

2. Tunnell concludes that the segments about crime and justice on television news magazines do not portray the true picture of crime and justice. What distortions does he find in these segments? Based on your own viewing of newsmagazines, have you noted similar distortions in what is presented?
3. Who are the spokespersons, experts, and others who Tunnell finds are typically interviewed in news magazine segments? What impact does he believe this has on what is presented? Who would he like to see included among those interviewed? Do you agree or disagree with Tunnell about the need for "newsmaking criminology"?

NOTES

1. Public Television airs *Front Line*, *The Crusaders* appears on the Disney Channel. Neither was used in this study because they are not seen by the great numbers of people as the programs appearing on the four major networks (including FOX) are. Also, for a time ABC aired *Turning Point*, which was not included in this sample because it made its debut in January 1994.
2. This research, based on a nonprobability and conveniently selected sample, offers an exploratory examination of the newsmagazine program. The programs selected for this research were viewed during only one television season. The sample was compiled conveniently—when time and schedules permitted viewing

primetime television. The programs might not be representative of newsmagazine shows during that one season, and furthermore, might not accurately reflect the newsmagazine format generally. Thus, drawing inferences from this sample to the population of newsmagazine programs is not advisable. Nonetheless, this sample is useful in generating limited explanations of the newsmagazine program and its media-generated assumptions about crime, criminals, and their treatment.

3. *Day One*, ABC, September 27, 1993.
4. *Day One*, ABC, November 29, 1993.
5. *Dateline*, NBC, February 1, 1994.
6. *NOW*, NBC, December 8, 1993.



Forensic Journalism as Patriarchal Ideology:

The Newspaper Construction of Homicide-Suicide*

NEIL WEBSDALE AND
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INTRODUCTION

Newspaper reports of crime constitute one of the many ways that culture is reproduced and transformed. Among these reports, articles on violent crime are the most widely read by the general public (Antunes and Hurley, 1977; Ditton and Duffy, 1983; Gorelick, 1989; Sherizen, 1978;). This cultural fascination with violent crime has deep historical roots, although its portrayal through the corporate print media is a relatively recent phenomenon (Surette, 1992: 51–52). The decisions of newspaper editors and reporters to cover certain forms of crime rather than others and to report those crimes within discernible stylistic parameters provide a rich substrate for sociological analysis. These parameters offer clues about the wider processes involved in the social construction of reality and, in particular, how popular understandings of crime become enshrined in individualistic and astructural explanations.

We begin with a definition of homicide-suicide and situate the reporting of homicide-suicide within the broader framework of the media discourse on violent crime. We analyze the content of 153 articles on homicide-suicide events from the *Arizona Republic*. Our analysis is enhanced by an interpretive exploration of crime stories. We conclude with a discussion of the ways in which what we call "forensic journalism" creates a discourse on homicide-suicide that observes systemic violence against women in a patriarchal society.

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HOMICIDE-SUICIDE

Homicide-suicides are homicides that are closely followed by the suicide of the perpetrator. They occur relatively infrequently compared with homicides and suicides, and their rare and unusual nature renders them a particularly newsworthy form of violent crime. Typical homicide-suicides are perpetrated by enraged males, and the recent separation or estrangement of the spouses or lovers is a prominent precipitating factor. (Marzuk, Tardiff, and Hirsch, 1992: 3180). Their relationship was often characterized by physical or emotional abuse or both. Marzuk, Tardiff, and Hirsch comment,

While some murder-suicides occur shortly after the onset of "malignant jealousy," more often there has been a chronically chaotic relationship fraught with jealous suspicions, verbal abuse, and sublethal violence. (1992: 3180)¹

Currens et al. concur with Marzuk, Tardiff, and Hirsch and note,

In 15 (41%) of the 37 cases in which the current husband was the perpetrator, the couple had previously filed for divorce (12) or was separated (3). In 7 of these 15, the wife had obtained a domestic violence protective order or restraining order from a court. (1991: 2063).

THE REPORTING OF CRIME

The News Appeal of Violence

In the United States, crime is a highly charged social issue that serves as both a lightning rod for political debate and a major source of social fear. As Chermak points out, the potency of crime has not been lost on newspapers (Chermak, 1994b: 95). According to Surette, articles on crime in newspapers are read consistently by a greater percentage of subscribers (24-26 percent) than other news topics (1992: 63). The least common forms of crime are reported most. Rarer forms of crime are newsworthy in part because of their rarity, but also because they lend themselves to graphic and sensationalistic reporting, which sells newspapers. Esterle (1986: 5) notes that murder, the rarest form of violent crime, is reported most often. In a similar vein, Graber (1980: 39-40) stresses that although murder constitutes only 0.2 percent of crime known to the police, fully 26.2 percent of crime news covers murders.

The Routinized Production of Crime News

According to Ericson (1991), the media enjoys a relative autonomy from its material owners (see also Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts, 1978: 57), but is strongly influenced by a production schedule that requires stories be easily constructed. The newspaper reporting of crime is therefore

"routinized." To minimize production costs and maximize profits from advertising, newspapers engage in the factory-type production of crime news. For example, newspaper reporters often rely on readily accessible and low-cost official sources to confirm stories. This routinized relationship between the print media and criminal justice sources is well documented (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987, 1989; Fishman, 1978, 1980; Gans, 1979; Hall et al., 1978; Sanders and Lyon, 1995; Tuchman, 1973; Voumvakis and Ericson, 1984). This synergistic relationship serves the interests of newspapers and source agencies. Reporters acquire up-to-date information on crime that can be cheaply and readily parlayed into crime stories. In return, criminal justice and governmental agencies that supply information benefit from being portrayed as credible and professional sources and from having their notions of crime and crime control placed on the public agenda. As Cohen and Young (1981) point out, this type of relationship between media and sources results in news items that are primarily informative and that support the source agencies.

