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Competing discourses and cultural intelligibility: Familicide, gender and the mental illness/distress frame in news

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Abstract: Familicide - the killing of a partner and child(ren) – is a rare and complex crime that, when it occurs, receives intense media coverage. However, despite growing scholarly attention to filicide in the news, little research to date has looked at how *familicide* is represented. Situated at the intersection of filicide, intimate partner homicide and very often suicide, how the knotty and confronting issue of familicide is reported on is telling of the discourses available to understand complex forms of family violence. In this article, we argue that reporting on familicide mirrors broader feminist concerns about the tendency to frame fatal family violence at the hands of men in individualised terms - often as driven by mental illness - at the expense of an accounting of gender and power. Here, we seek to elaborate on and contextualise what we call the *mental illness/distress frame* as part of the broader tendency towards psychocentrism. This is amplified in cases of familicide where cultural signifiers for the increasingly publicly conceived of issue of “domestic violence” are often not apparent, leading to popularised psychological explanations to be assumed. The mental health/distress frame operates not only to obscure the role of gender and power in domestic and family violence; it obscures the connection between gender, mental distress and violence, naturalising (and gender-neutralising) mental distress and violence as a response to it. We argue that intersecting discourses – of gender, age, disability and the heterosexual nuclear family, for instance – operate in important ways to suggest, support and rationalise this frame. We illustrate these ideas through a detailed case study analysis of news reporting on a case of familicide in Sydney, Australia.

Introduction

Familicide – the killing of an intimate partner and child(ren) – is a complex phenomenon that, when it occurs, receives intense media coverage and speculation. Yet, there is a paucity of research examining how familicide is represented, and even less from a critical feminist perspective. Situated at the intersection of filicide, intimate partner homicide and very often suicide, how this empirically knotty and emotionally confronting issue is reported on is telling of the discourses available to

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understand complex forms of family violence. While more work is emerging on news

representations of filicide (Cavaglioni, 2009; Little, 2015; Little, 2018; Little and Tyson, 2020; Niblock,

2018; Walklate and Petrie, 2013), only two studies have examined how familicide is represented,

both focusing on social media responses to news reporting (Quinn et al., Sisask and Värnik, 2012).

Only one study (Quinn et al, 2016) incorporates some analysis of news reporting itself, briefly

identifying a “mental illness frame” but not examining this in detail. News reporting on paternal

filicide has drawn somewhat more attention from feminist media scholars, where the tendency to

frame these crimes as driven by perpetrators’ mental illness or life stressors has been identified

(Little, 2018; Little, 2015; Little and Tyson, 2020). However, how this frame relates to familicide, how

its emergence can be understood and how it operates at the intersection of a range of discourses

requires attention.

In this article, we argue that reporting on familicide mirrors broader feminist concerns over the

tendency to frame fatal family violence at the hands of men in individualised terms - often as driven

by mental illness. Here, however, we seek to extend on and contextualise what we call the *mental*

illness/distress frame as part of the broader tendency towards psychocentrism (Rimke, 2016). This is

amplified in cases of familicide, we argue, where the cultural signifiers for the increasingly publicly-

conceived-of issue of ‘domestic violence’ are often not apparent, leading to popularised psychological

explanations. Importantly, the mental health/distress frame operates not only to obscure the role of

gender and power in family violence as feminist scholars have identified; it also obscures the

connection between gender and mental distress, naturalising (and gender-neutralising) both its

drivers and violence as a response to it. Further, while some work has examined domestic violence

representations from an intersectional lens, this lens has not been applied to familicide and under-

applied to mental illness frames. We address this gap by considering how intersecting discourses – of

gender, age and disability, for instance - operate to suggest, support and rationalise the mental

illness/distress frame.

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We illustrate these ideas through a case study analysis of news reporting on a familicide case in Sydney, Australia. Reporting on this case is examined from its inception in 2016, when the killings took place, to news coverage of the Coronial Inquest findings in 2019. Our analysis shows how a mental illness/distress frame was produced through a combination of language, selection of sources and the provision of context (Kirkland Gillespie et al., 2013). Further, it shows that the mental illness/distress frame relies on a range of assumptions at the intersection of gender, age and (dis)ability. This has implications for the extent to which gender in familicide is recognised.

Familicide

Statistics on familicide are difficult to establish due to its relative rarity, definitional inconsistencies, and methodological challenges arising from overlapping with other crimes such as mass-homicide, intimate partner homicide, filicide and homicide-suicide (Karlsson et al, 2019). Available national incidence data varies between 0.07 and 1.0 cases per million people, or between 1 and 2.55 cases annually (Karlsson et al, 2019). When defined as killing of a partner and child(ren), two main sub-types of perpetrators have been identified. One is motivated by anger or revenge and more likely to have a history of coercive control and physical violence; the other is motivated by despondency and humiliation, more likely to have no history of prior physical violence and be respected members of the community (Liem and Reichman, 2014; Websdale, 2010).

Most scholarship on familicide has been conducted through the lens of forensic psychology, with sparse attention given by sociology and feminist scholars¹. In most studies, risk factors and perpetrator psychology prevail as analytical frames, and gender is conceptualised around the sex of perpetrators rather than gender in social terms (see Karlsson et al, 2019 for a review of literature).

