of abuse. In addition, few units and articles indicated that the perpetrator or victim grew up in an abusive home or had been involved in abusive relationships in the past (Tables 1 and 2), information that readers might interpret as evidence of a pattern in one or both partners' lives. By not portraying the victim and perpetrator's history, the coverage presented the homicide as an isolated incident.

This research question also asked whether the coverage portrayed the incident as an isolated homicide (or attempted homicide) or as part of a larger issue of domestic violence in society. To address this, we looked at whether the coverage placed the problem in context by mentioning domestic violence not involving this perpetrator and victim (see Table 1). Only 2.9% of the units and 10.0% of the articles (14.4% of the large-case articles and 5.9% of the small-case articles) placed domestic violence in a broader context. These cases were generally not presented as part of a larger problem; they appeared to be isolated incidents of violence.

The third research question dealt with whether the coverage showed domestic violence only in terms of physical abuse or whether it also showed psychological abuse. Psychological abuse between perpetrator and victim was described in only 66 units (2.2% of the total) scattered among 39 articles (17.0%). Thus, domestic violence was portrayed overwhelmingly in terms of physical harm, and the psychological component was largely ignored.

Based on the literature, we expected Research Question 4 (Does the coverage blame the victim and/or exonerate the perpetrator?) to be answered affirmatively. Our findings (Table 2) contradict this because individual statements showing that the perpetrator had an excuse, that the victim was to blame, or that blame should be shifted to society showed up in few units.

TABLE 1: Frequency of Items Indicating That Case Involved Domestic Violence

<i>Item</i>	<i>Unit</i> (<i>Large Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 1,688; <i>Small Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 1,365)		<i>Article</i> (<i>Large Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 111; <i>Small Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 119)	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Past problems in this relationship (any evidence of past domestic problems, other than protection order, between this perpetrator and victim)				
Total	114	3.7	52	22.6
Large/Small	55/59	3.3/4.3	26/26	23.4/21.8
Domestic violence contextualized (cases of domestic violence not involving this perpetrator and victim, domestic violence hot lines, domestic violence agencies and their purposes, etc.)				
Total	89	2.9	23	10.0
Large/Small	71/18	4.2/1.3	16/7	14.4/5.9
Protection order (victim obtained or tried to obtain a protection order against this perpetrator)				
Total	79	2.6	38	16.5
Large/Small	45/34	2.7/2.5	21/17	18.9/14.3
Domestic violence experts used as sources				
Total	74	2.4	11	4.8
Large/Small	67/7	4.0/0.5	10/1	9.0/0.8
Description of psychological abuse (verbal, emotional) between this perpetrator and this victim				
Total	66	2.2	39	17.0
Large/Small	28/38	1.7/2.8	18/21	16.2/17.6
Perpetrator killed victim because victim abused him or her, the children, and so forth				
Total	20	0.7	12	5.2
Large/Small	0/20	0.0/1.5	0/12	0.0/10.1
Perpetrator a domestic abuser of people other than this victim				
Total	11	0.4	6	2.6
Large/Small	5/6	0.3/0.4	2/4	1.8/3.4

However, analyzing how many articles included any excuse or any form of blame probably provides a more accurate picture. When items were combined, 47.8% of the articles suggested at least one motivation or excuse for the perpetrator (40.3% of the small-case articles and 55.9% of the large-case

TABLE 2: Frequency of Items That Excuse Perpetrator, Blame Victim, or Blame Society

