Making Sense of Intimate Partner Violence in Late Life: Comments From Online News Readers

Nancy Brossoie, PhD, Karen A. Roberto, PhD, Katie M. Barrow, MS
Purpose: The purpose of this study was to gain insight into public awareness of intimate partner violence (IPV) in late life by how individuals respond to incidents of IPV reported in the newspaper. **Design and Methods:** Using grounded theory techniques, online news items covering 24 incidents of IPV in late life, and the reader comments posted to them were analyzed. The news items were examined for incident details, story framing, and reporting style. An open coding process (Charmaz, K. [2006]. Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.) was used to generate a comprehensive understanding of themes and patterns in the comments posted by readers. **Results:** Few posters indicated that incidents were episodes of IPV. As many posters struggled to make sense of incidents, they attempted to remove guilt from the perpetrator by assigning blame elsewhere. Comments were influenced by personal assumptions and perspectives about IPV, relationships, and old age; reporting style of the news items; and comments posted by other posters. **Implications:** Altering public views of IPV in late life requires raising awareness through education, reframing the ways in which information is presented, and placing greater emphasis on the context of the violence. By engaging interactive news media, reporters, participatory journalists, and policymakers can enhance public recognition and understanding of IPV in late life.

Key Words: Domestic violence, Spousal abuse, News media, Participatory journalism

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a hidden and pervasive public health problem that includes physical, sexual, or psychological/emotional harm intentionally inflicted by a current or former intimate partner and can culminate in death (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2011). IPV often involves concurrent forms of abuse (Bonomi et al., 2007). IPV pervades relationships across the life span, irrespective of sex, age, income, and social standing (World Health Organization, 2005). Perpetrators are predominately male and victims generally female (CDC, 2011). Patterns of violence and abuse often change as couples get older (Rennison & Rand, 2003). For example, physical violence declines with age. It is often replaced by new or intensified types of psychological/emotional abuse, including denial of medical care or social isolation from family and friends (Abramson, Brandl, Meuer, & Raymond, 2007; Seff, Beaulaurier, & Newman, 2008), which allows perpetrators to maintain power and control in their relationships (Brandl, 2000; Daly, Hartz, Stromquist, Peek-Asa, & Jogest, 2008; Fisher & Regan, 2006; Montminy, 2005).

Since the 1970s, the steady growth of community- and government-funded IPV services has
helped improve public awareness of family violence and shift perceptions of domestic violence, including IPV, from a personal matter to a community problem (Carlson & Worden, 2005). The public reframing of IPV has been especially successful when victims are viewed by community members as weak and deserving of protection, like mothers with young children or persons with disabilities (Kim & Willis, 2007; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Thus, the availability and outreach of support services (e.g., crisis hotline, emergency shelter, support groups, transitional housing) continues to expand as communities join together to help victims identify, confront, and escape violence. However, public perception of able and competent adults engaged in abusive relationships has been more resistant to change. IPV continues to be viewed as a personal problem and the onus for change is placed on the victim (Carlson & Worden, 2005; Taylor & Sorenson, 2005).

Yet for older victims, especially women, escaping the violence is not without challenges. Aside from potentially losing their homes, financial security, and cherished relationships with people who are socially tied to the abuser, they face intangible socially constructed barriers that can deter them from seeing themselves as victims, seeking help, considering alternative solutions, or leaving their abusive partners (Harbison, 2008). In rural areas, the pressure to remain silent and keep abuse hidden is exacerbated by social and cultural norms that stress keeping family matters private, taking responsibility for personal mistakes, and upholding the covenant of marriage (Few, 2005; Teaster, Roberto, & Dugar, 2006). Remaining silent is further reinforced by community professionals whose suggestions deny, minimalize, or rationalize IPV. Such messages remind victims that IPV is a private personal matter and encourage them to keep their abuse hidden even at the expense of their health, well-being, and quality of life. With few older people coming forward about their experiences with IPV, gauging public perceptions about IPV in late life is challenging. In this study, we utilized newspapers and reader comments on news items as resources to gain insight into public awareness of and response to IPV in late life.

