

WHEN LOVE TURNS LETHAL: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INTIMATE PARTNER  
HOMICIDE IN PRINT MEDIA

by:

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## **ABSTRACT**

The current study conducted a content analysis of newspaper articles in a Florida newspaper, the Orlando Sentinel. The study spanned across a five-year time period from 2004-2009, featuring 198 articles on domestic violence homicide. The current study is a replication of previous research conducted using the same newspaper during 1995-2000. Victim blame, tone, and descriptions of the perpetrator and victim were among several items of interest. Findings reveal a slight increase in victim blaming statements and a larger increase in positive portrayals of the victims of domestic violence homicide.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Violence is a significant problem in today's society. According to Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) approximately 1.9 million women and 3.2 million men are physically assaulted each year in the United States. One form of violence in particular, domestic violence, has been an issue gaining attention in the media over the last few decades (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Berns, 2004; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Consalvo, 1998; Myers, 1997; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). According to the Department of Justice, approximately 25% of women experience domestic violence in comparison to 8% of men in the United States (Laney & Siskin, 2003). Domestic violence has most commonly been referred to as a private family matter, not something for the public to be concerned with. However, in the last fifteen years following the enactment of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994, domestic violence has become accepted as a more serious social problem. Domestic violence can now be viewed as a social problem warranting public attention and intervention through various government funds as outlined in VAWA (Laney & Siskin, 2003). Society's perception of domestic violence is largely based on media portrayals of domestic violence in the news (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Berns, 2004; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Consalvo, 1998; Myers, 1997; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). Media outlets have the ability to create and shape what society knows and understands about domestic violence (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Berns, 2004; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Myers, 1997). As a result of the media's prominent position in society and their impact on how society

views certain issues, examining the media's portrayal of domestic violence can give some insight into how society views domestic violence.

Violence in society, especially homicide, is known for being newsworthy (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Myers, 1997; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). This also applies to domestic violence homicide, with the majority of research conducted in reference to media and domestic violence involving some type of homicide (Bullock, 2007, 2008; Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006; Taylor, 2008; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). One key finding of research related to media coverage of domestic violence is the use of victim blame (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Berns, 2004; Consalvo, 1998; Ferraro, 2006; Lamb, 1991; Myers, 1997; Taylor, 2008). Another key finding is failing to place the responsibility of the domestic violence on the perpetrator (Berns, 2004; Lamb, 1991; Myers, 1997; Naylor, 2001). A third finding is the effects of using various sources in stories involving domestic violence (Bullock, 2008; Park & Gordon, 2005; Taylor, 2008). A fourth key finding is the examination of the frame in which the media reports on domestic violence, which has been known to affect how society perceives domestic violence (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Berns, 2004; Bullock, 2007; Maxwell, Huxford, Borum, & Hornik, 2000; Myers, 1997; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002).

The current study is a content analysis of a large metropolitan newspaper in the Orlando Florida area and replicates previous research conducted by Taylor (2009). In Taylor's (2009) study, she examined media portrayals of domestic violence homicide from 1995 to 2000 using data from the Orlando Sentinel. The current study is an extension of her work looking at many of the same topics she researched, but using data from 2004-2009. The current study focuses on Central Florida including six different counties: Lake, Orange, Osceola, Polk, Seminole and



Volusia. Taylor's (2009) study reviewed media portrayals in the five years following a significant event in the field of domestic violence, the Violence Against Women Act of 1994. The current study reviews media portrayals approximately ten years after VAWA of 1994 and will be looking for any similarities or differences from what has been found in previous research. The timeframe is something unique to the current study because the issue of domestic violence gained much public attention and support in the nineties close to when Taylor's (2009) study was conducted and during the time of the OJ Simpson trial during 1994-1995, but this study focuses on domestic violence a decade after VAWA of 1994. Findings may reveal any progresses or hindrances occurring in the portrayal of domestic violence in the media since that influential occurrence of the passing the VAWA of 1994.

### Research Questions

This research addresses the following questions: 1) How does the media portray both the victim and the perpetrator of domestic violence homicides? 2) How do the sources used by reporters influence the frame and tone of domestic violence? 3) How often are popular domestic violence myths/stereotypes portrayed in the media? 4) Are there changes in the media portrayal of domestic femicide ten years post VAWA that were not evident five years post VAWA (i.e. Taylor's study)?

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### Literature Review

#### Media Coverage of Social Issues

“Most people who have no firsthand experience with social problems use the media as their main source of information.” (Berns, 2004, p. 36). The current study seeks to understand how the media is portraying domestic violence, as the media is often how individuals within society learn about social issues. Berns (2004) indicates that the media are not only a source of information in reference to social issues, but they have the ability to mold society’s experience with social problems. Berns (2004) indicates that television is the most popular media source for individuals to get their information from. She also indicates that magazines and newspapers are the second most popular media source (Berns, 2004). Berns (2004) claims that if you have not experienced domestic violence first hand your experience of domestic violence is born from what you read, see, and hear in reference to domestic violence. The current study examines newspaper coverage of domestic violence homicides as Berns (2004) indicates that people often believe that what you find in a newspaper is more credible than what is on television. In order to better understand the issue of domestic violence, as it relates to the current study, it is important to review previous media coverage of domestic violence.

#### Media Coverage of Domestic Violence

The way in which social issues, such as domestic violence, garner support from the societies in which they are occurring is for that society to be informed. Making them aware of

what the problem is and whom it is affecting. This leads those that were unaware to become aware and to be able to find sympathy for the victims that are suffering under their particular social issue (Best, 1999). This sympathy can translate into support for various programs designed to help fight the social issue (Best, 1999). There are two key elements that assist this cause, support for the victims and awareness of the underlying issues in domestic violence. There is especially a need to realize the magnitude of this problem in the most severe cases of domestic violence, those that result in murder. One study found it is indicated that most domestic violence incidents go unreported in the media (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003) but the incidents appearing in the news are the ones involving murder. This associates domestic violence homicide with general homicide and may be misleading because the underlying issues in general homicide and domestic violence homicide are different (McManus & Dorfman, 2003). Reporting on sensational cases involving well-known celebrities, such as the OJ Simpson Trial also affects the way in which society views domestic violence (Maxwell et al, 2000). Further, some journalists report on the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence as those who are “different” from society, perpetuating the image that domestic violence is not something that “normal” people experience (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Consalvo, 1998). Researchers have found that compared to other types of violence, domestic violence is reported differently. For example, the Berkeley Media Studies Group (2003) found that domestic violence is not covered as often as other types of violence; in fact they found that other violence is covered eight times more frequently. In one of the most significant studies involving media and domestic violence, Meyers (1997) argues that news coverage of domestic violence femicide blaming the victims hinders the progress that women have made in society In addition media portrayals of the perpetrator are also problematic

as they do not hold the perpetrator accountable for his actions and often make excuses for his behavior. Meyers' (1997) findings of victim blame are consistent with other research studies (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Consalvo, 1998; Park & Gordon, 2005;).

Several problems can be found with the media reporting of domestic violence incidents. One of the most severe issues of reporting domestic violence murders is that many reporters blame the victim (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Consalvo, 1998; Park & Gordon, 2005). Another issue is that many reporters fail to place the responsibility of the violence on the perpetrator (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Consalvo, 1998; Lamb, 1991). Sometimes even when reporters place the blame of the murder on the perpetrator, they follow up by making excuses for his actions (Berns, 1999; Lamb, 1991; McMaus & Dorfman, 2003; Myers, 1997; Taylor, 2009). Terminology has been identified as another issue with media coverage of domestic violence. Some reporters fail to label the violence as domestic violence when covering a domestic violence murder (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Lamb, 1991; Ryan et al, 2006). While some believe that the label of domestic violence does not accurately reflect the violence that is occurring and would prefer the use of a signaling word to indicate that this violence is most often against women (Ferraro, 2006; Lamb, 1991). When the media reports on stories of violence against women, such as domestic violence, a specific frame is needed to show that this single incident is part of a much larger problem (Carll, 2003).

