Abstract

The news media play a substantial role in shaping societys 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 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 of women, particularly by male partners, was condoned socially (and even legitimized by the absence of spousal and rape laws) as an acceptable way for husbands to discipline their wives. It was not until the 1970s that claimsmaking activities by members of the battered womens movement convinced the public to recognize the condition of wife as a social problem and women subjected to this condition as battered women (Loseke, 1992). Consequently, womens experiences with relationship 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 medias substantial role in shaping societys 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 medias representation of femicide and the medias 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 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 19701978. 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 19701975 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 womens 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 as more than isolated occurrences, as a collective social problem (Tierney, 1982).

Contemporary studies conducted in the vein of Tierneys (1982) investigation of the news medias 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 pairs 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 victim of male violence and male victim 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 victim, 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 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.

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 classor 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 onetime occurrence. Articles utilizing the third frame do not treat the intimate partner homicide as the culmination of abuse,4 but rather as happening outoftheblue (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 perpetrators 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 medias 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 framesthe sources used, language and word choice, and the context of the incidentin 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