Despite a notable lack of feminist scholarly attention, available research suggests it is deeply gendered. Research on filicide, more broadly, shows male intimate partner violence is a frequent precursor of both paternal and maternal filicide (Butler and Buxton, 2013; Caruthers, 2016; O'Hagan,

¹ For a notable exception see Websdale's (2010) sociological analysis of emotion and familicide.

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2014)². Female partners are often targeted as victims of domestic violence preceding filicide (Butler and Buxton, 2013; Jaffe et al., 2014; Karlsson et al., 2019; O'Hagan, 2014), and paternal filicide is more frequently connected to a perceived loss of masculine control or an act of revenge following separation or custody disputes (Bourget et al., 2006; Caruthers, 2016; Eriksson et al., 2016; Jaffe et al., 2014; Kirkwood, 2012; O'Hagan, 2014).

When partners are also victims (familicide), it is an almost exclusively male crime (Johnson and Sachman, 2014; Karlsson et al., 2019; Websdale, 2010). Various studies point to gender constructs as important for understanding familicide. This includes gendered controlling and proprietary attitudes towards women, children and the family, as well as humiliation and shame due to a loss of control over gendered domains such as finances (Karlsson et al., 2019; Liem and Koenraadt, 2008; Mailloux, 2014; Oliffe et al., 2015; Websdale, 2010). Homicide-suicides characterised as “domestic desperation” - as many familicides are – are about reaffirming hegemonic masculinity in the face of its perceived marginalisation (Oliffe et al., 2015). Despite a notable lack of feminist work in this area, therefore, extant research signals the enduring salience of gender in familicide and its location on a continuum of control-oriented domestic and family violence, even in cases where familicide appears “out-of-the-blue”.

The mental illness/distress frame

Feminist media scholars have long criticised portrayals of domestic and family violence as suggesting a private family tragedy, relying on individualised, psychological frames over structural ones (Berns, 2017; Sutherland et al, 2015). This, they argue, denies root causes of such violence; power and control (Yates, 2020). Emerging research on filicide and familicide reflects this tendency. Writing on news representations of paternal filicide, Little (2015) identifies a “mental illness referent”, whereby violence against children is represented “as the extraordinary consequences of mental illness” (p.605). This mental illness referent arises when news media “attempts to ‘translate’ an

² Butler and Buxton's (2013) found 80% of paternal filicide offenders had a history of domestic violence against women, and 59% of maternal filicide offenders had been victims of domestic violence.

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incomprehensible event” by drawing on “a populist discursive paradigm of mental illness” (Little and Tyson, 2017, p.10). This theme has been picked up in Quinn et al’s (2016) case study on familicide in the Irish media, which identifies a “mental health frame”, although this is not explored in-depth.

We call it a *mental illness/distress frame*, rather than a mental illness frame as others have done, to emphasise the more broadly psychocentric (Rimke, 2016) framing of perpetrators’ actions as driven by mental distress. Not all reporting directly implicates the presence of a mental illness. However, psychocentric frames in which mental distress is assumed to have overwhelmed perpetrators to the point of “snapping” are common (Easteal et al., 2019; Niblock, 2018). The term, therefore, captures both direct and oblique explanations based on psychopathology. The term mental illness alone is also limited, undergirded by assumptions of scientific consensus and detachment, regarding mental illness in positivistic terms (Rimke, 2016). By incorporating the term mental distress, therefore, we also acknowledge that not all mental suffering is categorised as “mental illness”.

Rimke (2016) defines psychocentrism as “the view that human problems are due to a biologically-based flaw or deficit in the bodies and/or minds of individual subjects” (p.5). Mental illness and distress are, according to Rimke (2016), predominantly viewed from this lens. This essentialises and naturalises experiences of mental distress, denying their social and structural causes (Rimke, 2016). The mental illness/distress frame of family violence is, therefore, not limited to positioning “mental illness” as the cause of violence; it extends to presenting violence as the outcome of mental distress that is assumed a natural response to certain life stressors. The gendered social and structural causes of this distress – and the fact that it is responded to with violence – are largely invisible. Mental distress is presented as ahistorical and asocial (Rimke, 2016) – and therefore gender-neutral. This is at odds with what the research suggests: that most familicide perpetrators indeed feel intense and painful emotions (Websdale, 2010), but that these emotions and how they are acted upon are deeply gendered, contextualised within patriarchal culture and structures (Mailloux et al, 2014; Oliffe et al, 2015). The mental illness/distress frame as we identify it, therefore, signals not only reference to mental illness/distress, but how it is conceived of in psychocentric terms.

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Discourse, culture and the intelligibility of familicide

Culture makes available a range of discourses that lay particular contours around the interpretive possibilities for cases of extreme and rare violence. Familicide shocks the public and challenges cherished values of the nuclear family as safe haven, and fathers as protectors (Little, 2015). To understand public interpretations of familicide, which in many ways threaten normative understandings of family, we need to consider them at the intersection of a range of available discourses that may work to make sense of extreme violence.