## Framing Domestic Violence as a Social Issue

Media portrayal of domestic violence can not only influence who society views as the victim or who they see as being responsible for the violence, but also if they see this problem as a serious social issue or a private family matter. In reference to the portrayal of domestic violence in the media, research has been found that indicates that the public still thinks of domestic violence as a private family matter (Berns, 1999). In recent years domestic violence has emerged as a social problem warranting public attention and intervention through various government funds as outlined in VAWA (Laney & Siskin, 2003). However, media portrayals are not always consistent. Berns' (1999) research, which reviewed articles from women's magazines, found that there was only one case that portrayed domestic violence as a social issue. Similarly, Taylor and Sorenson (2002) who conducted a study of newspaper coverage of homicide, found that only 1 of 33 articles on domestic violence homicide addressed domestic violence as a social issue. They also found that articles on domestic violence were less likely to provide background details of major underlying issues of domestic violence (Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). More common, is a media portrayal of domestic violence as an individual issue rather than a social problem. By framing domestic violence in such a way, there is no argument for societal intervention.

If domestic violence were viewed as an individual issue, rather than a social problem, the general public may think that it cannot affect them because it is not their problem. Researchers have found many distinctions between domestic violence being viewed as an individual or public problem leading to the conclusion that if the public does not view the issue as their own then they are less likely to actively pursue resolution of the issue (Bullock, 2007; Consalvo, 1998).

Bullock (2007) found that the victim and perpetrator were described as being very different from the rest of society, which would indicate that the domestic violence is their individual problem and not society's. Consalvo (1998) also found that the way that the victim and perpetrator of domestic violence were portrayed, would lead you to believe that they are not "normal" and as such the violence is something with which the rest of "normal" society should not be concerned with. If a social issue is to be viewed as legitimate, then there would need to be some media attention on legal changes that should occur within society to help fight this issue. Maxwell et al, (2000) found that there was an increase in the amount of legal and judicial efforts mentioned in domestic violence articles after the OJ Simpson Trial ended. This demonstrates that the media is beginning to view domestic violence as a serious social issue, one worthy of implementing laws towards the punishment and prevention of, domestic violence and as such is allocating more space reporting on its occurrence. This is not to say that the issue of domestic violence is wholly thought of as an issue for the private person, there are those that see the issue as a social one and see that if it is then it is in need of a social solution.

These other researchers have found that domestic violence murders are framed as social problems needing social intervention (Ryan et al. 2006). In Ryan and associates' (2006) study researchers worked to develop a handbook that would help journalists report domestic violence more effectively. They conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage prior to the publication of the handbook and after to see if there were differences. After the handbook was published more articles portrayed domestic violence as a serious social issue (Ryan et al. 2006). The results of this study suggest then that educating the media may be one mechanism for changing media portrayal of domestic violence. The reason for this education can be to help

influence the frame of domestic violence news. The frame of any story is very important to how society views and understands the social issue behind the story. In addition, the portrayal of the victims of social problems such as domestic violence, can also influence society's understanding of the issue. If a victim is portrayed as having caused the violence to occur, then society will not sympathize with the victim and support for this crucial issue can be lost.

### Blaming the Victim

One issue that has hampered the domestic violence cause is that some reporters place blame on the victims. For example, one Washington study reviewing coverage of domestic violence fatalities in newspapers concluded that some of the coverage blamed the victim (Bullock & Cubert, 2002). For example reporters described various things that the victim did that were inappropriate such as: use of drugs or alcohol, cheating on partner, or being too dependent on their partner (Bullock & Cubert, 2002). Other studies have analyzed the statements referring to both the victim and perpetrator in domestic violence murders. In one such study the authors found that reporters blamed the victim by indicating that the victim contributed to the violence by staying in the relationship in approximately 5% of the articles (McManus & Dorfman 2003). There were also other ways in which victim blame was identified in various statements in the media coverage. Some of the statements that were made in 1% to 6% of the articles included: mentioning the victim's revealing clothing, stating that the victim provoked the attack by physically attacking the perpetrator, and stating that the victim may have contributed to the violence by using alcohol or drugs (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003). Describing what the victims of domestic violence homicide did or didn't do doesn't change the fact that they are dead at the hands of someone else, and not just anyone else, at the hands of a loved one. However,

focusing on what the victims did or didn't do before their untimely deaths may take away from the real issue, domestic violence.

Raising awareness of domestic violence is one way to improve media coverage of domestic violence murders and other incidents. One study examined the difference in news coverage made by journalism students who attended a presentation on domestic violence compared to a group of journalism students that did not. The findings indicate that the students who received the information about domestic violence prior to writing about domestic violence used less victim blaming statements in their articles (Park & Gordon, 2005). One particular difference was that the statement in reference to why women stay with men who treat them badly, was used by 43% of the journalism students who did not attend the presentation and only 31% of the journalism students that attended the presentation (Park & Gordon 2005). One limitation of this research is that it used a convenience sample and it was conducted of entirely undergraduate journalism students and therefore cannot be generalized to a larger population. It can however provide insight in to the reporting of future journalists. In addition to media coverage that blames the victims of domestic violence, some coverage fails to place the responsibility of the violence on the abuser, which can be just as harmful to this issue.

#### Placing Responsibility on the Abuser or Making Excuses for the Abuser

It is important that society view the perpetrators of domestic violence as being responsible for their acts of violence. In her study of domestic violence media coverage, Lamb (1991) indicates that at least half of the statements made about the abuse refused to hold the abuser responsible for the violent acts he committed against his partner. In addition to not placing the blame on the perpetrator, some journalists make excuses for the perpetrator. Some of



these excuses include: referring to the perpetrators use of alcohol or drugs as a being at least partially responsible for the violence (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Myers, 1997; Taylor, 2009), referring to the perpetrator as a victim of some sort of childhood abuse (Lamb, 1991; Taylor, 2009), or indicating that the perpetrator was acting out for fear of losing their spouse or children (Lamb, 1991; Taylor, 2009). McManus and Dorfman (2003) found that in approximately 5% of articles the perpetrators use of alcohol or drugs was referred to and implied either explicitly or implicitly to be at least partially to blame for the domestic violence. This study also found that approximately 5% of articles referred to the perpetrators use of violence as acting out for fear of losing their spouse or children (McManus & Dorfman, 2003). Lamb (1991) indicates that one psychological explanation of why some reporters make excuses for the abusers is as a result of the theories that indicate that some abusers were once victims of abuse themselves. McNeil (1992) found that some perpetrators were portrayed as “tragic heroes” in her analysis of a series of 1986 domestic violence murder suicide articles. These men were seen as “tragic heroes” because although the relationships had ended, the love these men had for their wives was great and they just wanted to be with them and the only way they could make that happen was in death (McNeil, 1992). In another study where the researcher performed a content analysis of 111 articles only 4 articles placed the primary blame of the violence on the abuser (Berns 1999). Berns (1999) also found that a question asked often was “Why doesn’t she leave?” referring to the victim and Berns indicates that the question we should be asking is “Why does he hit her?” Berns (1999) indicates that the first question places too much responsibility on the victim to stop the violence. By placing the blame on the victim of the violence instead of the actual perpetrator it makes the issue seem less important than it is. The media’s use of victim blaming terminology

is yet another obstacle in the way of domestic violence being seen as the issue that it is.

Domestic violence terminology is another issue in media reporting of domestic violence.

