



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

1-1-2009

Family violence reporting: supporting the vulnerable or re-enforcing their vulnerability?

V. Lee Thomas

PACT Community Support, Australia

R. Green

University of Ballarat

Recommended Citation

Thomas, V. Lee and Green, R., Family violence reporting: supporting the vulnerable or re-enforcing their vulnerability?, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 19, 2009, 55-70.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss19/7>

Family violence reporting: supporting the vulnerable or re-enforcing their vulnerability?

Vicki Lee Thomas

PACT Community Support, Australia

Rosemary Green

University of Ballarat, Australia

Abstract

Reporting of family violence in the media is often done in ways that either sensationalise or, alternatively, minimise and trivialise the issue. This article reports on the collection and analysis of reports concerning family violence from five Australian newspapers over a 15-week period. The research found that reporting varied significantly depending on the ethnicity, gender, age, status and/or religious affiliation of those involved. The analysis uses codes of ethics for reporting as a framework to discuss current examples of reporting about family violence cases and issues in Victoria, Australia. The research identifies opportunities for increasing community understanding of family violence and for supporting those affected through effective and ethical reporting.

Introduction

Family violence is the greatest cause of murder of women and children in Australia and is a key risk factor for a range of physical and mental health problems (VicHealth, 2004). Family violence contributes to homelessness and poverty. It impacts on women's ability to participate in the workforce. It has serious effects on children's relationships, their mental health, and educational attainment, and is the most significant predictor for young people becoming violent in future relationships. In addition to the personal costs of family violence, it is estimated that the annual cost of domestic violence (2002-03) was \$8.1 billion (Access Economics, 2004: 63).

Family violence occurs when one family member, in a past or present relationship, uses violent or coercive and intimidating behaviour to control or dominate another. It includes not only physical injury, but a range of other actions. In Australia it has been defined as

the repeated use of violent, threatening, coercive or controlling behaviour by an individual against a family member(s), or someone with whom they have, or have had, an intimate relationship. Violent behaviour includes not only physical assaults but an array of power and control tactics used along a continuum in concert with one another, including direct or indirect threats, sexual assault, emotional and psychological torment, economic control, property damage, social isolation and behaviour which cause a person to live in fear (Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence, 2005: 11).

In the vast majority of cases that are reported, family violence is perpetrated by men against women and children. Some forms of family violence, such as physical and sexual assault, constitute criminal offences. Other types of family violence may or may not be considered criminal by the legal system depending on the jurisdiction. Women who have been victims of psychological, emotional, economic, social and other 'non-physical' forms of abuse report that these forms of violence are long-lasting and often the most damaging (Hegarty et al, 2000).

The media plays a powerful and important role in influencing community perceptions and understanding of social issues, including family violence.

Press representations of the issues surrounding domestic violence must hence be acknowledged as an influential part of an ongoing cycle, and individual journalists and editors be seen as both products of, and participants in the very society they seek to inform (Evans, 2001a: 147).

The media both reflects *and* shapes public opinion and is, therefore, vitally important as an ally for those committed to addressing family violence. Newspaper articles about violence provide the public with a way of thinking about violence: "*what* to think about, and *how* to think about it – two functions which can have a critical impact on public health practice and policy" (Taylor & Sorenson, 2002: 121).

Reporting of family violence can articulate its causes as well as possible solutions. It can be educative and insightful. The media work to various agendas however: stories must be considered newsworthy and appeal to the readership. Notwithstanding this, journalists have changed the way governments and the community see particular

issues. They have influenced public policy and government intervention (Taylor & Sorenson, 2002), and fulfilled an important role in providing education about social issues. Grabosky & Wilson (1989) have argued, for example, that the media, by highlighting a particular crime, can ensure it becomes a major public issue.

Lack of reporting allows family violence to remain hidden and can reinforce the control and domination of those who perpetrate such abuse by further isolating their targets as well as by supporting the notion that incidents of family violence are private and rare. Where reporting does occur, there are often concerns about how the family violence is reported.