Familicide does not fit neatly into common narratives of domestic and family violence. First, it involves an interlocking trifecta of filicide, intimate partner homicide and often suicide, each connected to their own range of cultural discourses. Further, while a prior history of domestic violence is one of the most common precursors for familicide, this is not always the case (Karlsson et al., 2019; Websdale, 2010). Intense feelings of shame and failure or an imminent fall from grace are common (Websdale, 2010). Compared to the most common form of fatal domestic violence - intimate partner femicide (Richards et al., 2014) - familicide is therefore particularly susceptible to appearing out-of-the-blue and unconnected to gendered violence. As such, it is revealing of the quick-trigger meaning-making mechanisms available to journalists, particularly where cases do not map neatly onto power and control models of domestic violence. Policy and media portrayals of domestic violence also tend to centre on violence against women (Murray and Powell, 2008), making domestic violence less readable in cases involving children (Little, 2015).

The comparative intelligibility of the mental illness/distress frame also needs to be considered in the context of modern psychocentrism, particularly the medicalising and depoliticising of social issues through the trope of mental illness (Rimke, 2016). It emerges out of a shift toward embracing mental illness as a public health issue over the last few decades, a period which saw the growth of therapeutic discourses that normalise the medical management of mental illness within the community (Holmes, 2016). Accordingly, while earlier media coverage of mental illness was often largely negative and connected to violence, mental illness has received increasingly 'sympathetic'

Competing discourses and cultural intelligibility: Familicide, gender and the mental illness/distress frame in news coverage (Francis et al., 2004; Rowe et al., 2003). This has largely been achieved by enfolding mental illness within bio-medical models of health that form part of modern psychocentrism (Rimke, 2016), displacing blame from the sufferer and positioning mental illness as individual pathology in need of medical management (Rowe et al., 2003). While the connection between mental illness and violence in media has not been severed, recent studies show it is receding (Reavely et al., 2016), and sufferers of mental illnesses such as depression are increasingly framed in as in need of support rather than dangers to society (Rowe et al., 2013). This context makes a mental illness/distress frame in cases of violence both culturally accessible and potentially sympathetic.

At the same time these mental health paradigms were making ground, understandings of domestic violence shifted considerably from being perceived principally as a private issue to being recognised as a social and gendered problem (Murray and Powell, 2009). In Australia, where this case study is situated, domestic violence has a prominent position within national discourse, and feminist framings of domestic and family violence have come to assume a dominant position in policy contexts (Yates, 2020). Domestic violence is, accordingly, increasingly conceptualised as part of a systemic pattern of male control and abuse with its roots in patriarchal privilege (Dobash, 1994). Still, there remain "discursive tensions around whether family violence is 'a gender issue'" (Hawley et al., 2018: 2306). The gendering of public discourse on domestic and family violence is shadowed by a resistant discourse of gender neutrality and individualisation. As such, there is tremendous "cultural ambivalence" towards the gendering of domestic violence, which remains central to the "knowledge contests" occurring in media spaces (Dragiewicz and Burgess, 2016).

The mental illness/distress frame must be considered within this contested space. Where the dominant frames available to understand domestic and family violence do not map neatly onto familicide cases, psychocentric framings may be more culturally intelligible. Journalists tend to take up the responsibility to 'solve' events, "however much they seem incomprehensible" (Michelle and Weaver, 2003: 603). Within this culturally invested "language of rationalisation" (ibid), nascent discourses of mental illness as a public issue may be drawn on as part of a journalistic repertoire of

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sense-making. This is particularly so in cases involving the killing of children, which defy our most cherished values and assumptions (Little, 2018). Here, “rationalization materializes through the filtering capacity of public assumptions about mental illness” (Little, 2015: 608).

Finally, the cultural intelligibility of the mental illness/distress frame needs to be considered with an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1993). Of course, gender constructs provide a prism through which familicide is viewed and represented; news stories about fatally violent fathers are, in fact, stories that convey ideological assumptions about gender and family (Little, 2015). These discourses are, however, further inflected by interlocking social categories (Crenshaw, 1991; Meyers, 1994) in a way that affects when and how individualised discourses are employed. For instance, discourses of domestic violence are more likely to be individualised in cases involving racially and ethnically dominant groups and attributed to ‘culture’ for racial or ethnic minorities (Maydell, 2018; Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005). Violence against children has also not always been recognised as gendered, because gender-based violence is often conceived of as male violence against women (Boyle, 2019; Yates, 2020). This impacts on the intelligibility of filicide as gender-based violence. An intersectional lens on the mental illness/distress frame can, therefore, illuminate some of the interlocking social forces that influence news representations - and render mental illness/distress as an explanatory frame intelligible.

The case study

In 2016, in Davidson, Sydney, a family of four (the Lutz-Manriques) and their pet dog were found dead in their home: two children, Elisa (11) and Martin (10), their mother, Maria Lutz, and their father, Fernando Manrique. Police investigations revealed that a network of pipes had been installed into the roofing of their home to pump poisonous gas throughout the house. Neighbours reported witnessing Fernando Manrique working on the house with power tools just two days before and subsequent reports confirmed the pre-planned deaths to be a ‘murder-suicide’. In the days and weeks to come, and as confirmed by the release of the coronial inquest findings in 2019 (Truscott, 2019), Fernando Manrique had meticulously planned and executed the killing of his family.