### Domestic Violence and Terminology

It is not only the amount of reporting that is done on the issue but also the words that are used in the reporting. It is important that the proper terminology is being used in media coverage of domestic violence. If a domestic violence homicide occurred and it receives news coverage, then domestic violence or a similar term should be used to let society know what type of violence has just occurred. One researcher determined that media coverage of domestic violence does not provide the readers with the proper vocabulary to discuss domestic violence, referring to the frequent use of “domestic disturbance” as a term to describe domestic violence, one which minimizes the seriousness of the issue (Bullock & Cubert 2002). It was found in another study that over a specific period of time after the implementation of a handbook used to help reporters when reporting on domestic violence that there was an increase in the labeling of domestic violence occurrences as “domestic violence” (Ryan et al. 2006). Some researchers believe that using the term “domestic violence” does not accurately portray the majority of the victims of domestic violence, which are women, and they have argued that wife or woman battering would be a better term to use to discuss domestic violence (Lamb, 1991). Lamb (1991) indicates that using the term “battered women” or “battering men” would be a more effective way to accurately portray the majority of victims and perpetrators. Gender neutrality is also an issue with media portrayals of domestic violence (Ferraro, 2006; Taylor, 2009). Using a term such as “family violence” or “spouse abuse” implies that the violence is mutual and leaves a question of who the victim and perpetrator really are (Ferraro, 2006). Ferraro (2006) concurs with the

feminist theories that indicate that “violence against women” would be a more accurate use of terminology to describe the victims of domestic violence. Having a better understanding of who the victims and perpetrators are would lead to a better understanding of the entire issue.

### Domestic Violence and a High Profile Case

Media coverage of domestic violence can also be influenced by high profile cases of domestic violence, for example the OJ Simpson trial. In a study examining how the OJ Simpson trial shaped coverage of domestic violence, the key finding was that the murder case was associated with an increase in the frequency of domestic violence reporting, but the overall substance of the reporting did not increase (Maxwell et al. 2000). Other findings of this study indicated there was an upward trend of reports of domestic violence incidents that did not result in murder (Maxwell et al. 2000). Berns’ (1999) describes the OJ Simpson case as “overkill” where the media put out too many articles on the incident with too little learned. The subjectivity of the media indicates that there may be a reduced presence of domestic violence incidents that are not as sensational as murder. One thing that was made clear through Consalvo’s (1998) study and is supported by other studies, such as Maxwell and associates’ (2000), is that not all newspapers report on domestic violence the same way. In Maxwell and associates’ (2000) study there were three newspapers that were examined and only one of the three continued to cover domestic violence at the same rate after the trial as it did before the trial. That same newspaper also published more articles that were socially focused, meaning that they focused on explanations for domestic violence, consequences for the abuser, and discussion of legislative issues (Maxwell et al 2000). This study did have its limitations, for example the time frame it focused on was in conjunction with only one high profile case, there is a question of whether or

not the same results would be produced in similar cases. These findings indicate that domestic violence media coverage does change with more sensational homicides, especially those involving celebrities.

In recent years there have been at least two other incidents of high profile celebrities involved in domestic violence. The first incident occurred February 2009 and is that involving musical artists Chris Brown and Rihanna who were involved in a dating relationship when a violent incident took place with Chris Brown as the perpetrator. Although this incident did not involve homicide it gained much media attention and may have had some sort of impact on the way that domestic violence is portrayed in the media. During the media coverage of this story, graphic photos of Rihanna surfaced showing serious facial injuries she incurred from the night the incident took place. Eventually Chris Brown plead guilty to felony assault and received six months of community service and 5 years of probation (Associated Press, 2009). The second incident occurred December 2009 and involved actor Charlie Sheen and wife Brooke Mueller and portrays Charlie Sheen as the perpetrator. Sheen has pleaded not guilty to the domestic violence charge and has a trial date set for July 2010 (Itzkoff, 2010). Either of these incidents and any other domestic violence cases involving celebrities are sure to receive plenty of media attention and may influence the portrayal of other domestic violence incidents.

#### Limitations of Previous Research

In summary, media coverage of domestic violence influences the way in which society portrays domestic violence. There is evidence that reporters use statements in articles that blame the victim of domestic violence (Berkley Media Studies Group, 2003; Berns, 1999, 2004; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Lamb, 1990; McManus & Dorfman, 2003; Meyers, 1997; Taylor, 2009).

There is also evidence that reporters use statements that avoid placing the responsibility of the violence on the abuser or make excuses for the abuser's behavior (Berns, 1999, 2004; Lamb, 1991; McManus & Dorfman, 2003; Taylor, 2009). The frame within which domestic violence articles are written may either describe domestic violence as a private family matter (Berns, 1999) or a serious social issue needing intervention (Ryan et al. 2006). Not only is the frame in which the media portrays domestic violence of their choice but the language that they use when reporting on it is as well. It is important for media coverage to use accurate terminology of domestic violence incidents and most importantly domestic violence homicides (Berns, 2004; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Ferraro, 2006; Lamb, 1991; McManus & Dorfman, 2003; Taylor, 2009).

One of the limitations of the existing research is that some of the samples were convenience samples taken of journalism students therefore the results cannot be generalized to the public (Park & Gordon 2005). Another limitation of the research is that one study was conducted along with the publication of a handbook and it was in a very small state, which may mean that the results would be different if conducted in a larger state (Ryan et al. 2006). Another limitation of the literature is that some studies were conducted over short time periods such as one year and longer studies may have been more accurate (Bullock & Cubert 2002). The current study attempts to overcome this limitation by examining print media over a five-year period. The current study seeks to reinforce previous findings on domestic violence homicide, as well as add any new information on domestic violence homicide.

The current study examines articles written and published in the decade after the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994. This powerful act created attention in the

media and it necessary to see if any changes or progresses have been made to domestic violence reporting and if so, what are those changes and/or progresses. In the next section I will provide you with a brief history of the VAWA of 1994.

### Domestic Violence and the Violence Against Women Act

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed in 1994 as a result of domestic violence being noted as a serious social issue. According to Laney and Siskin (2003) domestic violence was first identified as a significant issue in the 1970's and in 1990 legislation, which included a federal response to the issue of domestic violence, was proposed. The funds proposed under this act would address the issue of domestic violence legal responses for perpetrators and education programs for both victims and society (Laney & Siskin, 2003). Various types of data have been collected under grants from VAWA for the purposes of researching definitions of violence against women and the extent of the issue of violence against women (Laney & Siskin, 2003). Updates to VAWA have been made periodically since it was first enacted. For example, in the 2000 VAWA new stalking offenses were included to address individuals who travel across state lines to stalk, harass, or threaten violence against an intimate partner (Laney & Siskin, 2003). The new stalking laws also addressed violence threatened against the family and/or friends of an intimate partner as a way of getting to the partner (Laney & Siskin, 2003). For this study it is important to understand the purpose of the original 1994 VAWA and to note that the time period for articles reviewed in the present study is approximately ten years after this historic act was enacted. What will this time frame show about the portrayal of domestic violence in print media approximately ten years after the VAWA of 1994?

In reviewing the literature there are two key theories that stand out as providing much of the framework for the research conducted about domestic violence and the media. These two theories are feminist theory and social construction theory. Both of which will be discussed in the next section.

### Theoretical Framework

Several researchers highlight the feminist theory as being a major part of the findings in reference to domestic violence in the media (Berns, 2004; Ferraro, 2006; Myers, 1997; Taylor, 2009). One of the key findings, victim blame, is very prominent in the media reports of domestic violence. Feminist theory would indicate that victim blame is an example of the patriarchal roots of society being reinforced through the reporting of violence against women (Ferraro, 2006; Myers, 1997). Feminist theory would also indicate that the blame reporters place on women victims of violence is another form of reinforcing the idea that women are the subordinate sex (Myers, 1997). According to feminist theories, gender-neutral language, another key finding of the literature, is another form of our patriarchal society asserting male dominance over female victims of violence (Ferraro, 2006). Victim blame and the use of gender neutral language in domestic violence homicide reporting are factors that hinder social growth and change from occurring for women's status in society (Berns, 2004; Ferraro, 2006; Myers, 1997; Taylor, 2009). When reporting on domestic violence shifts focus from victim blame to more fact based reports of who the victims and perpetrators are and focuses on the perpetrators' actions of violence this would be a positive change in reporting and a step towards change. In addition to the feminist theoretical framework that exists among the literature, social constructionist theories maybe a useful framework.