<i>Item</i>	<i>Unit</i> (<i>Large Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 1,688; <i>Small Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 1,365)		<i>Article</i> (<i>Large Case</i> <i>n</i> = 111; <i>Small Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 119)	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Perpetrator's motivation and/or excuse				
Perpetrator had mental health problems				
Total	83	2.7	39	17.0
Large/Small	76/7	4.5/0.5	34/5	30.6/4.2
Separation or divorce				
Total	46	1.5	34	14.8
Large/Small	35/11	2.1/0.8	25/9	22.5/7.6
Perpetrator used drugs and/or alcohol				
Total	26	0.9	18	7.8
Large/Small	0/26	0.0/1.9	0/18	0.0/15.1
The death was or may have been accidental				
Total	26	0.9	19	8.3
Large/Small	12/14	0.7/1.0	9/10	8.1/8.4
Money (perpetrator killed for insurance money, to avoid a costly divorce, etc.)				
Total	24	0.8	17	7.4
Large/Small	20/4	1.2/0.3	15/2	13.5/1.7
Perpetrator killed victim because victim abused him or her, the children, and so forth				
Total	20	0.7	12	5.2
Large/Small	0/20	0.0/1.5	0/12	0.0/10.1
Perpetrator was specifically called a victim in this domestic violence case				
Total	8	0.3	7	3.0
Large/Small	2/6	0.1/0.4	2/5	1.8/4.2
Perpetrator had physical health problems				
Total	6	0.2	6	2.6
Large/Small	1/5	0.1/0.4	1/5	0.9/4.2
Perpetrator grew up in an abusive home				
Total	2	0.1	2	.9
Large/Small	0/2	0.0/0.1	0/2	0.0/1.7
Victim deserved it/brought it on self				
Victim's behavior was unacceptable (victim used drugs or alcohol, was unfaithful, was clingy, etc.)				
Total	72	2.4	35	15.2
Large/Small	28/44	1.7/3.2	14/21	12.6/17.6

(continued)

TABLE 2 Continued

<i>Item</i>	<i>Unit</i> (<i>Large Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 1,688; <i>Small Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 1,365)		<i>Article</i> (<i>Large Case</i> <i>n</i> = 111; <i>Small Case</i> , <i>n</i> = 119)	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Victim was specifically blamed for bringing about his or her death or the attempt on his or her life				
Total	39	1.3	19	8.3
Large/Small	10/29	0.6/2.1	4/15	3.6/12.6
Victim grew up in an abusive home or had been involved in abusive relationships in the past				
Total	4	0.1	2	0.9
Large/Small	2/2	0.1/0.1	1/1	0.9/0.8
Victim had health problems (he or she was unable to care for self)				
Total	2	0.1	1	0.4
Large/Small	2/0	0.1/0.0	1/0	0.9/0.0
Society is to blame				
Society in general is violent				
Total	23	0.8	15	6.5
Large/Small	20/3	1.2/0.2	13/2	11.7/1.7
Perpetrator had easy access to weapons				
Total	6	0.2	5	2.2
Large/Small	5/1	0.3/0.1	4/1	3.6/0.8

articles) that could be interpreted as exonerating him or her. A smaller but still noteworthy percentage, 17%, blamed the victim for his or her death (20.2% of the small-case articles and 13.5% of the large-case articles). Overall, only 8.3% shifted the blame to society (2.5% of the small-case articles and 14.4% of the large-case articles).

The fifth research question dealt with the journalists' sources. As Table 3 shows, the coverage relied heavily on factual information not attributed to a source and on information from official sources such as the police, court documents, and legal personnel. Articles drew much less on sources who could put a human face on domestic violence, such as victims' and perpetrators' family members, friends, and employers. This is consistent with the literature, as is the fact that domestic violence experts were rarely used as sources.

TABLE 3: Frequency of Use of Various Sources

Source	<i>Unit^a</i> (<i>Large Case</i> , n = 1,688; <i>Small Case</i> , n = 1,365)		<i>Article^b</i> (<i>Large Case</i> n = 111; <i>Small Case</i> , n = 119)	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Factual, unattributed information and official sources				
Factual statement not attributed to a source, unattributed opinion of writer				
Total	1569	51.4	229	99.6
Large/Small	866/703	51.3/51.5	110/119	99.1/100.0
Police or police records, sheriff, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and so forth				
Total	510	16.7	134	58.3
Large/Small	232/278	13.7/20.4	60/74	54.1/62.2
Court documents or official documents other than police records				
Total	164	5.4	59	25.7
Large/Small	131/33	7.8/2.4	40/19	36.0/16.0
Prosecutor or other member of prosecution team				
Total	134	4.4	66	28.7
Large/Small	71/63	4.2/4.6	40/26	36.0/21.8
Defense lawyer or other member of defense team (other than defendant)				
Total	39	1.3	21	9.1
Large/Small	30/9	1.8/0.7	16/5	14.4/4.2
Firefighters, emergency medical technicians, coroner, and so forth				
Total	34	1.1	22	9.6
Large/Small	11/23	0.7/1.7	7/15	6.3/12.6
Generic authorities ("authorities," "officials," "court officials")				
Total	28	0.9	24	10.4
Large/Small	15/13	0.9/1.0	12/12	10.8/10.1
Multiple official sources ^c				
Total	14	0.5	13	5.7
Large/Small	8/6	0.5/0.4	8/5	7.2/4.2
Judge, magistrate				
Total	3	0.1	2	0.9
Large/Small	2/1	0.1/0.1	1/1	0.9/0.8
Personal sources				
Neighbor, acquaintance, friend				
Total	143	4.7	46	20.0
Large/Small	77/66	4.6/4.8	29/17	26.1/14.3