Media as Dominant Ideology

Several studies illustrate how crime news is a nonconspiratorial source of dominant ideology (Barlow, Barlow, and Chiricos, 1995; Chibnall, 1975; Hall et al., 1978; Fishman, 1978, 1980; Gorelick, 1989; Humphries, 1981). For example, Hall et al. (1978) deconstruct the media panic about "mugging" that developed in England between August 1972 and August 1973. During this period newspaper reporting of mugging emerged and became increasingly sensationalistic. The newspaper panic about mugging led to the construction of the young black male as the archetypal mugger who came to symbolize why British capitalism was in decline. In short, the mugger became a scapegoat or, to use Stanley Cohen's term, a "folk devil" (see Cohen, 1980).

Soothill and Walby's (1991) analysis of the reporting of sex crime in England also emphasizes the reproduction of dominant values by the media. These authors show that the newspaper representation of sex crimes adopts individualistic explanations that ignore or de-emphasize the importance of wider social structural patterns of disadvantage. The sex offender is presented sensationalistically as a monster or a freak. In addition, news articles about rape only report so called "stranger" rape and serial rapists. Readers are left with the impression that sex crimes against women are aberrant features of social life rather than criminal events endemic to patriarchal society. In addition, newspapers rarely contextualize the reporting of sex crimes against the systematic knowledge of academe. In particular, certain voices, such as those of the Women's Movement, are marginalized in the debate. The suggested solution to the "problem" of sex crimes is an increased "law and order" effort, rather than a battery of social reforms that empower women vis-à-vis men.

Crime texts relay information concerning death, bodily injury, and the forces of good and evil, so they offer "emotional hooks" for a large number of readers. "Emotional hooks" refer to those experiences that readers can relate to at some deep level and perhaps even project themselves into. Such projection,

if it occurs, might result in readers being considerably relieved that their own lives were not taken or jeopardized. At a subliminal level, crime texts tend to convey the sense that crime and social disorder can be understood and explained at an individual rather than a social structural level.

DEVELOPING THE NOTION OF FORENSIC JOURNALISM

As we will show, the reporting of homicide-suicide takes a different form from reports of muggers and sex fiends. Perpetrators of homicide-suicide are not portrayed as folk devils. We use the term "tainting" to describe the occasional process of "discrediting" or "compromising" the persona of the perpetrator of homicide-suicide. Tainting refers to the way in which negative aspects of the perpetrator's past are presented to sully his or her image. Tainted offenders differ from labeled sex fiends or what Goffman once called "stigmatized" (deeply discredited) individuals because of the much lower level of intensity of the media attribution. Although the reports of the events are somewhat sensational, they do not consistently contain the kinds of lurid detail noted by Soothill and Walby (1991) or the kind of factual exaggeration noted by Hall et al. (1978) and Cohen (1980).

The reporting of homicide-suicide follows a certain routinized formula that does, we contend, constitute a form of patriarchal ideology. The ideological impact of this style of journalism stems from its obfuscation of systemic patterns of violence against women. We employ the term "forensic journalism" to describe that routinized style of crime reporting that focuses on the details of individual crimes and the immediate situational dynamics within which the crime takes place. In the final analysis, forensic journalism tells readers more and more about less and less. The sharper the focus and the more details we know, the less we learn about larger issues and patterns. It is worth pausing to lay out some broader qualities of forensic journalism.

Crudely defined, forensic science refers to the application of the scientific method to the solution of legal or criminal problems. We use the term "forensic journalism" very specifically here. Our use of the term should not be taken to refer to the reporting of crime or criminologically oriented stories. Rather, our use of the term refers to a style of newspaper reporting that focuses on the minutiae of the crime scene rather than on the social context in which the crime is embedded. By analogy, we employ the term "forensic journalism" to refer to that stylistic coverage of violent crime that relies heavily on a pseudo-scientific ethos. That ethos explains violent crime "objectively" by describing the situational details of the crime scene. This "objectivity," informed as it is with the "irrefutable" logic and meticulousness of forensic science, imparts a powerful credibility to crime reporting. Just as forensic science relies on agents of the state to confirm scientifically the nature of the crime scene, so too does forensic journalism draw upon official explanations of violent crime. The

accounts given by police officials figure prominently in these explanations (see Chermak, 1994b:110).

Police accounts of crime are "factual" and confined to the immediacy of the crime scene itself. Reports of violent crime will typically include details about the age, sex, and race of the offender and victim(s) and the relationship between the parties. Forensic journalism is imbued with an "investigative motif" or an "ethic of detection" that feeds off details such as who killed who and when, the location of corpses, and so on. The entire report is written in the language of perpetration and victimization. This linguistic style tends to anchor the explanation of the violence to the level of the individual participants. Reporters select material from police sources, but they do not select the conceptual framework within which the information is presented to them. In other words, reporters might decide what "fact" to publish and when and how to publish it, but they do not decide (without seriously disrupting their own routinized production schedules) to eschew the forensic frames within which facts are routinely presented to them. Hence reports of violent crime, as we have seen from our review of the literature, focus more frequently on individual offenders and virtually never on structural contexts (Barlow, Barlow, and Chiricos, 1995; Humphries, 1981).