Social construction theories contend that knowledge, or what we know to be true, is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). What society reads and understands to be true of domestic violence can therefore, be socially constructed through the media, their words, portrayals of the victims, perpetrators, and the real problem of domestic violence (Berns, 2004; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). For example, the work Ryan and associates (2000) conducted showed how a local coalition against domestic violence could work with local journalists to help educate them on the issues of domestic violence which ultimately lead to better reporting of domestic violence. Through accurate reporting of information about domestic violence, what society's knows and understands about domestic violence can be viewed more accurately. After reviewing the literature and theories surrounding domestic violence hypotheses were formed.

### Hypotheses

The first hypothesis is that the term domestic violence will be used in most, but not all of the articles describing domestic violence murders. The second hypothesis is that domestic violence will be described in gender-neutral terms, therefore placing the blame equally on both parties. The third hypothesis is that less knowledgeable sources (i.e. friends, family and community members) will be cited more frequently than more knowledgeable sources (i.e. police and domestic violence advocates). The fourth hypothesis is that popular domestic violence myths and/or stereotypes will be portrayed more often than not in the articles. By popular myths and/or stereotypes, I mean various forms of victim blame, refusal to hold the perpetrator responsible for their actions, and the mentioning of drugs and/or alcohol by either the abuser or victim as a means of altering blame or responsibility.



## CHAPTER THREE: METHDOLOGY

### Data

The data collected for this study are a series of domestic violence homicide articles in the Orlando Sentinel a local newspaper that has been previously used for a content analysis. Articles were selected if they covered the topics of domestic violence homicides committed by and against women. Print media was used because it has been identified as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion (Berns, 2004). For the purposes of this study domestic violence, which encompasses child abuse, elder abuse, and intimate partner abuse, will only focus on violence between intimate partners. The search for articles was conducted online at the Orlando Sentinel website using their archived articles through a program called ProQuest Archiver. This is a paid service where you can choose to pay per individual article, pay for a 24 hour pass to download up to 5 articles, pay for a 30 day pass to download up to 75 articles, pay for a monthly on going pass, or pay for a year long pass. I chose to subscribe to the monthly pass. The Orlando Sentinel has a circulation of approximately 206,000 (Orlando Business Journal <http://orlando.bizjournals.com/orlando/stories/2009/04/27/daily26.html>). The articles were pulled for the time period of approximately five years from June 1, 2004 through June 1, 2009, which is also the time period of 10-15 years after VAWA.

### Methods

To search for the articles I used the key word table found in Taylor's (2009) study, which used data from the same metropolitan newspaper. In addition to using Taylor's (2009) table (see

table 1), this study is a replication of the study that she conducted. Similar methods from Taylor's (2009) study were employed such as: examining the data for evidence of victim blame, sources referenced in order to provide domestic violence context, positive and negative behaviors portrayed by either the victim or perpetrator. One difference between the current study and Taylor's (2009) study is that the current study only focused on domestic violence homicides that occurred in the central Florida area. Taylor found that both direct and indirect methods of victim blame are employed by reporters covering domestic violence homicide (2009). Some of the direct methods she found include: use of negative language to describe victim; discussing the victim's choice not to report previous incidents of violence; and describing the victims' actions with other men (Taylor, 2009). Some of the indirect methods she found include: sympathizing with perpetrators; emphasizing perpetrators mental, physical, emotional, and financial problems; emphasizing victims mental or physical problems; and using terms for domestic violence that assign equal blame to both parties (Taylor, 2009).

Table 1 Keyword Searches

Murder and wife	Murder and husband	Murder and girlfriend
Murder and boyfriend	Murder and spouse	Murder and intimate partner
Homicide and wife	Homicide and husband	Homicide and girlfriend
Homicide and boyfriend	Homicide and spouse	Homicide and intimate partner
Domestic homicide	Domestic murder	Intimate partner homicide
Intimate partner murder	Femicide	Wife and death
Husband and death	Girlfriend and death	Boyfriend and death
Spouse and death	Intimate partner and death	Wife and kill
Husband and kill	Girlfriend and kill	Boyfriend and kill
Spouse and kill	Intimate partner and kill	

Every article was pulled from the archive even when there were multiple articles on the same case. It was noted how many individual cases there were and how many individual articles

there were. The tone of each story was noted and whether or not domestic violence is described as a social issue warranting societal intervention. I looked for the use of the phrase domestic violence or intimate partner violence to describe the murder in each article. I made note of the use of gender-neutral terms to describe the violence. I recorded whom information is quoted or cited from and how frequently. This applies to information provided by friends, family, community members, police, and advocates in the articles. I examined whether or not statements were written which either implicitly or explicitly, blamed the victim, and the frequency of such statements. I also examined whether or not statements were written that placed the responsibility of the murder on the perpetrator, and the frequency of such statements. I examined whether or not statements were written that provided excuses for the perpetrator and indirectly blamed the victim, with a particular focus on the mentioning of drug or alcohol use by either the victim or the perpetrator. I used a coding sheet to note the items of interest and to ensure consistency of researched information. The following items were used for this study (others were reserved for future work):

1. Title of article
2. Sex of victim and perpetrator
3. County where homicide occurred
4. Negative and positive adjectives and behaviors of the victim
5. Negative and positive adjectives and behaviors of the perpetrator
6. History of domestic violence
7. Use of gender neutral terms and which terms
8. Sources referenced for quotes or information regarding incident
9. Tone of article

Each article was carefully analyzed for the items of interest and coded in the appropriate manner.

Sources were separated in seven different categories which are: police report, interview with police, DV advocate, victim's friends and family, perpetrator's friends and family, community

member, and other. Tone was categorized in one of five choices: factual, mostly factual/slightly narrative, combination of factual and narrative, narrative, and mostly narrative/slightly factual.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

There were 257 articles printed based upon the initial reading of the article abstract. The time frame was five years dating June 1, 2004 through June 1, 2009. Upon reading each article in its entirety, 59 articles were excluded. The majority (n=31) of the articles excluded were excluded on the basis of location (e.g. the incidents did not occur in one of the six counties being researched.) Nine articles were excluded because the domestic violence homicide was not intimate partner violence as the homicide was committed by some other member of the family (e.g. stepson.) Thirteen others were excluded because they involved a murder for hire plot, where the actual murderer and victim were not intimate partners, but the victim's intimate partner hired the murderer. The remaining six excluded articles were those involving attempted murder on an intimate partner and the death of someone who did not have an intimate relationship with the perpetrator and those in which a spouse killed himself and two kids, but did not kill his intimate partner. In total there were 198 articles included in this study with 95 separate incidents of domestic violence homicide.

The vast majority of homicides (85%) were male perpetrated against female victims (Table 2). Those that were female perpetrated against male victims represented only 15% of the sample. Approximately 26% of the incidents from this study were murder-suicide, and among those 96% were male perpetrated murder suicides against female victims.