Australian research has found that newspaper reporting often reinforces myths and stereotypes about family violence (Evans, 2001b). Similar findings have been reported in other Western countries such as the USA (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Carll, 2003). Poor reporting can further isolate and punish women and children experiencing family violence (Anastasio & Costa, 2004). In many parts of Asia, as well as in the West, abuse of women in the home is still seen as fundamentally a private matter with governments supporting direct service provision to help the women, but being far more cautious about engaging in processes that bring these 'private issues' into the public domain (Lambert & Pickering, 2000).

It has been argued that newspaper coverage can reinforce the vulnerability of the victims of such violence, and sometimes re-victimise them. An American study found that the way some journalists reported on these issues and events subtly reduced the empathy for victims, reinforced stereotypes and engendered blame for female victims of family abuse (Anastasio & Costa, 2004).

Despite the fact that intimate partner violence is the most common form of assault in Australia, there is limited media coverage of family violence except in cases concerning high-profile individuals, or those where events are 'sensational'. What can journalists do to improve the reporting of family violence? The research reported in this paper stems from an ongoing project, "Family Violence in the News", conducted in Victoria, Australia, beginning in 2004. This project worked on several levels: with journalists, with women who had experienced family violence, and with staff from key organisations in the family violence system (including support services, police and health professionals). One of the outcomes was a media toolkit to help both journalists and services to understand the key issues of reporting (Thomas, 2005). More recently, an analysis into newspaper reporting of family violence in Victoria, Australia, was undertaken. This paper reports on the findings of that analysis, highlights some problematic areas, and provides a discussion of ways in which reporting could be improved to prevent those experiencing family violence being made more vulnerable through newspaper reporting.

Developing the collection of newspaper reports

This project was based within a critical theory framework, and used content analysis to review newspaper reports related to family violence. Content analysis is a method of research that enables the discourse, including the symbolic content of words or images, to be systematically quantified and analysed (Monette et al, 1994). A critical

theory approach enabled the discourse to be considered in terms of power, values and ideology.

Newspaper reports were collected for fifteen weeks from five newspapers. One is a national paper (*The Australian*), two were metropolitan newspapers (*The Age* and *The Herald Sun*) and two were regional newspapers drawn from Victoria (*The Courier*, Ballarat and *The Latrobe Valley Express*, Traralgon) The collection period was 18 August through 1 December, 2006.

Reports were identified as relevant on the basis of their reference to actions constituting family violence in the text consistent with the definition of family violence.

Reports that could not be clearly identified as family violence because relationships between those concerned were unclear, or there were doubts as to whether the actions reported constituted family violence, were excluded. Very high-profile cases also were excluded because of their potential to skew the data about general reporting of family violence due to sensational reporting or the celebrity status of those involved. There were a small number of reports identified as relevant to the study but which lacked enough detail to be included in the analysis.

Two specific categories of reports of family violence were identified for use in this research. These categories are newspaper reports of family violence that are non-case specific and those that are case-specific. Similar categories were previously used by Evans (2001a) in a study of family violence reporting in three metropolitan newspapers in 1998. The non-case specific articles are of a general nature and are termed 'general-information' for the purposes of this research. Each of these two categories was broken into sub-categories or characteristics by carefully analysing content within the text.

The primary focus of the reports, the numbers of reports concerning child versus adult victims of family violence, and a small number of other demographic characteristics were considered. Additionally, the case-specific-reports analysis included measurement of types of violence reported, sources of stories, and the gender of those reported as having experienced family violence.

Two sets of guidelines were identified against which to gauge ethical standards of reporting of family violence: the Australian Media, Arts and Entertainment Alliance's (Australian Media Alliance) (1999) *Journalist Code of Ethics* and the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma's (Dart Center) (2008) *Quick Tips: Covering Domestic Violence*. The Australian Media Alliance's *Journalist Code of Ethics* (1999) applies to all reporting and there are no specific references within them to family violence reporting. The Dart Center is a global network of journalists, journalism educators and health professionals dedicated to improving media coverage of trauma, conflict and tragedy and offers specific advice to support reporting of family violence.