On further reflection, we can discern three interrelated characteristics of forensic journalism: "situationally based explanations," "situationally based dramaturgical representations," and "internal myopia." "Situationally based explanations" refer to the routinized newspaper manufacture of violent crime stories that includes a common core of facts about the participants with which the readership can easily identify. We learn details about age, sex, relationship types, weaponry, and so on. Consequently, forensic journalism reports the details of individual offenders and the crime scene, but not social structural contexts.

"Situationally based dramaturgical representations" are central to forensic journalism. That this dramatic imagery often emanates from police sources gives it an extra edge of legitimacy. Imbued with the aura of forensic analysis (even if forensic science is only marginally used in the case in question), the dramaturgical details are elevated (blood, gore, and all) to a position of prominence. Forensic journalism tends not to "demonize" offenders or construct them as "folk devils." Rather it occasionally resorts to tainting them, if the appropriate information required for tainting is available. The sensationalism resorted to in forensic journalism is more constrained and routinized. The legitimacy of constrained sensationalism stems partly from its association with police sources and partly from the way forensic journalism conveys facts that for the most part are irrefutable. We might argue about the appropriateness of including details about how a murder victim was shot in the face with a 12-gauge shotgun, but it is difficult to argue with the fact that this was how the victim was killed. Once these gory details are in circulation, it is difficult if not impossible for either the press or the audience to discuss structural contexts without seeming to lessen the individual responsibility of the "guilty" party.

The third quality of forensic journalism that is worth noting is its "internal myopia." Although media portrayals of crime largely ignore structural explanations, they also ignore, or fail to explore fully, the implications of the patterns evident in their own history of reporting a particular crime phenomenon. For example, when newspapers write stories about violent crime, they consistently ignore structural patterns that are discernible in their own prior reports. The ignoring of these patterns might reflect the pressures of adhering to a routinized news production schedule. As we will show, however, the failure to explore patterns of gendered asymmetry of the homicide-suicide perpetrator-victim relationships that are evident in prior reports might also reflect the patriarchal imperatives of news production.

It is in the daily rhythms of forensic journalism with its language of perpetration, its pseudoscientific logic, and its occasional tainting of perpetrators, that we see a most insidious and nonconspiratorial deployment of power. Amidst the seeming objectivity, situational explanations, and dramatic representations of crime and criminals, systemic patterns of violence and their structural causes are marginalized or disappear altogether.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a content analysis of 153 *Arizona Republic* newspaper stories on homicide-suicide events. These 153 articles represent an exhaustive listing of every news story printed about homicide-suicide in the paper from 1987 through 1994. Most of these stories concerned homicide-suicide events in Arizona, although occasionally national stories were covered. In 84 percent of the 153 *Arizona Republic* articles, the police were the major source of confirmation for the case facts. The majority of articles reported distinct cases, although within our sample were a number of repeat articles. These repeat articles covered the same case two or more times. Our focus is on the media portrayal of homicide-suicide, so we have treated the repeats as separate units of media analysis even though they refer to a case already reported.

DISCURSIVE PATTERNS

Table 9-1 shows the reported relationship of the victim to the perpetrator. Of the *Arizona Republic* reports of homicide-suicide, 79.1 percent of the events occur between spouses, lovers, parents, children, and siblings. This is consistent with the literature on homicide-suicides, which indicates that familial homicide-suicides constitute the overwhelming majority of cases. Within the "familial" category we find that interspousal relationships compose the single largest group of perpetrator-victim dyads (36.2 percent), followed by lovers (27.1 percent). Put differently, intimates (men and women in intimate relationships such as marriage, common-law partners, ex-husbands, boyfriends,

Table 9-1 Reported Relationship between Victim and Perpetrator in Homicide-Suicide Articles, *Arizona Republic*, 1987-1994

| Reported Relationship | | Total | % | Total % |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|------|---------|
| Familial | Spouse Kills Spouse | 64 | 36.2 | |
| | Lover Kills Lover | 48 | 27.1 | |
| | Child Kills Parent | 4 | 2.3 | |
| | Parent Kills Child | 20 | 11.3 | |
| | Sibling Kills Sibling | 4 | 2.3 | 79.1 |
| Nonfamilial | Stranger Kills Stranger | 4 | 2.3 | |
| | Acquaintance Kills Acquaintance | 5 | 2.8 | 5.1 |
| Unknown ^b | | 23 | 12.9 | 12.9 |
| Other ^c | | 5 | 2.8 | 2.8 |
| Total | | 177 ^a | 100 | 100 |

^aTotal exceeds *n* of sample (153) because some homicide-suicide cases have more than 1 victim and each victim is listed separately.

^b"Unknown" refers to articles in which the relationship between victim and offender was not specified within the article.

^c"Other" refers to cases such as cult killings in which the victims and offenders were both familial and nonfamilial.

and girlfriends) constitute the most common group of perpetrator-victim dyads (63.3 percent of all reported homicide-suicides and 80 percent of reported familial cases). These findings are consistent with the previous research about homicide-suicide (see Allen 1983; Berman 1979; Palmer and Humphrey 1980; Santoro Dawood, and Ayril 1985; Selkin 1976; West 1967; Wolfgang 1958). Of the remaining familial homicide-suicide events, we find that 11.3 percent consisted of a parent killing a child, 2.3 percent consisted of children killing their parents, and the remaining 2.3 percent consisted of a sibling killing a sibling. Reported cases of nonfamilial homicide-suicide constitute only 5.1 percent of the all reported cases (2.3 percent are perpetrated by strangers, and 2.8 percent by acquaintances).

Given that the majority of homicide-suicide reports refer to intrafamilial killings, we examined "familial" cases more closely. Table 9-2 reports on the sex makeup of the perpetrator-victim relationship in reported cases of familial homicide-suicide. Fully 87 percent of all these intrafamilial perpetrators were adult males. In 7 percent of familial cases, the perpetrators were adult females and in 5.8 percent, they were children. In not one reported case did a female intimate kill her male intimate and then kill herself.