Table 2 Frequencies

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257 articles printed from archive program
59 excluded during second read through
198 articles included in study
95 separate incidents of domestic violence homicide
85% (n=81) male perpetrated/female victim
15% (n=14) female perpetrated/male victim
26% (n=25) murder suicides incidents
96% (n=24) male perpetrated murder suicide
4% (n=1) female perpetrated murder suicide
5% (n=5) incidents involved multiple victims
52% (n=103) articles were multiples from a series on the same incident

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#### Central Florida Data

For the purposes of this study, the following counties define Central Florida: Lake, Orange, Osceola, Polk, Seminole, and Volusia. The definition of Central Florida is based on the geographic areas that the Orlando Sentinel indicates are part of its circulation area. Data for the numbers of domestic violence homicides are therefore drawn from the Central Florida counties as identified. The number of actual domestic violence homicides, defined as murder and manslaughter (Florida Department of Law Enforcement [http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/Content/FSAC/Data---Statistics-\(1\)/UCR-Domestic-Violence-Data/UCR-Domestic-Violence-Data.aspx](http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/Content/FSAC/Data---Statistics-(1)/UCR-Domestic-Violence-Data/UCR-Domestic-Violence-Data.aspx)) are illustrated in Table 3. The dates of the current study were June 1, 2004 through June 1, 2009, therefore 2004 and 2009 included incidents from approximately half of the year. The data from 2004 is an estimation of the actual statistics that occurred during the timeframe used in the study and reflects fifty percent of the actual reported statistics, rounded up to the nearest whole number. The data from 2009 are not included as they were not available at the time this paper was submitted.

Table 3 County Data

County	2004* DV Homicides	2005 DV Homicides	2006 DV Homicides	2007 DV Homicides	2008 DV Homicides	Total
Lake	1	3	1	1	3	9
Orange	5	17	15	16	16	69
Osceola	2	2	0	2	5	11
Polk	3	6	4	8	12	33
Seminole	7	2	5	12	3	29
Volusia	1	7	4	4	3	19
Total	19	37	29	43	42	170**

\* Represents a year in which only half of the year was included in the study, therefore number is actually cut in half and rounded up to nearest whole number. \*\* Total does not include 2009 data, as that was not available until April 2010.

Table 4 shows actual incidents, as reported by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, compared to incidents reported in the Orlando Sentinel in the present study. The total reflects that approximately half (56%) of all domestic violence homicides were reported in the media. It is important to note that some of the incidents that were reported on during the 2004-2009 timeframe may have occurred beforehand. Some incidents are reported on for years after the actual incident occurred due to various court proceedings.

Table 4 Incidents in Study and Actual Reported Incidents

Counties	Incidents in Study	*Actual Incidents	*Percentage of Incidents Reported
Lake	9	9	100%
Orange	37	69	54%
Osceola	7	11	64%
Polk	8	33	24%
Seminole	19	29	66%
Volusia	15	19	79%
Total	95	170	56%

\*2009 Data was not included in the number of actual incidents; expect percentages to be slightly less upon factoring in 2009 data.

#### Methods of Victim Blame

A total of 68 articles (34%) featured statements blaming the victim. Some of the direct methods used to blame the victim are: emphasis of choices the victim made which may have made her/him more susceptible to violence, emphasis of a history of domestic violence and victims' choices to take back perpetrator after previous violent incidents, and focus on the victim's actions instead of the perpetrator's actions. Two different incidents featured female victims under the age of 18 both still in high school. These incidents, in particular, were covered in the news articles with much emphasis on bad choices the victims made which may have led to their deaths. Some examples included: sneaking out to be with the perpetrator, lying about their relationship with the perpetrator to parents, and participating in a sexual relationship as a



teenager with an older man. One example of victim blaming choices emphasized by reporters was meeting with the perpetrator. Whether the victim chose to meet with the perpetrator at her/his house or in a public place, this choice was highlighted in many of the articles in which the victim sought out the perpetrator and not the other way around.

The victim's history of domestic violence was often mentioned in articles. Some articles emphasized how the victim and perpetrator's relationship had ended in the past only for the victim to take back the perpetrator or to go back to the perpetrator. In one incident involving an attorney who was killed by her ex-boyfriend, three of the four articles in this series mentioned how she had repeatedly kicked out and taken back the perpetrator prior to her death. For example one article on this incident quoted a friend as saying "Anderson and Conley had a troubled, on-and-off again relationship for years" (Jacobson, 2008, p. B2). Another article on the same incident begins with "Theresa 'Teri' Anderson, a Seminole County lawyer, was through with longtime boyfriend Andrew Conley, according to friends and family. He wouldn't get a job and wouldn't help around the house, so after nearly a decade she ordered him out. That happened more than once, most recently in September. Within days, though, he told her he'd been beaten and robbed and begged her to take him back. She said yes." (Stutzman, 2008a, p. B1). Another article on the same incident states "The couple had lived together for nearly a decade. Anderson ordered him out, but then relented and allowed him to return about two weeks before the shooting." (Stutzman, 2008b, p. B3). Another article featured the victim's father as corroborating the fact that there was a history of domestic violence between the victim and perpetrator and quoted the father as saying "I don't know why she put up with him." (Jacobson, 2007, p. A1).

Examples of focusing on the victim's actions instead of the perpetrators, which is used to blame the victim are illustrated in the very beginning of many articles, the title. Such as "Slayings of 2 students in Oviedo followed break up" (Pacheo & Prieto, 2007) and "Lawyer sheltered ex-beau charged with killing her" (Stutzman, 2008a). Right off the bat the first article indicates that these two deaths are the result of a break up and later the author states this in reference to the victim (Barwick) "Friends who knew the victims and suspect said all three were friends until Barwick decided to leave Allred." (Pacheo & Prieto, 2007, p. A1). In the second article the victim's actions are the center of the article because she was letting the perpetrator live with her although they had broken up and she kicked him out, something that happened on more than one occasion. Later on in this article it is discussed how the victim met the perpetrator while she was helping him avoid child support payments and that she employed an ex convict to work in her home. These articles focused much more on the actions of the victim and not the perpetrator, leaving the reader with a negative perception of the victim's.

Some examples of indirect methods of victim blame found throughout these articles include: making excuses for the perpetrator, describing the perpetrator with positive language, and emphasizing the victim's emotional and/or physical problems. Emphasizing the perpetrators drug and/or alcohol use is one example of ways in which the articles made excuses for the perpetrator. A total of 24 (12%) articles made reference to the perpetrators drug and/or alcohol use. One article quoted a neighbor as saying this about a perpetrator "Colon, drank a lot-particularly after the death of his father this year" (Jacobson, 2004, p. B7). This statement emphasizes the perpetrator's alcohol problem and also mentions the death of his father, leading readers to sympathize with the perpetrator and also providing the perpetrator with drinking as an

excuse for what contributed to killing the victim. In another article the victim's father said this in reference to the perpetrator "Clayton was drunk that weekend and had threatened to kill them all." (Mariano, 2009b, p. B1). This article also provides the perpetrator with drinking as an excuse for making violent threats. Other excuses made for perpetrators were that victims didn't let them have contact with their kids or that victims left perpetrators, which hurt them so much, it contributed to the killings.

Using positive language to describe the perpetrator also occurred frequently (36%) throughout this study. Some positive attributes of perpetrators included: great neighbor, intelligent, angel, sweet, loving husband, friendly, and good father. In one particular eight-article series on a police officer who murdered his wife, another police officer and the police officer's wife, the perpetrator was described in an especially positive manner. The Eustis Police Chief stated "I've watched him mature and was impressed with his performance" (Hudak, Lundy, Sargent, 2006, p. A1). His ex-wife and mother of his children stated "The Mike I know was not a violent person," she said "He's a good man, a good police officer, and good father. He's not a monster." (Lundy and Hudak, 2008, p. A1). In another incident involving a man who killed both his son and wife in an especially gruesome manner, using a samurai sword, he was also described in an especially positive manner. For example one article states that the perpetrator "recognized his son's interest and made sure to get involved" (Hunt, Taylor, and Mathers, 2006, p. A1). The same article quotes his son's teacher as saying "I really felt the love he had for his son." (Hunt et al, 2006, p. A1). The article concludes with a quote from a teenage boy who had seen the perpetrator with his son at the community pool as saying that the perpetrator "seemed like one of those dads who wants their son to be a good man" (Hunt et al, 2006, p. A1). This

article placed great emphasis on the character of the perpetrator as a good dad, which takes away from the main focus, murder. Describing the perpetrator as a good, nice, and/or decent person shifts the focus of the crime, murder, to what kind of person the perpetrator is or was, and by portraying the perpetrator as someone so “good” readers may shift their negative feelings about the murder to the victim, especially if the victim is not described in a positive manner.