**Newspaper Influence**

U.S. newspapers, either in print or online, are read by over 170 million adult readers (75% of U.S. adults aged 18+) during an average week, and among those readers 76.6% report reading the weekday local news section (Newspaper Association of America [NAA], 2009b). People rely on newspapers to keep abreast of current events and use what they read to construct their own sense of belonging and connectedness to their communities (Entman, 1993). Newspapers publish stories that mirror the cultural values and interests of readers even though that approach can limit the scope of news coverage, especially for “invisible” and less palatable topics like IPV (Beard & Payne, 2005; Nerenberg, 2008).

Newspapers are also relied upon by policymakers who enjoy a reciprocal relationship with the press. On an average day, members of the U.S. Congress (not including their staffers) spend 1.8 hr reading newspapers (Bennett & Yanovitzky, 2000) to identify issues that concern their constituents (Carlile, Slater, & Chakroff, 2008). However, policymakers also use newspapers for political advantage. Editors are often pressured to publish stories to further political agendas and manipulate readers’ understanding of issues (Yanovitzky, 2002).

Reporters also mold readers’ perspectives on issues, like IPV, by how they frame their stories. Story framing influences how readers interpret an event, place it into context, and assign responsibility for it based on prior knowledge and exposure to similar incidents (Carlile et al., 2008; Entman, 1993; Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002; Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). News stories are framed as unique occurrences (episodic) or part of larger problems or issues (thematic). For example, a story about IPV framed episodically provides only basic facts about a specific incident, which may lead readers to believe it is an isolated case to which responsibility can be assigned to either the victim or the perpetrator. The same story framed thematically contextualizes the incident with details such as information about IPV and intervention strategies for victims. The thematic presentation is more likely to help readers recognize an incident as an act of IPV, gain a better understanding of how IPV challenges accepted social norms, and identify how the community can become part of the solution. Reporting style or format also impacts how readers receive a story (Meyers, 1997; Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence [RICDAV], 2000). Although photographs and personal quotes from community members may increase reader interest in a story, quotes that soften the image of...
a perpetrator and photographs that suggest innocence dilute the seriousness of an event and may lead readers to make inaccurate assumptions about IPV, the degree of harm inflicted, and the intentions of the persons involved.

In today’s age of instant communication and multimedia formats, news followers expect to be kept informed about events as they occur. In response, many news organizations have shifted their focus to an online news format and have relegated printed newspapers to a secondary status (Grabowicz, 2011). Approximately 54% of general Internet users visit websites for local news compared with 40% who watch local television and 20% who listen to the radio (NAA, 2009a). During early 2010, Internet newspaper sites were visited by an average of 71 million unique readers or 36% of active Internet users a month (NAA, 2010). News websites have the added benefit of providing readers the opportunity to publically comment on stories or other comments almost instantaneously.

Online commenting provides readers with more opportunities to express their thoughts and read a broader range of opinions than possible through editorials and letters to the editor found in traditional newspapers (Woo-Young, 2005). Readers posting comments (i.e., posters) are “participatory journalists” (Bentley et al., 2007) creating news, ideas, and public discussion rather than just consuming information. Their exchange of comments fosters communication that is more provocative than traditional media formats and influences a broader audience about how to think about solutions to community problems (Cenite & Zhang, 2010; Goode, 2009), especially among persons less inclined to analyze and contemplate issues (Lee & Jang, 2010). While online commenting offers community members the opportunity to raise public awareness and potentially affect policymaking (Leung, 2009), it only requires Internet access, a personalized site user name (e.g., rogerthat), and agreement to abide by site posting rules.

Prior studies have focused on the proliferation of online commenting (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Schultz, 2000), the anonymity and integrity of online posters (Perez-Pena, 2010), and the impact of negative comments on how readers interpret stories (Lee & Jang, 2010; Siff, Hrach, & Alost, 2008). The content of online postings has received less attention (Paskin, 2010). Thus, the purpose of this study was to analyze online comments to answer the research question “How do readers respond to news about incidents of IPV in late life?”