The appropriateness of using the Dart Center (2008) standards were confirmed during a consultation process with two groups of women who had experienced family violence and The Statewide Project Reference Group that included representatives from peak family violence sector organisations and the media industry.

Reports about Family Violence

Of the reports collected, 126 were non-specific or 'general-information' reports and 211 concerned specific cases of family violence. Table 1 identifies the topic of reports and the newspaper for the 126 general-information reports. These reports include promotion of events such as White Ribbon Day: the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (13 reports) as well as stories covering targeted services, government policy, legal processes and issues that are prominent in specific ethnic communities. They identified family violence as a problematic phenomenon and used accurate, sometimes graphic, language to emphasize the horrors associated with such violence. The most reported phenomena was child abuse (36) followed by adult family violence (21) and family violence in specific communities (Aboriginal 14, and Specific Ethnic Groups 11).

Table 1. General-information Reports Relating to Family Violence – categorized according to the primary focus of report

	<i>Age</i>	<i>Australian</i>	<i>Courier</i>	<i>Express</i>	<i>Herald Sun</i>	<i>Total Reports</i>
Child Abuse	2	23	1	0	10	36
Family Violence (adult)	9	0	4	3	5	21
Aboriginal	6	6	2	0	0	14
Specific Ethnic Groups (non-aboriginal)	3	8	0	0	0	11*
High-profile Individuals	2	0	1	0	1	4
Demographics at Risk**	0	1	0	1	1	3
Justice System	1	2	1	0	6	10
Spanking (children)	1	1	4	0	3	9
White Ribbon Day	3	1	1	1	7	13
Miscellaneous	1	1	0	0	3	5
Total	28	43	14	5	36	126

* Eight of eleven about women of the Muslim faith.

** Aged, homeless, people with gambling addiction

Nearly two-thirds of the general-information reports were specifically about family violence, and the remainder mentioned family violence in connection with other discussions (e.g. culture-specific gender issues, gambling).

Just over two-thirds of the general-information reports included comment on government (and/or instruments of government, e.g. courts, child protection services) responsibilities regarding family violence. More than four out of five reports that related to family abuse of children explicitly questioned the responsibility of government. In contrast, only half of the reports about adult family violence suggested

that government or its instruments had responsibility for preventing or responding to the violence. The newspaper reports were more likely to suggest government responsibility if discussion of adult family violence occurred in the context of broader issues, especially where the problems of specific ethnic groups were discussed.

The thirteen reports of White Ribbon Day offered various levels of understanding of family violence and/or advice to those who are living with family violence. Statistical information about the extent of the problem, referring to a range of reports and surveys, was usually given. Only three of these reports gave contact details for where to seek help if you are exposed to family violence, although six of the reports provided the White Ribbon Day website address. Whilst the White Ribbon Day website is an excellent source of information about family violence, there is no indication in the newspaper reference that contact information for help services is available via the website.

Of the 61 reports that were not child(ren)-specific, a significant proportion (25 reports) placed family violence squarely within a particular culture, with Aboriginals and people of Muslim faith receiving the most attention.

Child abuse was the single most reported topic (36). The vast majority of these stories argued for improvements to responsible government departments' performance, and/or an increase in government resources to address the problems.

The Australian was particularly vocal in advocating for the safety of children.

Headline: "Fatal child abuse calls for action" (C. Jackman, *The Australian*, 1 September 2006: 16).

Abusive parents have no right to keep their kids ... Horrific stories of babies and toddlers dying cruel deaths are increasingly common, prompting this urgent question: how many innocent children have to die before governments act to redress a situation no society should tolerate? (*The Weekend Australian, Opinion*, 2-3 September 2006: 16).

Many of the stories cited the findings of current research and inquiries into the performance of child-protection agencies and the justice system and provided evidence to support a case for Government reform.