Emphasizing the victim’s emotional and/or physical problems is an indirect method of blaming the victim (Myers, 1997). Mentioning the victim’s drug and/or alcohol use is one example of this. A total of 11 articles (6%) mentioned the victim’s drug and/or alcohol use. One article described the perpetrator as attempting to stop the victim from using drugs by taking the drugs from the victim, flushing them down the toilet, while holding the victim’s head underneath bath water to prevent her from taking them back from the perpetrator. The article later confirms the perpetrator’s story by stating that cocaine was found in her system. Emphasizing the victim’s suicidal thoughts is another example of this. This is something that was noted in articles that were perceived as “mercy killings” in which the victim wants to die, often because the victim is elderly and ill, and the spouse kills the victim, in an attempt to end the suffering of him or her. One example of this was in a three-article series on an 82 year old man who shot his wife, who had cancer. “By all testimony in court, the June 5 shooting was the act of a depressed man who loved and doted on his wife.” (Lelis, 2009, p. B1) The article describes how he killed her while she slept because he wanted to end her pain. It makes it sound as if the death was pleasant, as a result of no evidence of previous violence or of any violence immediately preceding the killing, and was what the victim wanted.

### History of Domestic Violence

A history of domestic violence was mentioned in 43 (22%) articles. Some articles specifically state that there was a history of domestic violence; usually this was coming from a police spokesperson or the police. Other articles describe past violent incidents between the victim and perpetrator and are often described by the victim's family, friends, or coworkers. In 28 (14%) of the articles, there is discussion on how there is or has been an injunction on file between the victim and perpetrator. There were 16 articles (8%) that mentioned there was an injunction in place at the time of the homicide, but the perpetrator violated that injunction. For example, one article describes the victim's actions to end the relationship with the perpetrator by stating "She had moved out in July or August and obtained a restraining order." (Stutzman, 2005, p. B1). Another example shows how more than one injunction was on record between the victim and perpetrator as the victim's father stated "She had a domestic-violence injunction against him at one time and was seeking another" (Jacobson, 2007, p. A1). There were also a few articles that mentioned the perpetrator had an injunction against them from a previous relationship. For example, one article describes how the perpetrator, Benbow, is the victim's former boyfriend and while it doesn't mention that the victim has ever had an injunction against the perpetrator it does state "His wife had obtained a domestic-violence injunction against Benbow in 2000," (Jacobson, 2006, B3).

### Use of Gender Neutral Terms

Very few articles (n=7(3.5%)) used statements or terms that were gender neutral. Articles that did feature statements that were gender neutral used terms such as: family dispute and mutual combat. One article where the perpetrator brutally beat his girlfriend to death referred to

the couple as having a “stormy relationship” (Colarossi, 2005). Describing the relationship as stormy does not give an accurate portrayal of a domestic violence relationship and assigns equal blame to both parties for the state of the relationship. Another article began by stating “A combative relationship ended in deadly violence”, the article later describes that her boyfriend strangled the victim only a few weeks after he finished a sentence for an earlier incident of violence (Mariano, 2009a, p. B3). In another example a judge states, “There may have been mutual combat involved.” when discussing a case involving the murder of 62 year old woman by her 82 year old husband (Hudak, 2007, p. J7). Overall, the use of gender-neutral terms was lower than expected. This can be viewed as one progress made in the portrayal of domestic violence in the media.

#### Descriptions of Perpetrators and Victims

Among the 198 articles included in the study, 63 (32%) articles described the victim positively. Good neighbor, good friend, good person, good parent, hardworking, nice, tidy, warm, loving, bubbly, friendly, college student, beautiful, happy and selfless are a several examples of positive descriptions of the victim. These descriptions were most often provided by the victims’ family, friends, coworkers and occasionally neighbors. However, 81 (41%) articles described the victims negatively. For those victims that were high school or college student age, many teenagers, information such as: sneaking out, lying to parents, illegal drinking, having sex, and teenage pregnancy were mentioned when referring to these victims negatively. Some other examples of negative language and/or behaviors attributed to the victims are that the victim: hit the perpetrator, used drugs, drank alcohol, refused to leave perpetrator, had multiple failed marriages, depressed, suicidal, possibly cheating, didn’t work, hired convicts, lived in a hotel and

may be an abuser themselves. Emphasizing that a victim wanted a divorce or filed for divorce is another example of negative information that was in the articles about the victims. For example in this article's first paragraph it is stated this in reference to the victim, "She told her husband she wanted a divorce and that he had to move out." (Lundy and Hudak, 2006, p. A1). 18 (9%) articles featured information in reference to the victim's relationship with other men. For example this article stated that the perpetrator was "Charged with murdering his wife because he suspected she was cheating on him." (Stutzman, 2009, p. C3). In another example the Eustis police chief of an officer who killed his wife and two others stated this in reference to the perpetrator " He always questioned her commitment to the marriage" (Lundy and Hudak, 2006, p. A1). Many articles featured both positive and negative descriptions of the both the victim and perpetrator.

More articles described the perpetrator in a positive manner than the victim. There were 72 (36%) articles which described the perpetrator in a positive manner. Likewise, more articles were found that described the perpetrator in a negative manner (n=132(67%)) in comparison to those that described the victim negatively. Intelligent, angel, sweet, sweetheart, loving husband, sweet woman (there were a total of 14 female perpetrators), friendly, honest, gentle, doting husband, ideal neighbor, good education, suave, church member, devoted, good parent, nice, kind, served in the military, and good officer are several examples of positive descriptions of the perpetrators often provided by the perpetrator's family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. Mentioning a perpetrators arrest/criminal/police record was also a negative behavior attributed to them. Lying to the police, killing the victim in front of children, previous domestic violence and/or injunctions against them, and drug/alcohol use are additional examples of negative

behaviors attributed to the perpetrator. A few more examples of negative attributes of the perpetrator are: not showing emotion during a trial, jealous, suicidal, unfaithful, out of work, controlling, mentally ill, homeless, secluded, low intelligence, stoic, and fled or hid from cops.

### Tone of Article

In analyzing the tone (see Table 5) of an article I created five different categories of tone: factual, mostly factual/slightly narrative, combination of factual and narrative, mostly narrative/slightly factual, and narrative. Articles categorized as factual, were those in which the article only contained a few facts about the case and no quotes or narrative accounts from anyone other than the police. In this study 48 articles (24%) were categorized as having a factual tone. Most of the articles categorized as having a factual tone were very brief in nature. For example, one article about an incident where a boyfriend set his teenage girlfriend on fire was only nine sentences long and the only sources were the police report and the Sergeant providing a brief summary of what occurred. Another example of an article categorized as factual was one that was four sentences long and describes the perpetrators guilty plea, the judges sentence and a brief summary of the murder.

Articles categorized as mostly factual; slightly narrative, were those which contained 1-2 quotes, or narrative accounts per page, about the homicide, perpetrator, or victim by someone other than the police. By page, I am referring to a printer page not a newspaper page. One example of an article with a mostly factual; slightly narrative tone is an article about a man who was accused of having killed his estranged wife while she waited in the car to meet him to pick up their two kids. In this article only witness accounts of the shooting are mentioned and police investigators narrate the rest of the article. More articles were in this category of tone than any



other. There were a total of 74 articles (37%) categorized as mostly factual; slightly narrative in this study.