**Methods**

This research was approved by Virginia Tech’s Institutional Review Board. From January to March 2010, we gathered news items describing alleged incidents of IPV involving persons aged 50+. News items were collected through the Elder Abuse News Feed (EANF), a newsfeed service supported by the National Center on Elder Abuse (2010) and collected under contract by the National Adult Protective Services Association (see www.apsnetwork.org); they tracked media reports on elder abuse by scanning billions of national and local newspapers’ web pages daily using Google and Yahoo Alerts. Through the EANF, we identified 24 news items, representing 24 unique incidents of IPV as defined by the Centers for Disease Control. All incident details and allegations were provided by the news reporter covering the story, not courtroom testimonies or convictions. A police investigator and the executive director of a local women’s resource center independently reviewed the articles, confirming the appearance of IPV. For 21 incidents, the EANF article was the initial coverage of the story. The remaining news items were follow-up stories to incidents occurring the previous year.

Even though readers were provided opportunities to post comments on 22 of the 24 EANF news items, they only commented on nine. Review of the 33 comments posted provided limited insight into how readers responded to IPV in late life as many comments mirrored the same concerns about posters and the usefulness of their comments raised in the literature (e.g., inappropriate and insensitive comments; Perez-Pena, 2010). Thus, we broadened our search to include online comments posted to other news items published about the EANF incidents through other online news websites. Team members periodically conducted Internet searches for news items 3–15 months after the EANF incidents were identified. Victim and perpetrator names, type of violence committed, date of incident, and incident location were used as search criteria. News items previously identified were revisited to check for new comments. Copies of the news items and comments were captured electronically to ensure that comments were preserved if they were no longer available for viewing. The first
author verified news items, comments, and documentation of search efforts.

Through this expanded search, we identified 86 news items (24 original and 62 additional) published on 73 news websites. Among the 62 additional articles found, 42 (67.7%) were on the Internet within 3 days of the EANF story. As reporting on the 24 incidents increased, opportunities to comment also rose, increasing the number of incidents with online commenting opportunities from 9 to 22. Those 22 incidents were covered by 83 online news items (22 original and 61 additional; M = 3.77; SD = 2.76). Sixty-three (75.9%) of the news items included opportunities for readers to comment online. From those news items, 340 comments were collected (M = 15.45; SD = 22.35). Additional information about the original articles is provided in Supplementary Table 1.

Each incident was coded for the type of violence committed, sex and age of victims and perpetrators, and relationship status. Each news item was also coded for causes of violence ascribed by reporters, how the story was reported (use of photographs and subjective language), and story framing. An open coding process (Charmaz, 2006) was used to generate a comprehensive understanding of themes and patterns among the comments collected. Team members independently read comments (grouped by incident) to identify themes. An initial set of primary codes (commenting for personal attention, extending sympathy to the family, and placing blame) and secondary codes (seeking God's mercy and forgiveness and respect for acts of murder–suicide) emerged. Comments interpreted as irrelevant to the incident or discussion thread were coded as commenting for personal attention. During team discussion, we discovered that blame took on various meanings. Thus, we refined the primary code for blame and coded it by where blame was placed—on the individual, family, or societal level.

In the next stage of the coding process, team members reread the comments and focused on the underlying assumptions, attitudes, and experiences of posters in making their comments. We expanded the secondary codes to include assumptions about old age, relationships, filial responsibility, and the right to die; ageist, cynical, and sexist attitudes; personal experiences with similar situations; and social responsibility for change. Throughout the coding process, we cautiously interpreted comments relying heavily on the actual words posted and how they were written, including the use of punctuation (e.g., !!!!!!!!!!), capitalization (SHUT UP!), acronyms (OMG!), and symbols (#*Tel). The interjection of comments within discussion threads was also noted and considered in analysis.

To ensure consistency in the application of the coding scheme, we used the constant comparative method in which each response coded was verified by at least one other author to ensure codes were applied consistently and appropriately (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because most comments contained only a few words or a sentence and did not elicit direct feedback from other posters, coder discrepancies related more to omission of secondary codes than disagreement among codes and were easily resolved. This intensive coding approach yielded 100% agreement in the development and application of the coding scheme, which enhanced the rigor of the analysis and dependability of the findings (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

Results

Incidents

In each article, the perpetrator (person identified by the reporter as inflicting harm), victim (person harmed), and type of IPV committed was clearly identified. All but one of the incidents involved married heterosexual couples. Men perpetrated the violence in 20 (83.3%) of the 24 incidents. Perpetrators ranged in age from 58 to 90 years (M = 78; SD = 8.6); victims ranged in age from 52 to 89 years (M = 75; SD = 10.0). Race and ethnicity were not published.