(continued)

TABLE 3 Continued

Source	Unit ^a (Large Case, n = 1,688; Small Case, n = 1,365)		Article ^b (Large Case n = 111; Small Case, n = 119)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Relative of victim but not perpetrator				
Total	57	1.9	14	6.1
Large/Small	16/41	0.9/3.0	2/12	1.8/10.1
Relative of perpetrator and victim				
Total	36	1.2	4	1.7
Large/Small	4/32	0.2/2.3	1/3	0.9/2.5
Victim's employer, coworker, business associate, adviser, etc.				
Total	27	0.9	10	4.3
Large/Small	16/11	0.9/0.8	7/3	6.3/2.5
Perpetrator's employer, coworker, business associate, adviser, etc.				
Total	19	0.6	8	3.5
Large/Small	17/2	1.0/0.1	6/2	5.4/1.7
Perpetrator				
Total	19	0.6	10	4.3
Large/Small	1/18	0.1/1.3	1/9	0.9/7.6
Relative of perpetrator but not victim				
Total	5	0.2	3	1.3
Large/Small	2/3	0.1/0.2	2/1	1.8/0.8
Domestic violence experts ^d				
Victim's advocate ^e				
Total	67	2.2	7	3.0
Large/Small	60/7	3.6/0.5	6/1	5.4/0.8
Medical professional (psychiatrist, psychologist, therapist, doctor, trauma specialist, etc.)				
Total	4	0.1	2	0.9
Large/Small	4/0	0.2/0.0	2/0	1.8/0.0
Domestic violence survivor				
Total	4	0.1	1	0.4
Large/Small	4/0	0.2/0.0	1/0	0.9/0.0
Women's group/policy				
Total	3	0.1	2	0.9
Large/Small	3/0	0.2/0.0	2/0	1.8/0.0
Generic domestic violence experts ("many in the domestic violence field," "some domestic violence experts")				
Total	2	0.1	2	0.9
Large/Small	2/0	0.1/0.0	2/0	1.8/0.0

TABLE 3 Continued

Source	<i>Unit^a</i> (<i>Large Case</i> , n = 1,688; <i>Small Case</i> , n = 1,365)		<i>Article^b</i> (<i>Large Case</i> n = 111; <i>Small Case</i> , n = 119)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Miscellaneous				
News accounts				
Total	17	0.6	10	4.3
Large/Small	7/10	0.4/0.7	6/4	5.4/3.4
Anonymous source				
Total	6	0.2	4	1.7
Large/Small	2/4	0.1/0.3	1/3	0.9/2.5
Other				
Total	129	4.2	40	17.4
Large/Small	101/28	6.0/2.1	28/12	25.2/10.1
More than one source used ^f				
Total	20	0.7	14	6.1
Large/Small	6/14	0.4/1.0	4/10	3.6/8.4

NOTE: Figures do not total 100% due to rounding error.

a. If a unit contained factual, unattributed information plus information attributed to a source, it was coded for the source. Units that included two or more sources were placed in the more-than-one-source-used category unless (a) one or more of the sources were domestic violence experts or (b) all of the sources were official sources. In the first case, the unit was coded for the appropriate domestic violence category. In the second, it was coded multiple official sources.

b. Article percentages total more than 100% because each article and case can contain multiple sources.

c. Multiple official sources includes units in which more than one source was used and all were official sources.

d. No units used batterers' treatment personnel as sources, so this category was omitted from the table.

e. Victim's advocates includes units in which more than one source was used and at least one source was a victim's advocate.

f. More than one source used does not include units in which at least one of the sources was a domestic violence expert and units in which all sources were official sources.

Such experts appeared in only 11 articles: 10 large-case articles and 1 small-case article (Table 1).

Frame Analysis

Certain frames appeared to misrepresent the broader social problem of domestic violence, providing commonsense solutions to complex problems.