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Some key information about the case and how it was reported are worth mentioning here. Much was made in the reporting of the fact that Elisa and Martin had autism, a point that remained prominent in reporting until the release of the inquest findings. Maria's friends disputed the role this played, revealing to the press that she had planned to leave Fernando and relocate to Colombia to live with her family. The inquest findings later confirmed that it was after hearing her decision that Manrique ordered the gas cannisters from his hotel room. He then begged Maria to come home until he could find another place to stay, using this time to construct the gas distribution system. The coronial inquest also revealed that Manrique had a history of extended infidelity, including a long-term relationship with a young woman in the Philippines up until his death, a point that was taken up in later reporting.

This article presents a qualitative case study of reporting on the Davidson familicide. We focus on reporting soon after the crimes, which constituted the majority of reporting and exemplifies a "moment of crisis" (Fairclough, 1992) in which struggles over meaning are laid bare. Some of the most productive moments through which to explore discourse are through such "cruces", moments of ambiguity and contestation (Fairclough, 1992). The early days of reporting, particularly, reflect this inducement to meaning-making around 'inexplicable' violence. However, we also show that with the release of the coronial inquest findings, this narrative shifted, revealing the contingency of the mental illness/distress frame.

Methodology

78% of Australians access 'traditional' news sources online as part of their repertoire of political engagement (RMRI, 2018), and news continues to hold a "position of relative discursive and institutional power as the 'Fourth Estate'" (Little, 2015: 608). This positions mainstream news uniquely as a source of information that is looked towards to make sense of events, "to render [an] irrationally violent act comprehensible" (Little 2015: 608).

Five online news publications were selected for this study to represent both broad public access across a range of age groups and a variety of orientations within mainstream news. This included

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four national and one Sydney-based publication which has one of the highest national readerships.

news.com.au is the most widely accessed online news source with a reach across multiple generations (RMRI, 2018). The national news broadcaster, *ABC News* and a more traditional news outlet, *The Guardian Australia*, represent left/centre-left orientations, while more tabloidized and centre-right publications with the highest readerships were represented by the *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Australian*. All content accessed was open-access to reflect broad availability and readership, except for *The Australian* for which online content is available only via subscription. Publications were searched with the family name used in news reporting on the case (“Lutz-Manrique”) and filtered to exclude a small number of articles not focused on the case. Overall, 43 articles spanning from October 2016 to May 2019 were collected and qualitatively analysed; 11 of these were published after the Coronial Inquest.

Publication	Pre-inquest	Post-inquest	Total
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	14	4	18
<i>The Guardian</i> (Australia)	2	2	4
<i>ABC News</i>	4	2	6
<i>news.com.au</i>	10	0	10
<i>The Australian</i>	2	3	5
Total articles	32	11	43

Table 1: Sample summary

As a broad analytical framework, feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) was applied, operating from the basis that gender is ubiquitous in discourse, actively implicated in and produced through power relations (Lazar, 2007). FCDA draws on feminist understandings of gender as a social construct that plays a central role in organizing discourse, practice and relations of power (Lazar 2007). Like Fairclough (1992), FCDA considers (gendered) discourse as a social practice. It also draws on feminist insights into the salience of intersecting social forces in constituting gender and shaping the ways it is represented (Lazar, 2007). As Lazar explains, “the intersection of gender with other systems of power based on race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, age, culture, and

Competing discourses and cultural intelligibility: Familicide, gender and the mental illness/distress frame in news geography means that gender oppression is neither materially experienced nor discursively enacted in the same way for women everywhere” (2007: 149). Intersectional feminist theory, developed by scholars such as Crenshaw (1991) and Hill Collins (1993), holds that an examination of gender is not complete without an interrogation of how interlocking social categories shape the experience and representation of gender. While FCDA places gender at the centre of the analysis, it aims to be astute to these interlocking social categories.

Like critical discourse analysis broadly, FCDA is theoretically robust but without clear practical direction for application. As such, Bacchi’s (2009) applied framework for critical discourse analysis was used in conjunction with FCDA. Her “What’s the problem represented to be” approach provides a set of questions that can be applied to texts to analyse how social problems are represented. These include questions in relation to 1) what the problem is represented to be; 2) what assumptions underlie this representation of the problem; 3) how this representation has come about; 4) what is left unproblematic or silenced in the problem representation; 5) what effects may be produced by this way of representing; and 6) how the representation is (re)produced and challenged (Bacchi, 2009). We also found Kirkland Gillespie et al.’s (2013) approach of considering language, sources and context provided in news as useful for exploring *how* these representations, as identified through Bacchi’s framework, were achieved within news texts.

“Was it too much?”: The mental illness/distress frame

Reporting on this case fed into an implicit mental illness/distress framing in three interrelated ways: the frequent inclusion of mental health support services and exclusion of domestic and family violence support services, constructing prevention in mental health terms; the focus on personal family struggles and stressors as a catalyst for the violence; and the use of passive language that framed violence as a response to these stressors as out of the perpetrator’s control.

