**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 per- ceived to be a social issue. Women were certainly experiencing abuse at the hands of vio- lent 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 move- ment” convinced the public to recognize the condition of “wife abuse” as a social problem and women subjected to this condition as “battered women” (Loseke, 1992). Conse- quently, 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 expe- riences 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 gath- ered 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 impor- tant 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 per- ceives 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 litera- ture, 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, vio- lence, 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 pro- posed 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, specifi- cally. 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 vio- lence 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 homi- cide 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 vio- lence fatalities) appearing during 1998 in Washington state. Their focus was directed towards assessing newspaper portrayals of domestic violence, its victims, and how accu- rately 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 misrepre- sent 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 repre- senting 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 femi- cide 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 enforce- ment 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 pro- viding 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 domes- tic 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 con- vey 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 refer- ence 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, expla- nations and solutions to crime offered by law enforcement are frequently accepted as ade-quate 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 iso- lated 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 neigh- bors 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 sexual- ized and promotes traditional representations of females or gender stereotypes. Meyers (1997) notes that it is imperative that journalists utilize language that avoids victim blam- ing 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 vio- lence, 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 compre- hensively 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 oftendetails 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 solu- tions (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 excus- ing 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 rou- tine event. For example, according to Meyers (1997), many journalists view domestic vio- lence 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 bat- tered, 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 inci- dent 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 recogni- tion 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 com- monly 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 compo- nents 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 femi- cide 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 domes- tic 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 femi- cide 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 homi- cides 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 newspa- per. 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%) repre- sents 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 *Altas.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-kill- ings” (*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 intro- ducing 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 examin- ing 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 fol- low. We note here that if an article was found to demonstrate more than one frame, each frame was coded.