Case-Specific Reports

There were 211 reports concerning 111 specific cases of family violence reported in the main as *news*. Of the 211 reports, 193 related to specific cases, while 17 mentioned family violence as a subsidiary issue to other matters. Table 2 provides a compilation of the details within these reports. Most originated from the criminal justice system (190) and related to 95 specific cases. A significant proportion of the reports were related to homicides or deaths (adult female: 62; adult male: 15 and children: 33). Many related to specific cultures or places and once again Aboriginals and people of Muslim faith featured highly.

Table 2: Details of Family-Violence-Specific Reports / Cases

	Reports	Cases
Originating from the criminal justices system	190	95
Stories identifying people as members of a specific culture or place:		
Indigenous	8	6
People of the Muslim faith	11	2
Other (includes Vietnamese, specific religions, homosexual, “criminal”, “bikie”)	10	9
Overseas stories (various)	40	28
Child(ren) victims of family violence*	74	45
Adult victims of family violence*	122	58
Homicide/death of adult female	62	21
Homicide/death of adult male	15	8
Homicide/death of child(ren)	33	18
Sexual assault of adult female	8	2
Sexual assault of adult male	1	1
Sexual assault of child(ren)	18	12
Assault of adult female	5	5
Assault of adult male	3	3
Assault of child(ren)	6	4
Other** abuse of adult female	16	13
Other** abuse of adult male	6	3
Other*** abuse of child(ren)	21	11

* Three reports concerned both adult and child victims.

** This category is interesting because stories describe types of family violence that are not widely recognised as such, for example property damage, financial abuse, foiled plots to assault or murder partners/ex-partners and deliberate infection with HIV virus.

*** Commonly neglect.

‘Briefs’

Reports of family violence regularly appeared as one-off case reports in the ‘Briefs’, ‘Weird World’, ‘Odd Spot’ and other short reports in the study collection. There were 53 such reports concerning 43 cases collected in this study. Of these, 23 reports occurred only as brief reports with no follow up. Nearly one-third of the brief reports, and over 40% of the cases reported in them, concerned ‘non-Australian-mainstream’ people. This included Indigenous Australians, people with specific ethnic or religious backgrounds (especially Muslims), and people living in other countries, as well as Australians who were labelled “bikie”, “criminal”, and “homosexual”.

Ethics and the Reporting of Family Violence

The Australian Media Alliance's (1999) *Journalist Code of Ethics* states:

Respect for truth and the public's right to information are fundamental principles of journalism. Journalists search, disclose, record, question, entertain, comment and remember. They inform citizens and animate democracy. They scrutinize power, but also exercise it, and should be responsible and accountable. (Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 1999, website).

The complex issues surrounding family violence are poorly understood in our communities. The Alliance's *Code of Ethics* (1999) clearly is relevant to increasing public understanding of this serious and widespread problem. However, some of the reports in the collection reinforced myths and inaccuracies by suggesting that those who experienced the violence were somehow responsible for it. In addition, some reports implied that the violence was justified in some way; blaming the violence on cultural norms or domestic 'problems'; and suggesting that the violence came without warning rather than in keeping with a history of violent and controlling behaviours.

The Dart Center's *Quick Tips: Covering Domestic Violence*, reproduced below, provide a more specific framework against which to consider ethical issues around reporting about family violence and are used to present the findings of the analysis:

- Use accurate language: Rape or assault is not "sex" — even when the attacker is the victim's spouse.
- Avoid language that suggests the victim is somehow to blame for the crime.
- Avoid undue focus on the socio-economic status or ethnicity of the victim or perpetrator: domestic violence is a public health problem that crosses all lines of race, class, and culture.
- Domestic violence is, in general, poorly understood by the public and under-reported by mainstream media. Take the opportunity to inform your readers with statistics and context.
- It may take time to build trust with victims and family members. Explain the type of story you're planning to write. Show old clips of stories you're proud of.
- Consider letting victims read portions of your story before publication. After reading — and seeing evidence of your intentions — they may decide to share more of their story with you.
- When describing the assault, try to strike a balance when deciding how much graphic detail to include. Too much can be gratuitous; too little can weaken the victim's case.
- Include information that can help others avoid assault.
- Provide contact information for agencies that assist survivors and families.