First, and most strikingly, the support services listed had a significant framing effect. Mental health and suicide prevention services such as *Lifeline*, *BeyondBlue*, *Suicide Call Back Service* and *Mensline* were provided in the majority of articles, while no articles in the five online newspapers included

Competing discourses and cultural intelligibility: Familicide, gender and the mental illness/distress frame in news national domestic violence resources such as *1800 Respect*. While the provision of support services did not act alone in producing a frame, operated to construct a *context* (Kirkland Gillespie et al., 2013) for the violence. Support services within news stories operate to suggest that a story can be interpreted in the context of a larger social issue, constructing a bridge between the individual event and other events identified on the same terms.

The provision of support services in news reporting is set out in Australian Press Council standards and guidelines for reporting on suicide and domestic violence. However, the application of these is not uniform, and there is an interpretive dimension to recognising the relevance of various support services to a particular story. For the Davidson familicide, which involved both suicide and the killing of a woman and two children, the identification and inclusion of relevant support services was telling. It implicitly framed the violence as stemming from mental illness/distress, and family killings as a form of extended suicide. This tendency may in part be linked to the fact that, while suicide reporting requires these resources to meet standards, domestic violence guidelines are just that: guidelines.

In addition, crime reporting's reliance on criminal justice sources can shape the tenor of reporting in this area. Criminal justice focuses on individual cases and the accused's "state of mind"; as such homicide cases are often reliant on psychiatric expertise and frameworks. Where criminal justice sources and court proceedings are frequently relied on this can shape news towards more "episodic" framing of domestic and family violence as isolated incidents (Sutherland et al, 2019). Further, legal questions may have a chilling effect (Cullen et al, 2019) on journalistic strategies to engage in thematic reporting that suggests the case is part of a broader social pattern (Sutherland et al, 2019); the inclusion of DFV resources placing the case in the context of domestic violence could be regarded as suggestive of criminal guilt that is yet to be determined. Nonetheless, there is scope to recognise multiple homicides in a family as family violence in itself, regardless of yet-to-be-determined individual guilt. We suggest there is, therefore, also an interpretive element in the failure to include domestic and family violence resources in such a case.

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In a few cases, mental illness/distress was more directly inferred through the use of *language*

(Kirkland Gillespie et al., 2013), with reference to Manrique's "toxic mind" (Morri and Houghton,

2016) and calls to the public to "get help" if needed (Davidson Deaths, 2016). *The Australian*

reported it had "been alleged Mr Manrique, 44, 'snapped' in an apparent murder-suicide"

(Buckingham-Jones, 2016a). Despite the quotations used, the term 'snapped' could not be traced to

any source, suggesting that the perpetrator who 'snaps' (Easteal et al., 2019; Niblock, 2018) has

become part of journalists' interpretive vernacular. This may also be influenced by psychocentric

legal frameworks around determining individual culpability. For the most part, mental

illness/distress remained largely implicit, however. Linking back to autism-related support services

(McCallum and Cross, 2016), for instance, or foregrounding the "struggle" of raising autistic children

implicitly frame mental distress as the key agent. One by-line captures this succinctly: "A mother

found dead with her husband, their autistic children and the family dog in a suspected murder-

suicide at their Davidson home yesterday was struggling to cope" (Patterson and Brennan, 2016).

Second, the killings de-contextualised from patterns of domestic and family violence (Sutherland et

al., 2015) by a conspicuous absence of expert *sources* (Kirkland Gillespie et al., 2013), or other

elements referencing *context* such as data on family violence, familicide or filicide. While cited

domestic violence experts are becoming more common in news (Sutherland et al, 2019), cases

involving filicide hardly see expertise on patterns and context included (Niblock, 2018). Much was

also made in the reporting of the niceness of the couple and neighbourhood, framing the events as

unexpected and without precursor. The Lutz-Manriques were described as "a lovely, friendly couple"

(Gusmaroli et al., 2016) and "just a normal family" in a quiet neighbourhood (Patterson and

Brennan, 2016); "it's so unexpected especially around here" (Two Adults, 2016). Some went as far as

to state, in reporting police statements, that the bodies showed "no signs of violence" (Police Await,

2016; Koubaridis and Fernando, 2016; Gusmaroli et al., 2016), silencing the violence of the killings

themselves and decoupling them from the issue of family violence.

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Constructions of the 'nice' man who kills his family operated to support assumptions of these violent acts as inexplicable, devoid of a context of control and coercion (Niblock, 2018). Yet, "killing [often] makes public what has been private, hidden to family, friends and neighbours who often thought that this man had been a 'doting' and 'loving' father and 'dutiful' husband" (Niblock, 2018: 2453). Representing violence as out of character bolsters the mental illness/distress frame, as 'nice men' cannot be conceived of as violent but can be conceived of as sufferers of mental illness or distress. Personal circumstances, in particular Elisa and Martin's diagnosed autism, were heavily emphasised throughout the initial news coverage, often coupled directly with the violence itself.