These were the police frame, a frame indicating that the people involved were somehow different, a frame that blamed the victim and/or excused the perpetrator, and a frame that perpetrators/abusers were not "normal" and should be easily identifiable.

The police frame adhered to the "just the facts" approach. It described how the homicide played out (who, what, where, when, and how) with no speculation about the nature of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim and no indication that the killing or its attempt was part of a larger problem between those involved or in society in general (why). The police frame did not indicate domestic violence as a family situation that needed intervention but rather as a legal situation that was already under control. As a result, the domestic violence fatality was not presented as the culmination of events but as an isolated incident to which the police responded. Two- and three-paragraph stories that only used police and doctors as sources reinforced ideas of the competence and authority of police and emergency services while failing to suggest any of the complexity or history of domestic violence.

Journalists also portrayed those involved as different. This frame indicated that domestic violence only happens to certain types of people. Both the perpetrators and victims were usually represented as being from different cultures, either ethnically or provincially, and from a low social class. Their criminal pasts and/or involvement with drugs and alcohol were highlighted, implying that those involved in domestic violence situations were already "troublemakers." For example, 1 article indicated that of the perpetrator and victim, "Neither was a stranger to crime. Celsa was convicted of manslaughter in 1978 for the death of their 2-year-old daughter, and Manuel was convicted for his involvement. Manuel was also a heroin dealer" (Johnson, 1998).

In addition, quiet, nonsocial couples and individuals were set apart from those more neighborly or social. This helped characterize such people as likely to be involved in domestic abuse. One article used quotes from neighbors who saw one couple as "weird" because "these people never talked to each other" (Broberg, 1998).

An interesting related frame implied that perpetrators should be easily identifiable. Many articles expressed surprise that a perpetrator seemed normal, despite literature that supports this phenomenon. In 1 story, a neighbor indicated surprise that the perpetrator of a murder-suicide could also be such a "well-rounded, upbeat person" (Westfall, 1998), and in another, people were shocked because the perpetrator was a "clean-cut, very nice guy" (Castro, 1998b, p. B2).

Instead, articles sought to characterize the perpetrator as deviant and thus presented the notion that domestic violence radiates from a certain type of person. For example, one headline read, "Murderer accused of being deceitful, nasty" (Harvey, 1998). In another case, the daughter of one victim and perpetrator reacting to media attention stated that the perpetrator is "not this monster like everyone portrays him" (Coffidis, 1998).

Another frame blamed the victim or excused the perpetrator for what had happened. Some articles framed in this manner seemed to indicate that women maintained and almost sought out relationships with abusers. For example, in one article, a victim's ex-sister-in-law noted that "Ronnie had a habit of getting with men that abused her" (Castro, 1998a, p. C7).

This frame provided perpetrators with excuses as well. This was most evident in cases of self-defense. In these articles, the perpetrator was represented as defending himself or herself against what was already an abusive situation perpetuated by the victim. Also by highlighting mental or physical illness in their characterizations of the perpetrators, journalists gave reasons for the murders of intimate partners. One case discussed the perpetrator's Gulf War illness, which shifted focus from what he did to an excuse for why he did it (Castro, 1998b; Costigan, 1998; Ellig, 1998). Cases in which the victim or perpetrator was abusing drugs or alcohol implicated the substance abuse as a possible motivation or excuse in addition to characterizing the drug or alcohol abuser as different.

In the three larger cases, some of the same frames reemerged; however, much of the reporting was handled differently. As coverage continued over time, the journalists moved away from the initial incident reports and developed the story more fully in news, news-feature, and feature articles. This is consistent with Chermak's (1995) discussion of what he called *primary stories*, those placed in the best sections of the newspaper and given more leeway in terms of space. As he explained, it takes time for a crime to work its way through the criminal justice system. Thus, crime stories are ongoing, and a story, especially a primary one, may be recycled as the case progresses. In addition, he said, a primary story may spawn related articles.