(The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, 2008, website).

Accurate Language

The language, with few exceptions, used in this collection of newspaper reports was accurate in describing the violence that had taken place. However, there was widespread use of the term *domestic dispute*, not only implying equal power between those involved, but also giving the impression that the violence perpetrated was of a private nature. This terminology minimises the violence and suggests that assaults and murders that occur within family settings are somehow different from those that occur elsewhere and/or are exempt from community responsibility. This impression is in strong contrast to overwhelming evidence that family violence is a significant community, health and economic problem in Australia.

The following is from a story about a man who murdered his girlfriend, dismembered and cooked parts of her body and then committed suicide.

“We can’t find any motive other than it was a domestic thing between him and her,” Cannatella said” (P. Hellard, Herald Sun, 20 October 2006: 39).

This quote, from a policeman, is a poorly chosen one and highlights the breadth of work needed to improve community understanding of, and responses to, family violence.

Victim-blaming

There were a small number of reports that explicitly suggested that the victim of family violence was somehow to blame for the violence. More commonly, reports tended to explain circumstances that preceded incidents of (adult) family violence, suggesting that the violence constituted justifiable behaviour given these circumstances and could therefore be excused. Examples include relationship breakdown, jealousy, a partner wanting to divorce, child-custody disputes and financial interests. Without exception, these explanations should not be framed as an excuse for the use of violence. Many of the reports contain examples of family violence that took place during pregnancy and following separation of the partners. These are well known as high-risk situations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996). Such situations associated with high risk of violence could serve as opportunities to promote education and provide warnings and advice related to preventative action in these highly volatile circumstances.

Reports collected for this study continue to exhibit previously documented gender bias in terms of the language used, information sources and respective portrayal of males and females. For example:

Headline (brief): “Partner in court”.

“A man accused of shooting and stabbing his teenage lover before dumping her body in a lake has appeared in court” (Herald Sun, *Brief*, 7 November 2006: 201).

Headline: “Widow on bail over kill count”.

“A woman accused of murdering her new husband the day after he changed his \$1 million will, leaving everything to her, has been freed on bail” (E. Hunt, Herald Sun, 17 November 2006: 17).

In the opening lines of the above reports, readers learn that a male having been accused of killing his partner had appeared in court; a woman had been accused, freed on bail *and* had a motive for killing her husband. The differing use of language in the headlines also has impact -- readers learn that a man is “in court”; a woman “on bail over kill count”. This is gendered reporting. Other examples of bias in reporting, including court reporting, can be seen in the following quotes:

Headline: “Couple aided in dealer’s death”.

“A woman accused of murdering her millionaire partner over money showered a couple with expensive gifts to enlist their help in the crime, a court heard yesterday” (K. Laphorne, Herald Sun, 9 November 2006: 15).

Headline: “Sex pics wife’s idea”

“A senior Adelaide pathologist accused of raping his wife 13 times while she lay stupefied on sleeping drugs claims his wife “stage-managed” the sexual encounters and directed him to take digital pictures” (J. Roberts, The Australian, 29 August 2006: 103).

In the above court reports, the case against the woman leads with a statement by the prosecution; the case against the male, a statement by the defense who blames the victim and provides an explanation for the events. Stories drawn from court reports often sourced information from the defense when the accused was male; the prosecution when the accused was female. Reports variously portrayed women as scheming, ‘bad’, vindictive, or even responsible for their own abuse. Explanations of situations surrounding family violence incidents tended to support the notion that men’s violent behaviour towards an adult female partner was justified under the circumstances.

Focus on Socio-economic Status / Ethnicity

Specific ethnic groups, especially Indigenous Australians and people of the Muslim faith and cases from overseas, received a disproportional amount of attention, with the effect of blaming specific cultures and minimising the perception of the problem of family violence in mainstream Australian society. Examples include:

“The majority of prisoners in the Northern Territory, we all know, are Aboriginal men, and the majority of them are in jail for violence, and the majority of them are in jail for violence upon their spouses” (A. Wilson & A. McGarry, The Australian, 22 September 2006: 4).