Table 9-2 powerfully illustrates the reported sexual asymmetry between perpetrators and victims present in this type of killing. The sexual asymmetry evident from our analysis of the *Arizona Republic* articles is consistent with the actual sexual asymmetry reported in the research literature.²

Of the entire 119 reports of familial homicide-suicide, only 8 (7 percent of total) reported a female perpetrator. In all 8 cases, the female killed her children. Child perpetrated homicide-suicides were just as rare in the *Arizona*

Table 9-2 Sex of Perpetrators and Reported Relationship between Perpetrator and Victim(s) in Familial Homicide-Suicide Articles, *Arizona Republic*, 1987-1994

| Familial Perpetrator | Perpetrator & Victim Relationship | Total | % | Total % |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Male | Male Kills Partner | 96 | 81 | |
| | Male Kills Partner and Child | 7 | 6 | |
| | Male Kills Child | 1 | .8 | 87 |
| Female | Female Kills Partner | 0 | 0 | |
| | Female Kills Partner and Child | 0 | 0 | |
| | Female Kills Child | 8 | 7 | 7 |
| Child* | Child Kills Mother | 0 | 0 | |
| | Child Kills Father | 2 | 1 | |
| | Child Kills Mother and Father | 1 | .8 | |
| | Child Kills Child | 4 | 3 | 5.8 |
| | Total | 119 | 100% | 100% |

*Child refers to the young or adult offspring of the victim or perpetrator or both

Rather than use the language of domestic violence, or, more rarely, the term "woman abuse," the *Arizona Republic* reports are significantly more likely to refer to divorce, separation, estrangement, or breakups as antecedents to homicide-suicide events. Table 9-4 displays the reported antecedents to the homicide-suicide event and shows that 16.3 percent of stories referred to the couple being divorced, separated, estranged, or recently broken up.³ The greater tendency to use the language of divorce and so forth to allude to relationship breakdown or dissolution may reflect that it is easier and cheaper for newspapers to learn of divorce, and so on than it is to include details of domestic violence or woman abuse. This tendency may also reflect the fact that this language of divorce, separation, estrangement, and breakup (as opposed to domestic violence or woman abuse) is more supportive of the myth of harmonious heterosexual relationships that has been well documented by feminist scholars. In other words, rather than just being a product of routinized crime story manufacture, this choice of language may also be a source of patriarchal ideology. We will return to this possibility later.

Marzuk, Tardiff, and Hirsch (1992) and Currens et al. (1991) show that many familial homicide-suicides are preceded by a history of domestic violence. Consequently, we examined the reports of homicide-suicide for reference to or evidence of a prior history of domestic violence, woman abuse, or other forms of relationship breakdown. The antecedents "prior history of domestic violence specified" and "no prior history of domestic violence specified," tell us whether or not the newspaper article mentioned or contextualized the event within the framework of violence within the family. Most of these cases (79 percent of our sample) were reported to be familial in nature, so we were interested in whether or not the reporting of these homicide-

Table 9-3 Reported Weapon Use by Year in Homicide-Suicide Articles, *Arizona Republic*, 1987-1994

| Weapon Used | Total | % |
|----------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| Firearm | 145 | 86 |
| Sharp Object | 4 | 2.4 |
| Blunt Object | 1 | 0.6 |
| Other ^b | 7 | 4.2 |
| Unknown ^c | 11 | 6.5 |
| Total | 168^a | 100% |

^aTotal exceeds *n* of sample (153) because in several cases more than one weapon was used and each was coded separately.

^b"Other" includes killings by such things as fire, poison, and vehicles.

^c"Unknown" includes articles in which the weapon was not specified in the article.

Table 9-3 shows that in 86 percent of reports of homicide-suicide, firearms were used in the killing. This heavy reliance on firearms in homicide-suicides significantly exceeds the level of firearm use in the commission of both homicides and suicides.

suicides demonstrates the broader context of domestic violence. Only 15 articles (9.8 percent of the total articles, and 12.7 percent of the familial articles) referred to a history of domestic violence. In only 5 articles (3.3 percent of the total articles, and 4.2 percent of the familial articles) did the report specifically indicate there had not been a history of previous violence between the offender and victim(s).

From the extant research literature and the reported perpetrator-victim relationships in the *Arizona Republic* articles, it is clear that homicide-suicides are mostly perpetrated by men. Numerous studies also show that violence between intimates is mostly perpetrated by men against women and that when women are killed by men, it is usually the endpoint in an abusive relationship of long standing (see Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, and Daly, 1992). Given these facts on the sexual asymmetry of intrafamilial homicide, homicide-suicide and domestic violence,⁴ we felt it was important to examine how many homicide-suicide stories reported a specific history of "woman abuse." Our intent was to determine to what extent the *Arizona Republic* reports captured, or at least alluded to, the sexual asymmetry of intimate violence.

Although we have no way of determining the proportion of reported familial homicide-suicides that were preceded by domestic violence or more specifically woman abuse, it is reasonable to suggest, given the aforementioned studies, that the majority of cases may have been preceded by domestic violence, most of which probably took the form of woman abuse.⁵ However, as

Table 9-4 Reported Antecedents to the Homicide-Suicide Event, *Arizona Republic*, 1987-1994

| Reported Antecedents | Total | % of Total Articles (153) | % Familial Articles (119) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Divorce/Separation/ Estrangement/Breakup Problems/Arguments ^a | 25 | 16.3 | 21.0 |
| Prior History of Domestic Violence Specified | 15 | 9.8 | 12.6 |
| No Prior History of Domestic Violence Specified | 5 | 3.3 | 4.2 |
| Abuse of Woman Specified | 5 | 3.3 | 4.2 |
| Medical/Health Problems | 22 | 14.4 | 18.5 |

^aThis category refers to articles in which it was stated, for example, that the couple had been having some problems in the relationship, had been seeing a counselor, or had an argument just before the killing. These relationship problems preceding the homicide-suicide event are not the same as reported domestic violence or woman abuse.