Articles categorized as a combination of factual and narrative, were those which contained 3-4 quotes, or narrative accounts per page, about the homicide, perpetrator, or victim by someone other than the police. There were a total of 45 articles (23%) that were categorized as having a combination of narrative and factual tone. An example of an article in this category is one in which a wife shot her husband. There are three different quotes from a neighbor in this page long article, in addition to a summary of events from the police. The first quote is the neighbor indicating that the victim and perpetrator were having marital problems because the perpetrator believed the victim was cheating. The second quote is what the perpetrator said when she knocked on her neighbor's door for help after the shooting. The third quote is the neighbor indicating how shocked she was by this incident.

Articles categorized as narrative, were those in which the article contained little or no information from police and were accounts of events by the victim or perpetrator's family, friends, and others. This category represented the smallest proportion of articles, with only four (2%) articles falling into this category. One example of an article that fell into this category is an article about a woman killed by her husband who then committed suicide. Mostly the mothers of the victim and perpetrator, both of whom were called by their corresponding son or daughter just before the killing, narrate the article. The only information from police in this article is to verify that the homicide was in fact a murder suicide. Other quotes or comments are from other family members of the victim and a neighbor.

Articles categorized as mostly narrative; slightly factual, were those, which contained five or more quotes, or narrative accounts per page, about the homicide, perpetrator, or victim by someone other than the police. There were 27 articles (14%), which fell into this category. An example of an article in this category is a series of five articles on a man who killed not only his wife, but also his niece before committing suicide. In the second article in this series, it is discovered that as a boy the perpetrator killed his pregnant mother. There are a total of nine quotes and narrative accounts of the current homicides, the previous homicide, and information on both of the victims and perpetrator in this page and a half long article.

Table 5 Tone of Articles

Category	Number of Articles	Percentage
Factual	48	24%
Mostly Factual Slightly Narrative	74	37%
Combination of Factual & Narrative	45	23%
Mostly Narrative Slightly Factual	27	14%
Narrative	4	2%
Total	198	100%

#### Sources

For the purposes of this study, information cited and/or quoted in articles was divided into seven categories of sources: police report, interview with police, interview with domestic violence advocate, interview with family and/or friends of the victim, interview with family and/or friends of the perpetrator, community members, and other. Articles including information

from police records, police documents, police affidavits, arrest reports, and sheriff's records were all categorized as police report data. A summary of the homicide is most of the information that was cited or quoted from police report data. Other information found in police reports was evidence of the homicide, charges against the perpetrator, what witnesses saw, crime scene details, and the type of homicide for example murder-suicide. For example one article states "Sheriff's records show that Barwick (the victim), 19, first called deputies at 11:30 a.m. Monday alleging that Allred (the perpetrator) had tapped into her Bank of America account and withdrawn money without her permission." (Pacheco, 2007, p. A1). Another article describes evidence found stating "The arrest report said investigators found blood on the back seat of Balzourt's (the perpetrator) 2007 Ford Edge." (Edwards, 2007, p. B6). A total of 35 articles (18%) featured information from a police report.

Included in the category of interview with police was information quoted and/or cited from detectives, police spokespersons, sheriffs, investigators, and jail officials. Once again most of the information was a summary of events leading to the homicide, the homicide itself, and what occurred after the homicide. An example of a article providing summary information is the following statement, "Senda Deramus, 52, collapsed in the doorway of a house at 5459 Karen Court and was taken to Orlando Regional Medical Center, where she was pronounced dead, Orlando police Lt. Shirley Coleman said." (Jacobson, 2006, p. B3). Later it is stated that investigators are looking for the victim's former boyfriend whom they believe killed her. Additional information included: updates on cases, what, if any, charges were being filed, additional details of the homicide, what the perpetrator told the police, and information on the

perpetrators criminal history. Far more articles used interviews with police as a source than any other source (n=104 (53%)).

In contrast to the high number of articles using police sources, only ten articles (5%) featured information cited and/or quoted from a Domestic Violence Advocate. Some of the agencies mentioned include: Harbor House, Haven of Lake and Sumter Counties, Help Now, Peace River Canters, and the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence. The information provided by these sources included: statistics, suggestions for helping a coworker who is being physically abused, patterns of domestic violence, escalating violence, safety planning, cyber stalking, and information on domestic violence judges and the decision to require perpetrators to surrender firearms. One example of information provided by domestic violence advocates is this quote from Shelley Gordon a spokesperson for Help Now who is discussing how to help a friend or coworker who is experiencing domestic violence, “Suggesting counseling is one option...support and friendship are important, too. If a husband or boyfriend is abusive, there’s no telling when violence can escalate to murder” (Jacobson, 2004, p. B7). Another example of information cited and/or quoted from a domestic violence advocate comes from Carol Wick, head of Harbor House, Wick states “Domestic violence is usually not man meets woman, man hits woman on the second date...it’s most common, when the woman leaves” in this same article Wick later states that “Last year, domestic violence resulted in 8,000 arrests and 3,000 court orders of protection in Orange County” (Curtis, 2006, p. A1). When a domestic violence advocate was featured in an article there were usually multiple quotes/citations and the information was thorough and helped to put the individual incident in the context of domestic violence as a larger social issue.

Approximately 32 % of articles (N=63) used the victim's family and/or friends as sources of information. The people in this category included: parents, grandparents, children, cousins, aunt, uncle, grandchildren and various friends. The information provided was mostly positive attributes of the victim, but occasionally a family member or friend provided negative information about the victim. For example one victim's faculty adviser stated, "She was a very serious-minded and focused young woman" (Curtis, 2006, p. A1). In another example a victim's manager at work stated, "She was a great mom" in reference to the victim (Sherman, 2004, p. B1). These sources also provided examples of instances when they witnessed or the victim told them of previous violent acts by the perpetrator against the victim. Other times these sources were referenced for the views of a trial or the sentencing of a perpetrator. Articles featured statements made by family and/or friends who were providing testimony for a trial. In one article the statements in the article were what the family member wrote in a letter to the judge on sentencing day. One article featured most of a transcript of a 911 call made by the victim and perpetrator's teenage son as he witnessed his father shoot his mother and the father later shot himself.

The number of articles featuring comments from the perpetrators family and/or friends is 39 (20%), which is less than those articles that featured statements from the victims' family and/or friends. The people included in this category were similar to that of the victims. The perpetrators attorney also provided information. For example, one article features statements from a perpetrators attorney attempting to explain how the perpetrator accidentally caught his girlfriend on fire, "He wanted to scare her to such an extent that he would never have to deal with her again, said Abdool's attorney." (Lundy, 2008, p. B1). Information mentioned included

both positive and negative attributes of the perpetrator and victim, a summary of events, how shocked they were by the situation, their belief that the perpetrator is innocent, and in one article a family member was quoted as saying that the perpetrator had a rough life.

Community members were largely defined as neighbors. Other people included in this category are: handyman, apartment manager, and witnesses who were not friends or family of either the perpetrator or the victim. Community members' comments were present in 27 articles (14%). Often community members were commenting on the perpetrator and victim individually or as a couple. Comments in reference to shock and disbelief over the incident were very common among community members.

The category other was used for those who did not fall into one of the above mentioned categories. Those included in this category are: Assistant State Attorney's, school board members, CEO of company where both victim and perpetrator worked, information from an autopsy, a psychiatrist, 911 recordings, judges, and both the victims' and perpetrators' words. Examples of using the victim's words came from parts of injunctions that several victims in the study applied for at some point in time. Examples of using the perpetrator's words were often from what he would say in court, either his testimony, or his words at sentencing. 38 % of articles (N=75) were included in this category. See Table 6 for a statistics on sources.