“By turning a blind eye to beatings, intimidation, genital mutilation, forced marriages, domestic slavery and honour killings, feminists and so-called progressives are letting down Muslim sisters” (J. Albrechtsen, The Australian, *Opinion*, 6 September 2006: 12).

The high media profile of family violence associated with specific groups of people both apportion blame and suggests that the problems associated with family violence are concentrated somewhere other than in 'mainstream' Australian communities. This is not the case. Family violence crosses all lines of race, class, age, sexuality and culture. Whilst it is recognised that there are certain characteristics and/or demographics that are more frequently associated with family violence, the particular characteristic or demographic does not define the underlying cause of the violence. For example, elderly and young women are at relatively higher risk of family violence than those in their middle years, but family violence is rarely presented as endemic to youth or old age as it is in relation to ethnicity. There is a strong relationship between those individuals and groups who lack power in a more general sense and those at higher risk of experiencing family violence.

Increased Understanding

The reports that were categorised as 'general-information' often included statistics, and expert and first-hand sources to support the reporting. The 'case-specific' reports failed overwhelmingly to relate individual cases of family violence to the widespread problem of family violence in our communities.

It is well documented that women are most likely to be assaulted (or, indeed, killed) by someone they know. It is not useful to suggest the threat of 'stranger danger' in structuring reports about family violence, as in the following example.

Headline: "Mother in bin 'shot or knifed'"

"Homicide detectives are investigating the possibility that a mother of two who was found stuffed in a suburban rubbish bin was either stabbed in the head with a metal implement or shot at close range." (P. Anderson, Herald Sun, 21 October 2006: 11).

It is not until the next to last sentence in this report that readers learn that the woman's husband has been charged with her murder.

Detail

According to our consultation process with women who had experienced violence, and peak bodies, reporting is required that is accurate in terms of language used and events that took place, with enough detail to reach an informed understanding of what had occurred. Thought-provoking reporting was valued and 'humanising' the stories with some detail to describe the people concerned as well as how they felt about what had occurred was considered to be important. Reports varied in the amount of detail and its presentation, with some being dehumanising, particularly with regard to the victim.

Information to Help Others Avoid Assault

Overall, the reports offered little in terms of helping others to avoid or prevent family violence. General-information reports provided some limited information. Opportunities to explore the many warning signs that were evident in the reports and well-understood by family violence experts were consistently missed. These included property damage, abuse of family pets, intimidation, financial control, emotional abuse, limiting of partner's social contacts, intense jealousy, harassment, and history of violence.

“A Delacombe man who threw napalm at his ex-partner's home after harassing her with nuisance calls was spared an immediate jail term yesterday” (Courier, *Brief*, 21 September 2006: 149).

“She said she did not want to tell police because she didn't want to get involved and feared retribution... she also kept information secret from the police because she was scared of Mr Unumadu” (E. Hunt, Herald Sun, 17 October 2006: 15).

None of the case-specific reports related individual experiences of family violence to the broader societal issue but presented it as a private matter. They did not include statistical or expert information to support an understanding of the magnitude of the problem. These omissions have the effect of isolating those experiencing family violence and frustrating help-seeking behaviour.

Contact Information

Contact numbers for relevant support agencies were not included in any of the case-specific reports and were only provided in a few of the general-information reports.

Other

The reports classified as 'Briefs' in this research were frequently presented as humorous and/or bizarre. Over half of the 'brief' (only) reports fell into this category – all of which concerned incidents outside of Australia. For example:

Headline: “It's you or the chook”.

“Eugene, Oregon: A woman shot her husband after he killed her pet chicken. Police told the local newspaper, the Register-Guard, they were sure Mary Gray, 58, intended to shoot her husband, Stephen Gray, 43. They weren't certain if the husband meant to fire at the chicken. The couple had apparently been drinking all day” (Australian, *Weird World*, 11 September 2006: 13).