"Their bodies were found when police forced entry to the home after being alerted by a concerned friend. Elisa and Martin both had significant disabilities, including autism" (Kidd, 2016).

The "struggles" of the family, almost entirely attributed to the children's disability, displaced focus away from the violence itself or the act of control they engendered. The "pain" of the family, often as described by neighbours, became the implicit explanation for violence.

"Davidson deaths: Was it all too much for tragic parents?" (Brennan, 2016a)

"Autism community urges people to seek help after suspected murder-suicide of family-of-four" (Cross and McCallum, 2016).

"It breaks my heart to think of how much pain the family was going through [...] [Maria] looked after them but I have to say she never looked happy" [...] She said it was a heavy thing on her heart and some days she found it impossible to cope" (Brennan, 2016).

This unproblematically assumes a connection between family circumstances and the wielding of extreme violence, rendering gender largely invisible. While both parents were described as experiencing tremendous personal difficulties, the above headlines demonstrate how these personal struggles were unquestioningly presumed as explanatory factors for violence on behalf of the father.

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This left unproblematic why one parent's mental distress manifested as violence but not another, and how this fits into patterns of domestic family violence – and familicide. This “internal myopia” is common in domestic homicide-suicide reporting, where journalists fail to see or report on gendered patterns of perpetration (Websdale and Alvarez, 1998). In this way, the link between distressed masculinity and violence is further naturalised. Psychocentric frames assume a largely asocial position on mental illness or distress (Rimke, 2016), contributing to this internal myopia. Within an asocial mental illness/distress frame, patterned and gendered responses to distress, such as violence against women, often go unnoticed.

The exception to this form of reporting only came when, frustrated with the news media's portrayal of the case, a year later friends of Maria Lutz later spoke to journalists about the events leading up to her, Elisa and Martin's deaths. In these interviews, they insisted on reframing the case explicitly as “domestic violence” and “control” that was connected to the couple's imminent separation (Benny-Morrison, 2017).

“In a raw and emotional interview with the Sunday Telegraph leading up to the anniversary of the murders, Mrs Lutz's friends have provided a frank insight into the case in a bid to raise awareness about domestic violence. Contrary to some of the reports about the high-profile case, Mrs Lutz's friends said the deaths had little to do with Martin's and Elisa's disabilities. It was about Mr Manrique's loss of control”.

As others have noted, where the voices of close friends and family are sourced over those of neighbours and acquaintances, a broader context of control is more likely to emerge (Kirkland Gillespie et al., 2013). However, there was generally an overreliance on law enforcement sources that frame domestic violence as “a series of individual incidents” (Simons and Morgan, 2018: 1203). Even in the direct reporting of Maria Lutz's friends' voices above, the domestic violence angle was buried within the news piece, not reflected in the headline, much of the body of the text or through relevant resources posted at the end. It remained a marginalised frame, if significant as a point of resistance to de-gendered framings of the killings as caused by presumed suffering.

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Finally, frequent use of passive *language* reinforced a mental illness/distress frame, particularly

where its use is juxtaposed with mental health resources suggestive of context. Framing the death of Fernando Manrique as a seamless part of the same tragedy as the deaths of his partner and children constructed him in passive terms as a victim of his personal circumstances and state of mind.

“Maria Lutz and her children, Elisa and Martin.. were found dead in their Sydney home along with her husband, Fernando Manrique” (Police Await, 2016)

“The family of four in Sydney’s North were gassed in an apparent murder suicide” (Sydney Family, 2016)

Passive language is particularly common in cases of male violence against women (Henley et al, 1994; Frazer and Miller, 2009). When perpetrator agency is diluted in this way (Henley et al, 1994), suggesting an absence of control, medicalised assumptions of disease as the agent and its sufferer as the object are reinforced.

The normative middleclass heterosexual family

Reporting on the Davidson case presented the adult victim, Maria Lutz, both subtly as complicit in the killings as mentally distressed parent, and as a figure of motherly virtue and therefore as undeserving (and unexpected) victim of violence. These gendered inscriptions of accountability and blamelessness crafted specific contours around the mental health framing; by implicitly presenting an adherence to normative understandings of femininity and family as reasons to expect greater immunity to family violence, the idea that violence stems not from gendered family structures but instead from individual pathology was bolstered.

On the one hand, repeated reference to the struggles of both parents insinuated that the killings were, in part, the result of a collective parental failure. This negated sole perpetrator responsibility. As Nikunen (2006: 181) has observed in depictions of filicide, “women are seen as more competent in controlling their actions than men and thus they are also more responsible for their actions”. In

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this case, while Maria Lutz was often framed as not coping, ultimately her control over her actions - her non-violence - was assumed. Fernando Manrique's move to violence in the face of mental distress, on the other hand, was largely naturalised.