Table 6 Sources Referenced

<b>Source</b>	<b>Number of Articles</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Police Report	35	18%
Interview with Police	104	53%
DV Advocate	10	5%
Victim's Friends/Family	63	32%
Perpetrator's Friends/Family	39	20%
Community Member	27	14%
Other	75	38%

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Discussion

The current study's content analysis consisted of 198 articles and 95 separate incidents of domestic violence homicide spanning over a five-year period. In comparing reports of actual incidents that occurred during the time period within the Central Florida area it was revealed that approximately 56% of actual domestic violence homicides get media attention in the form of a newspaper article. The current study did not find any articles on gay or lesbian domestic violence homicide, therefore there are none included in the sample.

One of the main purposes of the current study was to compare and contrast data found from Taylor's (2009) study conducted using the same metropolitan newspaper during an earlier time period. This study also hopes to both reinforce and build upon existing literature on domestic violence news coverage. Existing literature shows that women experience more male perpetrated domestic violence than men experience female perpetrated domestic violence (Laney & Siskin, 2003). Similarly, Taylor's (2009) study revealed that 89% of the articles in her study were male perpetrated domestic violence homicides against women. The findings of the present study are similar to that of Taylor's (2009) with 85% of the articles showing male perpetrated domestic violence homicides against women.

One theme that emerged from the data is the use of victim blame, which is consistent with previous findings (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Berns, 2004; Consalvo, 1998; Ferraro, 2006; Lamb, 1991; Myers, 1997; Taylor, 2009). Feminist theory suggests that reporters' victim blaming tendencies are an example of society attempting to reinforce a patriarchal society



(Myers, 1997). In reviewing various victim blame methods, they were separated into direct and indirect methods of victim blame.

In the present study, 34% of articles featured statements blaming the victim, which is just slightly greater (9%) than that of Taylor's (2009) results, which were 25%. Direct methods of victim blame included: emphasizing choices the victim made which may have made her/him more susceptible to violence, emphasizing history of domestic violence and victims' choices to take back perpetrator after previous violent incidents, and negative language used to portray the victim. Indirect methods of victim blame included: making excuses for the perpetrator, describing the perpetrator with positive language, and emphasizing the victim's emotional and/or physical problems. Another item of major interest that emerged from the results is the use of both positive and negative language to describe both the victim and perpetrator.

In the present study 34% of articles described the victim in a positive manner, which is much higher than Taylor's (2009) findings indicating that only 9% of articles in her sample described the victim in a positive manner. Another noticeable increase in findings of the present study as compared to Taylor's (2009) study was the triple increase in the number of articles describing the perpetrator in a positive manner up from 12% to 36% in the current study. Similarly, there was a vast increase in the amount of articles describing the perpetrator in a negative manner, from 14% (Taylor, 2009) to 67% in the present study.

A history of domestic violence was another item of interest in the present study. The findings indicate that 22% of articles referred to some previous violence, which is lower than the percentage of articles mentioning domestic violence in Taylor's (2009) study (34%). Another similar finding between the present study and Taylor's (2009) study is highlighting the victim's

relationship with other men. The present study found that 9% of articles mentioned the victim's relationship with men other than the perpetrator. In Taylor's (2009) study, she found that 9% of articles described unfaithfulness on the part of the victim.

Tone of article was another item of interest which was categorized into five areas: factual, mostly factual; slightly narrative, combination of factual and narrative, mostly narrative; slightly factual, and narrative. The greatest number of articles fell into the mostly factual; slightly narrative category (37%). The smallest number of articles fell into the narrative category (2%).

Sources referenced for quotes and/or information pertaining to the incident included: police report, interview with police, interview with domestic violence advocate, interview with family and/or friends of the victim, interview with family and/or friends of the perpetrator, community members, and other. More than half of the articles (53%) used interviews with the police as a source referenced for quotes and/or information pertaining to the incident. These findings are similar to Taylor's (2009) findings, which indicate that more sources from the criminal justice system were utilized in articles than other sources i.e. friends, family etc. These findings also support research conducted by Bullock (2008), which states that official sources (police, sheriff, court documents, attorneys etc) were utilized in the majority of articles in her content analysis. Meyers (1997) groundbreaking study on domestic violence and the media revealed that domestic violence advocates would serve as a great source of information on domestic violence, but are rarely viewed as newsworthy sources. The findings of the present study reinforce those of Myers (1997) as only 5% of articles featured statements from domestic violence advocates, but the information included in these articles was very good and included statistics, facts about domestic violence, and information on domestic violence policy in the

courts. The information from advocates contributed to putting the individual incidents of domestic violence into the context of domestic violence as a larger social issue. Taylor's (2009) study also revealed a low percentage of domestic violence advocates utilized as sources (>1%).

### Conclusion

The primary goal of the present study was to contribute to research on domestic violence and the media. The current study sought to conduct a replication of a content analysis of domestic violence homicide articles and compare and contrast findings. The current study also wanted to examine what changes or progresses, if any, have been made to the media portrayal of domestic violence homicide since the enactment of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994. Research is a key component in creating social change. Domestic violence is a serious social issue warranting public attention and intervention. The present study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on domestic violence and the media.

Domestic violence is a crime. Our view of crime is shaped by what we see in the media (McNeil, 1992). Domestic violence is a complex issue with several components and the media have the ability to help society better understand domestic violence through accurate reporting of domestic violence homicides and context.

The methodology of the present study was a content analysis of newspaper articles published in *The Orlando Sentinel* from June 2004 to June 2009. The study focused on the Central Florida Area. During the time period studied 198 articles were collected and used in the study. These articles included 95 separate incidents of domestic violence homicide were reported on in this newspaper. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement shows that in those same counties 170 incidents of domestic violence homicide actually occurred. The majority (85%) of

the articles were male perpetrated domestic violence homicides against females. A recurring theme throughout the data was that of victim blame. One change in the findings is that there was a slight (9%) increase in victim blaming statements in the present study as compared to Taylor's (2009) study. Direct and indirect methods of victim blame were found and discussed in the results section. Sources, tone, and history of domestic violence are other areas where themes emerged.

The timing of articles may have been a factor in both the content and length of articles. The current study did not distinguish between articles printed during the week and those printed on the weekend. Weekend newspapers are typically longer than weekday and have a higher readership. Whether or not an article was printed close to a deadline or not, may have influenced information included in articles.

The present study has its limitations. The first limitation is that the content analysis utilized only one newspaper in one geographic area covering 6 counties. The purpose of this study is not to generalize the findings to all newspapers or geographic areas, but instead to show the findings from one newspaper in one area and to see if there are differences in the reporting of domestic violence homicides over time. A second limitation is that the information gathered may not be entirely factual considering there are not any actual police reports on each incident with which to compare. Another limitation is that the articles are written from several different reporters and there is some level of subjectivity as their opinions are a part of what they write, but the extent to which is unknown. A final limitation of the study is that news articles are shaped by major events in the world and there was no way of knowing what other news was being covered at the time of the articles used for the study.

There are several suggestions for future research. The first suggestion is to conduct a similar study involving multiple newspapers possibly including multiple states. Another suggestion is to have some sort of comparison of local and national media outlets. Comparing actual police reports to articles written on an incident of domestic violence homicide would provide interesting insight. This would also help to understand why some incidents get reported in the media and others do not.

Collaboration between domestic violence advocates and the media is greatly needed in an effort to provide good information about domestic violence and to serve as a reference to context. The current study found that progress has been made as positive portrayals of victims increased from 9% in Taylor's (2009) study to 34% in the current study. Negative portrayals of perpetrators has increased from 12% in Taylor's (2009) study to 67% in the current study, a fact that assists in placing responsibility of homicide on the perpetrator. In order for social change to occur society must first understand the issue. Media outlets have the ability to foster understanding of domestic violence homicides and other surrounding issues. The media must report the facts accurately and stop blaming victims of domestic violence.

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