Other brief reports manage to provide an excuse for the perpetration of family violence in the few sentences that constitute the entire 'report'. Examples include a killing, a bashing and a stabbing that occurred 'because' the perpetrator was “a jilted boyfriend”, “suspected she [his wife] was having an affair”, and “had consumed 72

ales” and “smoked cannabis”, respectively. The first two of these examples provide victim-blaming excuses.

In our consultation process, participants stated that it was very important not to trivialise or minimise a victim’s experience. Such ‘humorous’ reporting negates the seriousness of these events, and their impact on victims, their families and friends.

Conclusion

In analysing the reports, there are some characteristics associated with differences in how family violence was portrayed. These include the age of the victim (child or adult), and the gender, ethnicity and/or religious beliefs of those involved. There were very considerable differences in reporting relating to the age of the victim. In the case of family violence against children, reports espoused revulsion of the violence and were quick to call for a response from government and the justice system. Reporters sourced information from a range of expert sources to support their stories and argue their case, thus portraying the violence as a matter of dire public concern. This concurs with current community attitudes to child abuse.

Whilst violence against children is abhorred by the community, adult family violence is perceived and reported as a ‘domestic’ problem, that is, a series of isolated and personal incidents, suggesting that family violence is rare. In some reporting, victims were blamed, and excuses provided for perpetrators. Rarely was there mention of any community and government responsibility regarding prevention or support for those experiencing family violence.

Many examples of gender bias in reporting were identified. This bias reflects and supports the unequal distribution of power between men and women, and the adherence to rigidly-defined gender roles that underlie the gendered patterns of family violence.

Specific ethnic groups, especially Indigenous Australians and Muslims, and cases from overseas, received a disproportional amount of attention, with the effect of blaming specific cultures and minimising the perception of the problem of family violence in mainstream Australian society. Reports aimed at exposing the nature and extent of the problem in Australian Indigenous communities included questioning the responsibility of government and courts. The main difference between these reports and those concerning children was the focus on Indigenous culture as the cause of the problem. This also was common in reporting about family violence in other ethnic or religious groups, especially people of the Muslim faith. In addition to labelling members of ethnic and/or religious groups, identifiers that placed people outside of mainstream Australian culture were often used in reports, for example “criminal”, or ‘bikie”, with the effect of providing distance from mainstream Australian culture.

Opportunities to explore and explain known risk factors and warning signs were missed; and contact information for those experiencing family violence was normally not provided. Occasionally, reports were not clear about the relationship between parties involved in a violent crime, supporting a fear of ‘stranger danger’ in contrast to the prevalence of relationship violence.

The reports classified as 'general-information' for this study were most likely to provide context and understanding about family violence. While the general-information reports often suggested community and government responsibility for preventing and responding to family violence, the majority did not provide information about relevant support services. Opportunities to provide education about family violence and its broader implications were frequently missed.

The primary source of reports about specific cases of family violence was the criminal justice system, including court proceedings, with the majority related to homicides/deaths – the result of family violence going unchecked until a worst-case scenario is reached. It is disconcerting that readers' understanding of family violence is so frequently focused on such cases, rather than on the pervasive symptoms that precede family homicides. The collection of reports contained many well-known warning signs associated with family violence, for example excessive jealousy and accusations of unfaithfulness. These warning signs were not interpreted as such nor linked more generally to the widespread problem of family violence. Reporters consistently missed opportunities to increase readers' awareness of dangerous behaviours and situations. Instead, a significant feature of reporting is the provision of explanations as to why the violence was perpetrated. Such emphasis on mitigating circumstances works to minimise the perpetrator's accountability for their violent actions.

While the higher-profile stories included contextual background to explain the final outcome, the majority of case-specific reports described isolated events – private tragedies – rather than reporting such events as symptomatic of a significant and wide-ranging problem. The choice of sources, usually traditional criminal justice system players rather than family violence experts, results in poor understanding of the context of family-violence crimes and frustrates community understanding.