Table 9-4 shows, 9.8 percent of stories report a prior history of domestic violence and only 3.3 percent reveal that woman abuse had occurred.

The reported antecedent "medical or health problems" refers to those categories in which the article indicated or suggested that the homicide-suicide event was precipitated by some type of chronic, terminal, or painful medical condition. As Table 9-4 illustrates, 22 articles (14.4 percent of the total number of articles) referred to a medical or health problem that preceded and may have influenced the decision to commit homicide-suicide. We cannot assume that these medical cases did not involve domestic violence or woman abuse. Of these 22 cases, 82 percent involved a male perpetrator and only 14 percent a female. In the remaining 4 percent of cases, the perpetrator was unknown. With this small number, it is risky to make too much of the perpetrator-victim relationship. However, that men continue to be the perpetrators in these cases is notable. Likewise, it is important to note that in the three cases where women perpetrated medical homicide-suicides, they killed their children before killing themselves. In no cases did women kill their male partners before killing themselves.

In Table 9-5, we identify six components of forensic journalism that, when combined, give the homicide-suicide reports a sensational and astructural flavor. We found that 80 articles (52 percent of the total) described the weapon in detail. For example, we found that if the weapon involved was a firearm (as in 86 percent of the articles), the article often specified whether it was a handgun, rifle, or shotgun. If it was a handgun, the article often specified the make and model, caliber, and whether it was a revolver or semiautomatic. Even in cases where the details of the firearm were not provided, the newspaper still discussed firearms. For example, regarding a homicide-suicide in Algona,

Table 9-5 Elements of Situationally Based Dramaturgical Depictions of Homicide-Suicide Events, *Arizona Republic*, 1987-1994

| Dramaturgical Elements | Elements | Total % |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Specifics of Weapon(s) ^a | 80 | 52.3 |
| Location of Wound(s) | 59 | 38.6 |
| Location/Position of Corpses ^b | 60 | 39.2 |
| Horrorific Portrayals of "Last Moments" ^c | 56 | 36.6 |
| Tainting ^d | 24 | 15.7 |
| Construction of Innocence and Tragedy ^e | 26 | 16.9 |

^aThis category refers to the specifics of weapons, such as caliber and make of gun.

^bThis category refers to the specific location of the bodies within or outside of a residence and the relative positioning of the corpses.

^cThis category refers to the dramatic portrayal of the last interactions between participants, for example, screams, violence, and so forth.

^dThis refers to language that discredits the perpetrator.

^eThis refers to the portrayal of the innocence and worth of the victims and the tragedy of their deaths.

Iowa, the county attorney declined to speculate on the nature of the weapons used. However, one crime story noted,

Sporting goods stores in the area were being questioned about recent purchases of .223-caliber ammunition, the type used in M-16 rifles. (AR, December, 31, 1987: A1)

The minutiae of the weaponry provides readers with the opportunity to reconstruct, in lurid detail, the heinousness of the injuries sustained in the incident. Including specific details of the weapon dovetails neatly with several other discursive themes of forensic journalism. Fatal wounds are brought to life through the imagery of weapon types. In a homicide-suicide in Mesa, Arizona, Elmer Lee Dean shot his wife in their backyard and then killed himself. For the readers' edification we learn that,

Both were shot in the face with a 12-gauge shotgun. (AR, December 30, 1988: B5)

In another story about the same case, we learn that Pete Bowen, who lived next door,

Heard some loud voices and then the thud of what sounded like wood falling to the ground. (AR, December 29, 1988: B1)

Taken together, news of the 12-gauge, the location of where they were shot and the thudding sound of wood falling, conjure up a lurid crime scene.

In about 39 percent of the stories (56 articles), the location of the injuries were specified. If there was more than one wound, very often each was described. As in the Elmer Lee Dean case, we must remember that the imagery

created by describing the wound site is enhanced when combined with the other themes of forensic journalism.

"After finding each other amid Manhattan's tangle of disconnected lives," (AR, April 9, 1994: A2) Rick Varela killed Sarah Auerbach after she broke off her relationship with him. Both were financial executives. The language of forensic journalism situates the location of the wound amid a number of themes including the cunning of the perpetrator, the gruesome nature of the homicide-suicide, and the irony of the perpetrator's fall from success.

Varela donned a disguise, followed Auerbach into a dry cleaning shop and pumped six bullets into her head in front of several customers. Sometime later, Varela shot himself in the head.