One of the large cases retold the story of a woman murdered while trying to get out of a domestic violence relationship (e.g., Barker, 1998; Ho, 1998; Tibbets, 1998). In this case, the system, not the victim, was blamed. By explaining the steps the victim took to get out of the abusive situation and by examining the system in place to protect her, the articles showed domestic violence as a larger societal problem. Still, in their characterizations of the victim and the perpetrator, journalists set up a classic story of good versus evil. The articles seemed to remove human characteristics from both parties

and construct their story as a morality tale rather than as a slice of life. For example, the victim was characterized as a “vibrant young woman who did everything right” (e.g., Ho, 1998; Tibbets, 1998). A neighbor even stated, “I met her walking the dog and she was just lovely” (Ho, 1998). The perpetrator, on the other hand, was a man with a “criminal history and a violent past,” a “tyrant” who “lived and breathed her fear” (Santana & Barker, 1998).

Another large case blamed both the perpetrator and the victim for the failure of the marriage, which ultimately ended in homicide. In the process, the articles uncovered aspects of their lives that might distance them from a normal reader. One article noted, “According to King County Superior Court documents, she [the victim] is alleged to have met men through a chat room. And prosecutors allege that Durall [the perpetrator] met women in a similar manner” (Bartley, 1998, p. A8). That they were both involved in Internet affairs made them seem sneaky, perverted, and removed from more accepted social outlets. The perpetrator even went so far as to use the Internet to research how to murder his wife. Beyond this, no aspects of their relationship were explained except that they were getting a divorce; the reasons why were never explored. Domestic violence and its patterns were not acknowledged although controlling and jealous behavior by the perpetrator was often mentioned in passing.

The largest case introduced the idea that domestic violence only happens in certain places. In this coverage, the community was painted as serene and rural, a place where neighbors knew each other and where these things almost never happen. One resident remarked, “This would be normal for California, but not here” (Church, 1998).

Another frame indicated that the crime only happens to certain people. These articles took the stance that these people were normal; it *should not* have happened to them. The perpetrator was a successful doctor, the victim was a philanthropist and devoted mother, and together they were popular in their community. However, because of the perpetrator’s position at the local hospital (a factor that helped make the story newsworthy; see Chermak, 1995), the articles developed a frame that he mattered most to that community. Articles included quotes such as the following: “‘I am personally shocked by these events,’ Stegbauer said. ‘My understanding is he is well regarded by his peers. This is definitely a tragedy’” (Kelly, 1998).

Rather than deal with the perpetrator and the victim as a couple, the journalists focused more on the perpetrator. Articles detailed his mental condition before and after the crime, mentioned his status as a doctor frequently, and even used his title to identify the victim. For example, the headline of the article quoted above simply read “Doctor’s Wife Slain” (Kelly, 1998).

Because of these portrayals and because the crime was framed as an isolated incident with no details about the relationship prior to the murder, that the perpetrator snapped was viewed as the ultimate tragedy.

DISCUSSION

In general, the coverage leaves audience members to make the connection between the case and domestic violence, abuse, or trauma. In addition, the coverage fails to provide readers with the vocabulary with which to discuss domestic violence.

For a variety of reasons (including the reliance on unattributed factual information and official sources, use of the police frame, omission of information on the victim and perpetrator's history together, and lack of information on psychological abuse), much of the coverage gives no sense of the victim's experience. This presents a grossly distorted picture of domestic violence, potentially portraying the case as one that can be equated with homicide in general.

Some of the coverage framed the victim and/or perpetrator as different, blamed the victim, or excused the perpetrator. This, too, raises questions about the adequacy of the portrayal of domestic violence fatalities.

With the exception of one large case, the coverage tended to portray the incidents as lone murders rather than as part of a larger social problem. This calls to mind the contention of some feminists that positioning domestic violence in terms of individual and family pathology rather than in terms of social structures and socially sanctioned gender roles blames women and helps relieve society of the obligation to act.

Consistent with the literature, we found that the newspapers relied heavily on official sources of information and often used a police frame. This tends to dehumanize the crime by omitting information from people who knew the victim and perpetrator and by emphasizing things such as the what, where, when, and how of the crime. Also, it places the case within the context of law enforcement rather than the context of domestic violence as a social problem, potentially portraying the situation as one that the police will take care of or that is under control.

Our results lend support to Meyers's (1997) idea that news coverage maintains gender myths and stereotypes. For example, coverage that blames the victim sometimes seems to imply that good girls avoid problems and bad girls get what they deserve. Also, as the feminist literature suggests, by presenting a domestic violence fatality as just another homicide and ignoring the

victim and perpetrator's history and the social context, the coverage sidesteps the issues of male control, manipulation, and abuse of women.