A disturbing trend is the reporting of family violence as bizarre or even humorous, most often seen in the 'Briefs'. A large proportion of these reports concerned incidents that occurred overseas, again offering distance from Australian mainstream culture. The suggestion that there is something bizarre or humorous about family violence is inappropriate. Family violence should *not* be reported for the sake of entertainment under any circumstances.

Recommendations for future reporting

Reports in which family violence is a feature should aim to:

- Present family violence as the significant and serious community problem it is, rather than a collection of isolated and personal tragedies.
- Contextualise family violence stories with informed comment sourced from experts in the field.
- Include contact details of agencies that are able to provide support to those who are experiencing family violence.
- Ensure that ethical considerations are reflected in the reporting of family violence cases and issues. Consider use of the Dart Center's (2008) *Covering Domestic Violence: Quick Tips*, as ethical guidelines.

- NEVER present family violence stories as entertainment, e.g. bizarre or humorous.

Stakeholders in the family violence field should aim to:

- Ensure access to expert advice and comment to support media reporting of family violence that is in keeping with the practical operation of the media industry.

Journalists are able to influence the way these social issues are portrayed, and have a role in shaping public opinion, in education, and in the development of government policies. Improved family violence reporting is an excellent way to tackle this serious and endemic problem.

Vicki Lee Thomas is Senior Project Officer, PACT Community Support, vlt@pactcs.org.au

Associate Professor Rosemary Green is Head of School, Behavioural & Social Sciences & Humanities, University of Ballarat, r.green@ballarat.edu.au

References

- Access Economics (Australia) (2004). *The cost of domestic violence to the Australian economy: part I and part II*, Office of the Status of Women, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Anastasio, P.A. & Costa D.M. (2004). 'Twice hurt: How newspaper coverage may reduce empathy and engender blame for female victims of crime', *Sex Roles*, 51 (9/10) 535-542.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996). *Women's safety Australia*, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Carll, E.K. (2003). 'News portrayal of violence and women: Implications for public policy', *American Behavioral Scientist*. 46 (12) 1601-1610.
- Evans, I. (2001a). 'Desperate lovers and wanton women: press representations of domestic violence', *Hecate*, 27 (2) 147-173.
- Evans, I. (2001b). 'We live under a government of men and morning newspapers': Some findings in the representation of domestic violence in the press', *Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre, Newsletter*, Spring: 3-7.
- Grabosky, P. & Wilson, P. (1989). *Journalism and justice: How crime is reported*. Pluto press: Sydney.
- Hegarty, K., Hindmarsh, E. D. & Gilles M.T. (2000). 'Domestic violence in Australia: Definition, prevalence and the nature of presentation in clinical practice', *Medical Journal of Australia*. 173 (3) 363-367.
- Lambert, C. & Pickering S. (2000). 'Violence as another name. The use of human rights discourse by domestic violence and women's crisis centres in South East Asia', *Women Against Violence*, 8: 24-34.
- Mills, S. (1995). *Feminist Stylistics*, Routledge: London.
- Monette, D.R., Sullivan, T.J & DeJong, C.R. (1994). *Applied Social research: A tool for the human services*, Harcourt Brace College Publishers: Fort Worth.
- Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence (2005). '*Reforming the family violence system in Victoria*', Melbourne: Office of Women's Policy, Department for Victorian Communities.

- Taylor, C.A. & Sorenson, S.B. (2002). 'The nature of newspaper coverage of homicide. *Injury prevention*, 8: 121-127.
- The Australian Media, Arts and Entertainment Alliance. (1999). *Journalist Code of Ethics*. Retrieved 4 February 2008, from http://www.alliance.org.au/media_alliance_code_of_ethics.
- The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2008). *Quick Tips: Covering Domestic Violence*. Retrieved 4 February 2008 from http://www.dartcenter.org/quick_tips/domestic_violence.php.
- Thomas, V.L. (2005). *Family violence in the news: a media Toolkit*. Grampians Family Violence Prevention network, Ballarat.
- Thomas, V.L. (2008, unpublished). *Family violence in the news: Newspaper reporting*.
- VicHealth. 2004. *The health costs of violence: Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence*, VicHealth.