The types of IPV reported were grouped into six categories: assault, neglect, neglect resulting in death, homicide, homicide–attempted suicide, and homicide–suicide. Twenty incidents (83.3%) included homicide, and 12 (69%) included perpetrator suicide. Reporters speculated on the underlying reasons for violence in 19 of the 24 (79.1%) incidents. Causes were ascribed to poor mental health (including dementia; 33.3%), caregiver stress and burden (20.8%), relationship tension (16.6%), or a death pact (8.3%). The cause of five incidents (20.8%) was unknown and not speculated. As shown in Table 1, other than an apparent death pact prior to a homicide–suicide, no single cause was attributed to a specific type of violence. Age and sex of persons involved also did not predict type or suspected cause of violence.
Reporting Styles

Story Framing. — The manner in which reporters presented the incidents of IPV was strikingly similar. In 78 news items (94.0%), reporters episodically framed incidents as isolated events, only including facts about the incidents in their coverage. Among the five thematically framed news items, four referenced similar incidents in the past year and one mentioned local resources for victims, ending with a quote from a local advocate encouraging readers to seek help if they were experiencing IPV.

Visuals and Language. — Readers responded to the photos that accompanied stories. Arrest photos of perpetrators looking distraught and disheveled moved some posters to comment with quips that ridiculed and passed judgment on the individual’s competency (e.g., “My God, it’s Hannibal Lector!”). The inclusion of less provocative photos, like those of victims’ homes, did not elicit any comments. Similarly, the use of descriptive language and inclusion of personal quotes influenced readers’ responses. When reporters used phrases like “tragic loss” and “unfortunate situation,” posters referred to the incident as a “sad story” and did not reference the incident as a crime or the persons involved as victims or perpetrators. Stories that were punctuated with fond recollections of victims and perpetrators by community members helped shift the burden of guilt away from perpetrators. Posters often expressed condolences to the family and reminisced about the good times they shared with the couple along with comments that romanticized the deaths. Additional information on reporting styles of the articles analyzed is provided in Supplementary Table 2.

Posters

Personal characteristics of posters were not provided with the comments posted. News websites protect the anonymity of posters and do not provide user information to the public. Occasionally, posters provided reference to local geography, politics, and services, leading us to believe these posters represented local news audiences.

Comments

The number of comments collected per incident was not associated with type or suspected cause of violence. However, the four incidents that received the greatest number of comments (ranging from 41 to 75; $M = 59.0$; $SD = 14.31$) shared a single outcome—death (two homicides, one homicide—suicide, one attempted homicide—suicide). Suspected causes included poor mental health, caregiver stress, or both. We attributed the volume of comments to the presence of online communities of posters who regularly engaged in online discussions with one another, rather than characteristics of the incidents. Consistent with other research on online communities with regular posters (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Paskin, 2010; Schultz, 2000), we found that insensitive comments were often commonplace and not always welcome. news junkie explains, “The folks on this news blog consistently spew hate and wise azz remarks about every article. One day it will be their friends or family that the haters are hating on. So sick of mean, hateful and brutal people.”

We examined the comments using five general categories that provided a framework for gaining insight into public awareness of and response to IPV in late life. Categories included sympathies to family and friends, perceptions of victims and
Perpetrators, perceptions of incidents, excuses and blame for the IPV, and social responsibility.

Sympathies to Family and Friends. — The majority of comments extended sympathies to family members and friends left behind to cope with the aftermath of an incident. Although very few posters stated they knew the victims personally, many like neighbors, expressed their sadness with comments like “My heart goes out to the son and the family. It’s hard enough to accept that not one but both of your parents are deceased and to know that it was done voluntarily, it has to hurt.”

A few posters, including beverly, shared their personal experiences with similar situations and used their disclosure as a way to educate and empathize.

Unless you’re in their shoes, judge not. My mother has been in a nursing home now 4 yrs . . . and my father has not missed one day. I understand fully the emotional trauma dealing with a loved one sick in this way.

A small group of posters also offered condolences with words that embodied their religious practices (“You have our prayers”) and faith in a higher power (“I pray God forgives them and gathers both he and his wife into His bosom”). Others took the opportunity to remind those left behind that the ultimate price for the incident had yet to be paid (“Hell’s gates are waiting”).