At the same time, in much of the coverage Maria Lutz was held up as exemplar of motherly virtue, as illustrated in some of the following phrases describing her:

"The fiercely protective mother";

"a dedicated volunteer and fundraiser";

"loving mother, a fighter to the end"; "devoted 43-year-old mother"; and

"Maria campaigned tirelessly for children with autism" (Morri and Houghton, 2016)

Emphasising Maria Lutz's character and qualities granted her an identity outside that of victim and gave expression to the love she and her children shared. However, the intensity and focus of these gendered accounts of feminine virtue also potentially contribute to (re)constructing an ideal victim (Christie, 1986). These gendered constructions render some victims (and perpetrators) more sympathetic or culpable than others, potentially shaping material outcomes such as court verdicts and sentences (Wiest and Duffy, 2013). Further, they strengthen the assumption of violence as unexpected anomaly, granting a mental health/distress frame greater explanatory power. Maria Lutz's traditional roles were emphasised and lauded in a way that suggested she was an unlikely victim; adherence to a traditional gendered model of family was implicitly suggested as immunising to violence. Yet, the traditional nuclear, middleclass, heterosexual family is almost ubiquitous to familicide (Karlsson et al, 2019). Further, a sense of failure to live up to this construct and sense of entitlement to act as agent on the family's behalf are central to most familicide cases (Websdale, 2010; Mailloux et al, 2014; Oliffe et al, 2015). The traditional middleclass nuclear family is, therefore, implicated in familicide even as it is presented here suggestive of immunity to violence.

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Gendered representations of the father also reinforced the discourse individual pathology. Fernando Manrique was described as a traditional breadwinner and accomplished middle-class father, “a high-flying technology executive whose work took him around the world” (Morri and Houghton, 2016) who built the family home “brick by brick” and as someone whose family were “well looked after” (Patterson, 2016). Yet, while the “parents’ struggles” with raising autistic children was in focus, little was said about his parenting. These normative constructions of gender reinforced the idea of his violence as ‘out-of-the-blue’ as shown below:

“But beneath the friendly face and suit-and-tie was a man who turned the family home he built 11 years ago into a gas chamber” (Morri and Houghton, 2016).

The performance of normative masculinity was implied as a condition that made his violence unexpected. This portrayal was also classed, where middle-class status formed part of the normative performance of masculinity and, indeed, the construct of the normative nuclear family. This class dimension lends weight to the explanatory power of mental illness/distress by making male violence less culturally intelligible than it would be in the context of a working-class family (Walklate and Petrie, 2013). As such, news reporting of the familicide attempted to “make sense of extraordinary events by relying on conventional ideas about gender” (Nikunen, 2011: 81). Mental illness/distress became a viable explanation for extreme family violence in part *because* it occurred within what was portrayed as a traditional middleclass heterosexual family that was assumed to provide no systemic ‘red flags’.

Intersections of disability and age

Intersecting discourses of disability and age were also mobilised in a way that supported the mental illness/distress frame. Reporting reflected an immense preoccupation with Elisa and Martin having autism, which became central to the narrative. While all newspapers drew on a gendered mental illness/distress frame, the way disability shaped reporting was particularly potent within more right-

Competing discourses and cultural intelligibility: Familicide, gender and the mental illness/distress frame in news leaning and tabloidized publications, which produced more dramatic and sensational reporting that relied on assumptions of disability and suffering. The impact of childhood autism on parents was, in many ways, the only suggestion of a broader public issue.

“Our society cannot avoid questions about its capacity to respond to families living constantly with disabilities, just as our Church cannot” (McCallum, 2016a)

“perhaps this [media] exposure may result in awareness of the enormous economic, social and psychological stresses that families of children with disabilities bear” (Kidd, 2016)

While support for families of children with disabilities is certainly an important issue, the implicit assumption of violence as a rational outcome of parenting disabled children is problematic. It shows how intersecting discourses of childhood and disability can undergird and create specific contours for the mental illness/distress frame; the “desperation” of the perpetrator was made sense of through the assumed burden of disabled children. Discourses of autistic children as a burden are pervasive in the media (Jones and Harwood, 2009). “For parents, families and carers there is a consistent message that life will be an ongoing struggle. [Parents are] portrayed as either stoic individuals who cope but are damaged and traumatized... or as uncaring or incapable parents who harm or abandon their children” (Jones and Harwood, 2009: 15). This discourse is both ableist and adult-centric, understanding childhood disability through the lens of its impact on adults and silencing relations of power between adults and children. In line with psychocentrism, it naturalises the assumed mental distress of parenting disabled children, unquestioning of ableist and adult-centric discourses and structures that shape these experiences.

It should be noted that Elisa and Martin’s deaths were covered with tremendous pathos, their talents and characters highlighted especially around their accomplished artworks placed on exhibition soon after their deaths. This, to some extent, challenged the deficit discourse associated with autism.

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“[Martin’s] artworks show a precocious talent with a command of subject, colour and composition unusual in one so young” (McCallum, 2016b)

“They’re also beautiful children with unique personalities” (Kidd, 2016)

Nonetheless, there was a concentrated preoccupation with their disability, referenced repeatedly and needlessly even as it celebrated them.

This morning, hundreds of people [...] celebrate the lives and achievements of the couple and their two disabled children, Elisa, 11, and Martin, 10” (Buckingham-Jones, 2016b).