Varela's body was found . . . on a park bench in the elegant Brooklyn Heights section, along a promenade offering a striking view of the Wall Street world where Auerbach had prospered. (AR, April 9, 1994: A2)

The location of the corpse can galvanize the attention of the readers and summon up vivid images of the homicide-suicide scene. In 60 of the articles (39 percent of the total articles) the location or position of the bodies was described. Such descriptions include references to whether the corpses were lying inside or outside of a dwelling and where the corpses were found in relation to one another. Vivid imagery was constructed through reference to the position of the corpses in a Mesa, Arizona, homicide-suicide case. Penny Marie Roberts was found by her parents in the bedroom of an apartment she shared with her boyfriend, William Ashby. Ashby killed Roberts then hung himself. The crime text reports that,

Ashby was found hanging from a ceiling fan in the bedroom. (AR, June 16, 1992: CL10)

It is almost as if the reader is invited into the bedroom to gaze at the way in which the corpse of the perpetrator is still surveying the corpse of the victim. Again, in the lurid architecture of death, we find the geometry of domination that recreates or enlivens the crime scene. Forensic journalism is imbued with an "investigative motif" or an "ethic of detection" that feeds off minute details such as the location of corpses. The reader, in the space of few lines, is introduced to the hard (and mostly undisputed) "facts" of the case. In other words, the descriptions of the locus of the corpse, contribute more factual information that reaffirms both the accuracy and, more important, the authenticity of this way of understanding the violent event. The effect of such reporting is an astructural appreciation or representation of violent crime.⁶

In 56 articles (37 percent of the total), we find a heightened fascination with the "horrific" final moments in the lives of the perpetrators and victims. Reporters engage in a dramatic reconstruction of the interactions between the offender, victim, and possible witnesses and bystanders. This reconstruction furnishes the readership with yet more emotional hooks to draw them into the immediate "reality" of the situation.

Robert Mosley shot and killed his estranged girlfriend, Gloria Procera, and then killed himself. One news story of this incident reported the event through observations of eyewitness and friend of the estranged couple, Larry Jacquez. Jacquez provides rich and horrific detail about the crime scene and in particular the last moments of the victim.

"She had her (car) window almost rolled up, and then he shot her," Jacquez said. He said Mosley shot her twice, then put the gun to his head and shot himself. . . . Jacquez immediately ran across the street. . . . Jacquez said Procera was alive for about two minutes after he got there. "She was moaning and breathing rapidly," he said. (AR, June 28, 1990: B1)

Horrific portrayals of the last moments crystallize most dramatically if they are conveyed through the eyes of a survivor who was also terrorized at the scene of the homicide-suicide. We witness such a portrayal in the case of Jose Delapena, who shot and killed his girlfriend, Ellen Bergsman, in the head and then took his own life. The crime story reads,

Delapena . . . forced his way into Bergsman's home and ordered Blanche Cutlap, a female friend and co-worker, into a bathroom at gunpoint. Cutlap said she heard Bergsman begging not to be harmed and then heard two shots. (AR, August 17, 1994: A8)

The frequency with which the articles "taint" the perpetrators of homicide-suicide in some way (15.7 percent) is roughly the same as the frequency with which the articles convey a general sense of tragedy or selectively reconstruct the persona of the victims to emphasize their innocence or their essential goodness (17 percent). It is important to note that "tainting" is not juxtaposed alongside the "construction of innocence." In other words, there appears to be no systematic theme whereby tainting and the construction of tragedy or innocence appear in the same article. Where the two occur together they clearly reinforce each other. This reinforcement allows for the emergence of a stronger sense of good versus evil. However, the number of articles that show signs of both tainting and the construction of tragedy or innocence is small.

Greg McDonald Larrabee killed his common law wife, Portia Caton, and their son, Greg Michael Larrabee, in a murder-suicide at their home in Phoenix, Arizona. According to some neighbors, Greg McDonald Larrabee had

Seemed a little disoriented at times. Nancy Horton said Larrabee once told her that he believed people were shooting gamma rays at his home and that the CIA was after him. She said she saw him on top of his roof about two months ago yelling about the rays. (AR, July 27, 1993: B1)

Another neighbor by the name of Wilburn is reported as saying,

The dad thought aliens were coming into his home. (AR, July 27, 1993: B1)

This case typifies the tainting of perpetrators. In the Larrabee case, the discrediting of the perpetrator is mild. He is not portrayed as a fiend or monster or as a serious threat to the social fabric. The use of the language of tragedy and the construction of the victims as innocent or laudable individuals or both provides yet another potential emotional hook to lure readers into the spirit of forensic journalism. In a homicide-suicide in Phoenix, four people including two children were found dead. Their neighbor described the two young daughters in the following way:

"I saw the girls all the time. They were always smiling and laughing and playing house in the back yard." (AR, January 20, 1989)

Our point here is not that the daughters did not play happily but that the article, and many others like it, selectively reconstructs the persona of victims, perhaps to evoke a sense of loss.

In the case of George P. Smith who murdered his ex-girlfriend Kerryn O'Neill, there is no mention of how these killings typically involve men killing women (often in the context of relationship breakdowns). However, there is a detailed portrayal of O'Neill:

Everyone loved Kerryn O'Neill, the outgoing track star with the candy jar kept filled on her desk. Six months after leaving the U.S. Naval Academy with honors, the young engineer was restlessly reassessing her future. (AR, December 5, 1993: A28)

According to her grandfather O'Neill was "heaven." He went on to comment,

She was always with a smile, smart as a whip. (AR, December 5, 1993: A28)

We also learn of her athletic prowess and her feminine beauty.

She was about 5 feet, 5 inches tall and slim. After work, she commonly ran up to 12 miles each day, her long, dark hair pulled back off her face. (AR, December 5, 1993: A28)

In the space of these few lines we learn of Kerryn's "candy jar" youthfulness, her physical fitness, and her intelligence. In many ways she was the embodiment of success, and we also learn that she was "restlessly reassessing" her future. The article conveys a sense of her immense human potential and so amplifies the tragedy's impact. The emotional hooks go deep in this article because they emerge out of the multiple themes that culminate in the loss of a life with rich human potential.