Perceptions of Victims and Perpetrators. — Posters shared assumptions about relationships and old age that colored their comments about victims and perpetrators. Many assumed that prior to the incidents, the couples had healthy relationships (“they look very much in love, like the sweetest couple ever”), coexisted peacefully (“quiet and sweet couple at the end of the street”), and enjoyed life together (“A person could see their excitement, enjoyment and compassion through their stories”). In cases of homicide—suicide, posters believed that couples shared a commitment to die together (“They were together as they wanted to be until the very end”). A few posters struggled with connecting older adults with violence (“Why do old people have to be violent like the rest of us?”) or sex (“The thought of a 75 year old woman steppin’ out to get her freak on is just a little too much for most of us to take!”). Many posters deduced that old people who acted irrationally were simply demented (“Seriously? I think Alzheimer’s has set in”).

Perceptions of Victims. Few comments specifically addressed victims, and none were posted about male victims. Only 22 (6.5%) comments indicated that a woman was an unwilling participant or victim of IPV despite 20 (83.3%) incidents involving her death. Among posters who identified the deceased as victims of IPV, two were incredulous of other comments written. Stillgottabrain asked

THEY wanted to spend eternity together? Then why didn’t each commit suicide instead of one killing the other and then that one committing suicide? And what did you read to prompt your comment “was probably their only alternative”? Did I miss something???

In response to another incident involving the strangulation of a woman suspected of having an extramarital affair, most posters wrestled with blaming the incident on dementia rather than expressing concern over the victim’s death. pbus1 responded:

Oh my goodness! Even if he actually believed his wife was having an affair at 75 years of age that was no reason to literally choke the life out of her! . . . Let’s call it what it is, murder, at least until further notice!

Not all posters agreed. A few posters hypothesized turbulent relationship histories between perpetrators and victims and concluded that the best outcome might be death. Posters like mamalouy836 speculated, “His wife is probably in a better place now. Who knows what kind of life she was living with her husband?”

In three separate incidents, posters suggested that the female victims were to blame for their demise. One man held little sympathy for a victim he knew personally, “She drank a fifth of brandy a day and used a lot of illegal drugs. I hate to snitch but her problems were self-inflicted. Not to mention that she was a chain smoker.”

In response to a different incident, Pantera (self-identified male) interjected that there are two sides to every relationship. Despite his initial claim to oppose domestic violence, he hinted that some level of abuse may be deserved because “after 60+ years of being married to a nagging demanding jealous woman that you may or may not love . . . sooner or later it will drive a man insane.”
**Perceptions of perpetrators.** Comments about perpetrators focused more on circumstances surrounding the violence than the individual or event. Only 22 (6.5%) comments included statements that patently blamed the perpetrator for the violence (“He is selfish and took someone’s life that didn’t deserve to be taken”) or identified the person as a criminal (“He should be convicted of murder by depraved indifference”).

Conversely, two posters not only supported the perpetrators’ actions, but agreed with the steps taken for maintaining relationship control. *Ida90210* suggested that, like one perpetrator, he knew what was best for his wife and would take action to see that her best interests were also served, even though she had left him:

> I love my wife and kids that much. So much that I know she will be suffering without me. We belong together till death do us part. Same situation as this old man. I feel she is suffering and brainwashed by this [her] boyfriend. Can’t let it go on.

However, posters’ perceptions of female and male perpetrators were distinctly different. Posters generally viewed female perpetrators as incompetent, and their actions were the result of being “crazy.” Male perpetrators were viewed as being in poor health, stressed out, and doing the best they could under pressure, even if their actions resulted in abuse. Male responses were frequently romanticized as acts of love, compassion, and desperation. Even when reasons for the violence were unknown, posters attributed it to caregiver stress caused by the victim’s dementia or failing health. *Alicia2222* captured the essence of these posts:

> I am going to guess that this man acted out of compassion and desperation... He was tired of watching his wife suffer so he decided to put her out of her misery and take himself with her... kind of Romeo and Juliet-esque.