Elisa and Martin’s disability acted as a central referent and an implicit rationale for Manrique’s actions. This pattern in reporting was picked up and challenged by people who knew the family (Kidd, 2016; Benny-Morrison, 2017). While there were attempts to frame them as whole people, the patterned preoccupation with the impact of their disability on their parents undergirded the assumption of mental distress as the driver of violence. Assuming such conditions as inherently distressing for the perpetrator, and sufficient explanation for violence, decontextualises both mental distress and its manifestation as violence.

Presenting disabled children as the reason in this case silenced how age and disability contribute to vulnerability to violence, particularly within in a patriarchal family context (Douglas and Harpur, 2016; Hunnicutt, 2009). Violence against children and people with disability, too, are gendered. As Hunnicutt (2009) argues, the concept of patriarchy must be understood as intertwined with other systems of domination. Indeed, as Walklate and Petrie (2013: 269) note, “filicide-suicide is rooted in personal or economic catastrophe reflecting dominant patriarchal discourses that underpin the presumption of male proprietorial power over women and children”. Here, however, the very proprietorial patriarchal understandings of children as possessions and potential burdens that render them vulnerable to violence are reified.

Post-inquest: The bad dad narrative

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While coverage following the Coronial Inquest into the Lutz-Manrique case was comparatively sparse, it demonstrated two important points. First, the assumption of disabled children as burden which underscored the mental illness/distress frame was decisively discredited and directly challenged by the Coroner (Truscott, 2019). So potent and readily available are the discourses that informed these early assumptions that perhaps the most salient facts of the crime were overlooked – namely, that a man carefully planned and executed the killing of his wife and children, in a national context with high levels of fatal family violence. The detailed Coronial Inquest laid bare these assumptions, showing that while Maria had indeed struggled in many ways, she loved being a mother to her two children and was excited and hopeful about the future (Truscott, 2019).

Nonetheless, individualised framings remained powerful, with a key element of post-inquest coverage being the construction of a ‘bad dad’ narrative. While brief reference was made in reporting to the Coroners’ description of the case as family violence, the most reported-on aspects of the findings were Manrique’s extra-marital affairs and “tawdry private life” (Crawford, 2019). This ‘second life’ came to define and make sense of his actions:

“Man suspected of killing family in murder-suicide was having affair, inquest hears” (Calderwood, 2019)

“Viagra, Botox and infidelity: the secret life of Fernando Manrique” (Harvey and Benny-Morrison, 2019)

“Murder-suicide dad had teenage lover” (O’Sullivan, 2019)

Rather than making connections between the case and broader issues of domestic and family violence, a new figure of the selfish cheating father emerged, solidifying the individualisation of the crimes even as the narrative shifted. No longer portrayed as mentally distressed, Manrique was a “murdering father... more interested in having unprotected sex overseas [and] getting a ‘sleeve’ tattoo... than helping his wife... care for their two autistic children” (Crawford, 2019). His violence was recast, somewhat seamlessly, as a symptom of intrinsic immorality. This portrayal was, in some

Competing discourses and cultural intelligibility: Familicide, gender and the mental illness/distress frame in news ways, startlingly conventional, relying on normalised constructions of masculinity and violence even as it condemned Manrique. The gendered figure of the “horror dad”, “defying hegemonic masculinity [...] with his lack of fathering capacity but affirming them with his choice to use violence against a child” (Little, 2018: 12) continued to naturalise and evade the question of violence. As Manrique went from being ‘mad’ to ‘bad’ (Niblock, 2018), his actions were still rendered understandable at an individual level. In all these news reports, the provision of domestic and family violence support services, statistics, or expert sources remained completely absent.

Conclusion

Familicide has received scant attention from feminist media scholars. Yet, news reporting on these cases is revealing of some of the limits around the intelligibility of domestic violence narratives where a history of prior violence is not evident. An analysis of news reporting on the Davidson familicide is offered here fill a gap in the research on familicide and news, and advance a more nuanced discussion of the mental illness/distress frame that has been identified in family violence cases involving children. While some representations drew on the concept of “domestic violence”, this was overpowered by a psychocentric mental illness/distress frame that silenced not only gender and power, but the social dimensions of mental distress and its manifestation as violence. Produced by a combination of language, sources and context, this framing was rendered with particular potency through intersecting discourses of disability, age and gender. The idealised middle-class heterosexual family was implicitly reified as a space in which violence is unexpected, and therefore attributable to mental illness/distress. Mental distress arising from parenting disabled children was assumed and naturalised, and adult (male) violence as a response to it largely unquestioned. Challenging psychocentric frames of familicide, therefore, requires interrogating these interlocking social categories.

While familicide does not always present as domestic violence as it is commonly understood, it is intimately tied to gender and power, and an extreme expression of proprietary violence against women and children. The mental illness/distress frame does more than individualise and deflect

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from this gendered power and control; it obscures and naturalises the gendered nature of the

emotions that drive familicide, and violence as a response to distress. Challenging psychocentric

representations requires contextualising familicide within gendered patterns of mental

illness/distress and violence. Further, we need to be astute to reporting that reinforces proprietary

attitudes towards children, assumes people with disabilities as burdens, and presents the

heterosexual middleclass family as immunising against family violence.