In sum, a significant number of articles stress the dramaturgical nature of the homicide-suicide event, rather than social structural patterns within which they are imbedded. This is a defining characteristic of forensic journalism. Disguised as a simple recitation of the event, the articles in reality highlight those specific aspects of homicide-suicide that titillate, horrify, and appeal to our voyeuristic and baser desires.

HOMICIDE-SUICIDE REPORTS AS PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY

Feminist perspectives argue that women have been and still are systematically disadvantaged vis-à-vis men. Some feminists have explained the subordinate position of women in terms of the structure of patriarchy. Walby defines patriarchy as a

System of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. (1990: 20)

It lies beyond the scope of this article to discuss the plethora of empirical studies that support the notion that women are systemically disadvantaged vis-à-vis men (see for example Walby, 1990), our main concern here is with patriarchal ideology, namely, that system of beliefs and ideas that justify or legitimate the power of men over women. These beliefs and ideas present existing patterns of gender relations as natural and inevitable. Patriarchal ideology operates in a number of ways in a number of different social arenas. For example, Ann Oakley (1981) identifies the way functionalist social scientists assume that the roles of men and women are natural, inevitable, and functional for "society" (in reality, men). More specifically, Cynthia Cockburn (1983) identifies the ideology of the "natural weakness" of women, as a means of excluding women from jobs as compositors in the print industry.

Our interest lies in identifying the ways in which the *Arizona Republic's* reporting of homicide-suicide constitutes a form of patriarchal ideology. We do not argue that the representational processes of forensic journalism can be reduced to their effects in reproducing patriarchal relations. Neither do we argue that forensic journalism constitutes a form of patriarchal ideology that works independently of the wider routines of newspaper reporting or the material conditions within which those routines are embedded. Rather, we contend that one important effect of forensic journalism is that it conveys a misleading picture of homicide-suicide by framing those events in a structural ways that ignore systemic violence against women. To better understand this process of distortion, we must revisit our empirical findings in the light of the concept of forensic journalism.

Our analysis shows that the majority of homicide-suicide reports refer to familial homicide-suicides. In the majority of familial cases, the reports indicate that a male spouse or partner kills his female spouse or partner before killing himself. These findings from the newspaper reports closely correspond to the actual frequencies of homicide-suicide, which clearly show it to be a largely intrafamilial offense perpetrated by men. This correspondence also holds true in cases where medical or health reasons were reported as significant antecedents to the killing. Even in medical or health cases, we find men to be the perpetrators and women to be the victims of the homicide. However, the newspaper reports fail to acknowledge or even notice that perpetrators of homicide-suicide, especially the intrafamilial forms, are nearly always

men. This is not surprising given the internal myopia of forensic journalism, which ignores past reports of homicide-suicide that clearly show a pattern of sexual asymmetry in the perpetrator-victim relationship. It is important to note here that we are not suggesting that newspaper reporters have Ph.D.s in Sociology but, rather, that they pay closer attention to their own patterns of reporting.

Familial homicide-suicides are often preceded by a history of domestic violence. Newspaper reports only occasionally allude to this history (9.8 percent in our sample) and rarely to a history of woman abuse (3.3 percent in our sample). Significantly, in only 3.3 percent of cases did reporters inform readers that there was no history of domestic violence. Although in many familial cases of homicide-suicide, domestic violence is a major antecedent, the press reports attach relatively little importance to it in their accounts of the event. In those cases where conflict in the relationship is reported, it is more often reported in terms of divorce, separation, estrangement, or breakup of the parties.

Although failing to indicate the sexual asymmetry of the perpetrator-victim relationship and the possible role of domestic violence or woman abuse as a significant antecedent to homicide-suicide, the newspaper reports nevertheless were consistent in their use of somewhat sensational language to describe the crime scene. This usage included a hyper-fascination with weaponry and references to the location of wounds, the relative position of corpses, and reconstructing the final horrific moments before death. At times newspaper accounts also "tainted" the perpetrator; constructed victims as vulnerable, innocent, and undeserving of their fate; and portrayed the entire event as dramatic tragedy.

We do not argue that press reports of homicide-suicide represent a deliberate attempt to ignore or obscure the wider power relations of gender. Rather, it seems reasonable to suggest that, as the state's premier newspaper with an average circulation of 365,544 (Monday through Saturday) and 573,497 (Sundays), the *Arizona Republic* is an influential source of information for its readers. Given the prominence of crime stories and the way newspaper readers consume these stories enthusiastically, it is also reasonable to argue that the forensic journalism of the *Arizona Republic* plays an important role in shaping the parameters within which many readers actively make sense of the world of violence and crime. Herein lies the power of the *Arizona Republic* to contribute to the social construction of reality. By using forensic journalism, the social reality of homicide-suicide is framed through the immediacy of the crime scene including the relationships between the individuals involved ("situationally based explanations"), the deployment of the language of drama ("situationally based dramaturgical representations"), and a failure to discern structural patterns of the offense in their own journalistic coverage of the past cases of homicide-suicide ("internal myopia").

Nevertheless, we cannot attribute the astructural substance of homicide-suicide reports solely to the institutional practices of newspapers. Within newspaper institutions, human agency is also exercised, and choices about what to

publish are based not only on the financial exigencies of news production but also on the political orientation of reporters, editors, and newspaper owners. Our research therefore begs a number of important questions about the reporting of homicide-suicide. Is the "tainting" rather than outright stigmatization or demonization of perpetrators because the offense is rare and therefore not sufficiently amenable to press hysteria? Or, alternatively is it because the perpetrators of homicide-suicide are "family" men whose victims are usually wives, partners, or ex-partners, that the offense is not defined in heinous terms? Is it likely that we will ever see the same kind of hysteria about perpetrators of homicide-suicide that Jenkins (1994) has noted in connection with serial killers, even though there are more homicide-suicides than there are serial killings?