**Perceptions of Incident.**—Posters did not generally comment on the incident or type of IPV, except in cases of homicide–suicide. Posters that did not view homicide–suicide as an act of violence or a crime concurred that it was the result of a mutually agreed upon death pact to be executed when quality of life was diminished for one or both partners. *Deathpool Dave*’s perspective was shared by many posters:

> I actually have respect for the decision. They lived a blessed and happy life together, the quality of life was gone, and rather than wither and shrivel away slowly they just decided that enough was enough and it was time to cash out. Cheers. Tip of the cap to them.

Other posters indicated that they understood why a couple might decide to end their lives together, but held religious perspectives that did not support it. They unequivocally stated that only a higher power could decide who would die and when.

Still, posters largely agreed that homicide–suicide was not an act of violence because they assumed that the victim and the perpetrator shared the same motivation and desire for its completion. A few posters offered that legalizing physician-assisted suicide would lead to a decrease in homicide–suicides. That is, legalization would take pressure off a partner to take action on behalf of the other. No one mentioned the possibility of other underlying motives for homicide–suicide.

**Excuses and Blame.**—Posters offered a variety of explanations for why perpetrators were not at fault and why incidents should not be handled as crimes. For example, when posters were aware that victims had contact with other family members, posters like *a.green* chastised them for not intervening: “OMG! Where was the daughter when all of this happened? Why didn’t she petition the court for guardianship?” Accusing family members of being passive and contributing to violence was more prevalent in incidents that included suffering. Otherwise, family members were not held responsible for deterring the violence perpetrated.

Across all incidents, posters repeatedly concluded the incidents were triggered by community-level problems; social services, law enforcement, and the local economy were all scrutinized. One poster, *opinionated4u*, a self-described stressed spousal caregiver, wrote about her frustration with local services while empathizing with a couple in one incident:

> I have begged and pleaded for help and there simply is none. If he were to die I’m sure there would be charges of neglect against me even though I am not neglecting him... His doctors know, the courts know, his family knows and no one cares as long as there is someone else to blame.

An anonymous poster stunned other posters with a suggestion that the community-based providers who intervened on behalf of a victim actually hastened her death because they provided worse care than her abuser:
All you people seem to be forgetting one important issue. She lived until the law stepped in. She did not die until the police, nursing home, and the hospital took over her care. She lived with the people in question for a lot of years but died within a month of being under care. That should make any logical person wonder about the medical care in the community.

Although other posters did not agree, many added that inadequate state-level services routinely contributed to problems, rather than alleviating them. Posters like intelldesign attacked government services with cynicism and blame. “The fact that somebody else died because DHS is incapable of doing what it is charged to do, well, that falls squarely on Oregon’s shoulders, no one else.”

Posters frequently blamed society for not caring about older adults. A few held Presidents Reagan and Obama responsible for enacting legislation that reduced older adults to second class citizens. I get it complained, “In more civilized nations, the sick and old are respected enough that they are given options, and we ought to have the same.” Some posters believed that reduced Medicare benefits and the Obama health care plan (which had not yet been finalized) contributed to feelings of hopelessness, which forced adults to live without the care they needed, and pressured loved ones to place them in nursing homes and make decisions that might be construed as IPV (e.g., homicide–suicide). A self-described older adult, to sokie, challenged readers:

Do you think if Obama care promised the elderly that they would provide families of Alzheimer’s patients the same amount of money they pay nursing homes to facilitate homecare for them that this poor man may have had some of that HOPE Obama promised? Naw, the government isn’t concerned about quality care for the elderly. We all know how great that nursing home care is.

Another poster, problem, agreed and added that a conspiracy led by the long-term care industry was largely to blame for homicide–suicides:

There are so many people in nursing homes who wish that they had the means to do this [end their life] but at $5,000 a month for their care, society won’t let them. They just lay there and let the health systems get richer and richer. Great quality of life isn’t it?

Posters also blamed the judicial system for its lack of awareness about IPV and leniency toward convicting and sentencing older criminals. In a discussion thread about sentencing, Mac7725 speculated, “Wow, if he lives that long he’ll be out in 5 for good behavior. Five years for murdering your wife?” Only one poster argued that a jail sentence (15 years) was too long for a charge of neglect, urging the perpetrator to appeal for a lighter sentence.