The results raise questions about how readers respond to coverage of domestic violence fatalities. It appears that the coverage has the potential to insulate readers from the idea of domestic violence, allowing them to conclude that it could not happen to them and that there is no need to discuss it or take action. Whether readers respond in this way remains for future study.

Few articles in the group of 230 portray domestic violence as a social problem that can affect every reader. However, a handful help prove that domestic violence fatalities can be more accurately portrayed within the boundaries of current journalistic norms and practices. For example, some articles illustrate domestic violence as a social problem by tying in other domestic violence cases, quoting domestic violence experts, discussing the work of domestic violence-related agencies, or including domestic violence hot line numbers. Some carefully describe the victim and perpetrator's history of physical and psychological abuse. Some put a human face on the crime through family members, friends, and others who knew the victim and perpetrator.

Clearly, newspapers have the potential to more accurately reflect the reality of domestic violence, and our results point to some ways that might be accomplished. However, we built the study on the assumption that all or most domestic violence deaths included the patterns of physical and psychological abuse described in the literature. It is possible that these patterns do not apply in some cases, that the perpetrator really just snapped with no warning. In such cases, the current coverage may more accurately portray the crime.

Our study is also limited by its dealing with cases and coverage from only 1 year in one state. In addition, it includes only coverage up through the arraignment, leaving future research to analyze postarraignment coverage.

As Sherizen (1978) suggested, media serve as sense makers to the world. This casts a sobering light on our findings that at least some newspaper coverage yields an incomplete, potentially misleading picture of domestic violence fatalities. However, it appears that a more accurate reflection of the reality of domestic violence as a social problem is possible within current journalistic norms and practices. Within those norms, journalists could include information and choose sources and words that place a domestic violence incident within the broader social context and more accurately portray the victim's experience.

APPENDIX
List of Washington State Newspapers That
Included Domestic Violence Fatality Coverage

Battleground Reflector
Bellingham Herald
The Chronicle (Centralia)
Columbia Basin Herald (Moses Lake)
The Columbian (Vancouver, Washington)
Daily Record (Ellensburg)
Daily World (Aberdeen)
Eastside Journal (Bellevue)
The Evergreen (Pullman)
Grant County Journal (Ephrata)
The Herald (Everett)
The Island's Sounder (Eastsound)
The Issaquah Press
The Journal of the San Juan Islands (Friday Harbor)
Millcreek View
The News Tribune (Tacoma)
News-Standard (Coulee City)
Nisqually Valley News (Yelm)
Northwest Asian Weekly (Seattle)
The Olympian (Olympia)
Peninsula Daily News (Port Angeles)
Peninsula Gateway (Gig Harbor)
Pierce County Herald (Puyallup)
Port Townsend Leader
Renton Reporter
Seattle Post-Intelligencer
Seattle Post-Intelligencer/Times combined Sunday edition
The Seattle Times
Seattle Weekly
The Sequim Gazette
Shelton-Mason County Journal
South County Journal (Kent)
South Pierce County Dispatch (Eatonville)
The Spokesman-Review (Spokane)
Stanwood/Camano News
The Sun (Bremerton)
The Tribune (Deer Park)
Tri-City Herald (Kennewick)
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
The Wenatchee World

NOTES

1. Work by Maxwell, Huxford, Borum, and Hornik (2000) found that articles focused primarily on domestic violence tended to cover specific incidents, often placed blame and solutions with individual victims and perpetrators, and tended not to offer broader solutions. However, when the researchers included articles in which domestic violence was secondary, they found that a higher percentage of the articles were socially focused rather than incident focused.

2. The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence hired a clipping service to save all domestic violence fatality-related articles from all Washington State newspapers. The coalition made this file of almost 2 years of coverage available for analysis. To keep the study manageable, we used coverage from 1 calendar year.

3. The clipping service did not include the newspaper's name on 1 article, so the newspaper was coded unknown. This category was not counted among the 40 newspapers.

4. A suicide that is a victim's response to and means of escape from an abusive relationship fits this criterion. However, we found no such cases.

5. A lead was defined as the opening of the article through the paragraph in which the journalist stated the point of the piece. With news articles, the lead was often the first paragraph; with feature articles, the lead sometimes ran several paragraphs. Brief pieces that reported domestic violence statistics sometimes included no formal lead and were coded accordingly.

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