We must weigh the ideological imperatives of forensic journalism and its reporting of homicide-suicide against the agency of the audience. We cannot assume readers accept the individualistic or astructural explanations of homicide-suicide presented to them and assimilate them into their world view. In the absence of audience studies, it would be most inappropriate to suggest that the ideological imperatives of the homicide-suicide reports are monolithic. Such a suggestion would deny the complexity of ideology and ignore the fact that newspaper audiences are not homogeneous. It seems to us, however, that the representational outcome of forensic journalism is to convey an explanatory matrix, which in and of itself obfuscates systemic violence against women. Whether such an outcome is intended is an empirical question that warrants more research. In the meantime, in the spirit of what Gregg Barak (1994b) has recently called "newsmaking criminology," we recommend that press coverage of homicide-suicide incorporate more of the social structural context of systemic violence against women that are clearly identified in the *Arizona Republic's* past reports of homicide-suicide. Such a process of incorporation would transcend forensic journalism, debunk its objectivist and patriarchal posturing, and confront the internal myopia that characterizes the homicide-suicide discourse.

SUMMARY

We began by stating that violent crime is highly newsworthy. The reporting of violent crime is influenced by both the routines of newspaper production in general and the imperatives of certain ideological positions. From the extant literature on the reporting of crime we developed the concept of "forensic journalism." Forensic journalism refers to that style of reporting that stresses sensational crime scene minutiae over the social structural context within which that violence occurs. Newspaper accounts suffer from what we call "internal myopia" because they fail to look at and report social structural patterns evident in their own patterns of reporting crime. Using the notion of forensic journalism we explored 153 newspaper accounts of homicide-suicide

appearing in the *Arizona Republic* (1987 through 1994). These accounts consistently fail to highlight the gendered nature of the perpetrator-victim relationships, especially the fact that men are nearly always the killers. Likewise, the reports fail to mention the well-documented role of domestic violence, or more accurately "woman battering," as a crucially important situational antecedent to the homicide-suicide. Juxtaposed alongside these failures is the hyper fascination of journalists with weapons, wounds, and the horrific last moments before death. Finally, we note that the perpetrators of homicide-suicide are rarely vilified in the way that serial killers are, even though there are more homicide-suicides than there are serial killings. We ask whether the "tainting" of perpetrators of homicide-suicide, as opposed to the "demonization" of serial killers, results from homicide-suicide being exemplified by the killing of family members, whereas serial killers murder strangers.

Finally, our analysis is based on our content analysis of newspaper accounts. We read ideology into the text. This approach is limited insofar as it ignores the agency of the audience in interpreting text. We recommend that more research be conducted about how readers of newspaper accounts of violence interpret them before more solid statements can be made about the extent to which newspapers espouse certain forms of ideology.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do Websdale and Alvarez mean when they refer to crime news as a "nonconspiratorial source of dominant ideology"? Explain why you agree or disagree with this characterization of crime news.
2. According to the authors, what formula is routinely followed in reporting homicide-suicide cases? Why do they term this "forensic journalism"?
3. How do the newspaper articles about homicide-suicide analyzed by the authors reflect "patriarchal ideology"? What is it that the authors say the newspaper accounts fail to relate about such cases? Do you think what is not reported in such newspaper accounts has consequences in public perceptions or public policy?

NOTES

1. Marzuk refers to the research of Allen (1983), Berman (1979), and Dorpat (1966) to support his argument. Without giving specific percentages, Allen (1983), Palermo (1994), Rosenbaum (1990), and Selkin (1976) argue that a history of dysfunction, conflict, and/or violence between intimates is a common antecedent

to homicide-suicides. Eastel's (1994) study of homicide-suicide found that 80 percent of the cases between intimates had a prior history of violence.

2. See Allen, 1983; Berman, 1979; Eastel, 1994; Palmer and Humphrey, 1980; Rosenbaum, 1990; Wolfgang, 1958, who all found males committed more than 90

percent of the homicide-suicides. Santoro, Dawood, and Ayril (1985) found males committed 78 percent, and Selkin (1976) recorded 85 percent of homicide-suicides perpetrated by males.

3. See also Eastel, 1994; Marzuk, Tardiff, and Hirsch, 1992; Rosenbaum, 1990; Santoro, Dawood, and Ayril, 1985; Selkin, 1976—who all suggest that relationship breakdown is a significant antecedent to homicide-suicide.

4. We prefer the term woman abuse to domestic violence because it unmasks the sexual asymmetry in the perpetrator-victim relationship.

5. It could be objected that the homicide-suicide cases reported in the *Arizona Republic* were somehow different and did not have the same levels of domestic violence as those reported in the wider literature. However, such a departure from the normal homicide-suicide case pattern seems unlikely. It is not our contention that newspapers maliciously underreport a history of domestic violence in cases of

homicide-suicide. Although our assertion that the likely amount of domestic violence preceding homicide-suicides is underreported may seem speculative, it is a logical supposition based on the research literature. Clearly, more empirical research is needed to examine the relationship between domestic violence and homicide-suicides to determine if domestic violence is being underreported.

6. Although one possible rationale for newspapers only reporting the "facts" is that in cases of homicide-suicide, there are no involved parties left alive to tell the tale, this is never the only, or even the most important reason. Clearly, the events preceding the event can often be reconstructed through other family members, witnesses, and friends. In this sense, the reconstruction of homicide-suicides resembles the reconstruction of airplane crashes. Our point is that the reconstruction process is largely astructural in a sociological sense.