Social Responsibility.—One poster took the opportunity to use the comment section as a platform to encourage community members to take a stand against social indifferences shown to older adults in the community. letsdosomethingabout wrote:

This is a sad testament as to how sheltered/closed off we’ve become from our neighbors and community. This could have happened to any of our elderly neighbors, in any city. Would we know, right now, if it is happening to someone on our street or just around the corner? This poor man, if he in fact did commit murder/suicide, will forever reap the benefits of his actions. What about the rest of us and our inactions that allow someone to feel so alone and overwhelmed?

No one responded.

Conclusion

Consistent with previous studies on media coverage of domestic violence (Carlyle et al., 2008; Roberto, McCann, & Brossoie, 2013; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002), we found that homicides dominated news coverage of IPV. Across stories with lethal outcomes, posters expressed little outrage and cautiously referred to those involved as victims or perpetrators. Posters often rationalized perpetrator actions and reassigned blame to make sense of the incidents. Abusers were perceived to be guilty of crimes only when the information provided suggested deliberate harm was perpetrated against defenseless persons—as in cases of neglect. Few posters suggested that perpetrators be criminally charged for their actions. Although some posters found homicide–suicide unacceptable, they remained reluctant to label it as a crime, assuming that the decision to die was consensual.

The pronounced absence of comments and discussions about victims is curious. We can only speculate that posters were either less interested in the victims than the abusers because their fates were already decided, they lacked sufficient information to comment or they were uncomfortable labeling an incident as IPV. We suspect that the same social norms that challenge victims from
seeking help (i.e., IPV is a personal matter) also make it difficult for posters to speculate victimization, particularly when IPV involves homicide–suicide.

By reassigning responsibility and drawing conclusions that aligned with their personal perceptions of IPV, older adults, and relationships, posters ensured that good memories of couples were preserved and perpetrators “saved face” in their communities. However, by discounting IPV as a possible explanation, posters helped minimize the violence and perpetuate the myth that incidents of IPV in late life are random and unintentional (Meyers, 1997). This unequal expectation not only trivializes victims and the harms committed against them (Meyers, 1997; RICDAV, 2000; Ryan et al., 2006), it highlights the need for increased awareness and understanding of IPV in late life (Carlyle et al., 2008; Wikler, 2002), including intimate partner homicide–suicide (Solari, 2007).

Altering public views of IPV among older adults will require public education about IPV and raising awareness of norms and expectations that prohibit victims from seeking help (Teaster et al., 2006). Such education needs to take place where people live, work, and interact with one another. Educational efforts need to reach all community members, especially those better positioned to affect change like policymakers and health care and community service professionals who routinely come in contact with older adults. The implementation of multifaceted, continuous educational messages and programs within the community can reduce violence and enhance quality of life, not only for older adults but for all citizens.

Aligned with these suggestions, academics and practitioners need to work closely with reporters to accurately portray IPV in late life. Collaboration is critical to raising awareness and understanding of IPV. If a more nuanced approach to IPV could be incorporated into stories, reader interest and concern about IPV might rise and the posting community could keep discussions active.

Posters are uniquely positioned to launch public discourses on IPV in late life, although relying on them to advocate for change may be premature. We found that most posters reacted more to other posters rather than the issues or lacked sufficient knowledge about a subject to contribute to discussions. However, we also found a core of thoughtful posters who posed questions, offered different perspectives, shared experiences, and challenged or dismissed comments with socially unacceptable statements. Not only did these posters stimulate diverse thinking and discussion, they regulated the quality and depth of discourse with their participation (Bentley et al., 2007). As interactive media evolves, reporters and policymakers can enhance public recognition and understanding of IPV in late life by engaging in conversations with participatory journalists about what matters most to community members and identify potential solutions.

Although our data collection methods represent a novel approach to the study of IPV within the gerontological and violence literature, we recognize its limitations. Reporters have relative freedom as to how they frame their articles, and newspaper editors decide which stories are news (Roberto et al., 2013). The stories we collected represent only a small portion of incidents of IPV involving older adults throughout the United States. Responses to the stories were also selective, limited only to those who provided unsolicited commentary. Thus, while our observations and findings need to be interpreted with caution, they point to the need for increased awareness about IPV in late life.

Funding

The project described was supported by Award Number R03HD059478 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD) and the Office of the Director (OD). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of NICHD or OD.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material can be found at: http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge research assistance provided by Ryan Cook, Sergeant Miles Turner, and Investigator E. M. E. Turner.

References


