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“A desperately sad case, a terrible waste, an act of evil”:  
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Australian News Media  
Constructions of Violence Against Women

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## Abstract

Violence against women is an enduring social issue upheld by unequal gendered power relations which benefit patriarchy. The primary aim of this research is to contribute to the important work being done to understand how and why violence against women persists by looking at a key site of social understanding – news media. For the general public, news media is a primary source of knowledge on the topic of violence against women. Often constructed through discourse as decontextualised, extreme episodic incidents, gendered violence has come to be understood as an issue of individuals rather than a social one, and many of the explanations for violence rely on gendered social expectations, myths, and stereotypes which not only shift blame to victims, but also allow perpetrators and society to justify violence against women.

Much of the research in this area has focused on North American and Western European contexts. To address the Australasian gap, this research analysed discourses used in *The Age* and *Herald Sun* online news reports of the public murders of four women in Melbourne, Australia between 2018 and 2019. Two newspapers were selected in order to capture a range of discourses and cover the different social and political perspectives of the publishers. The selection criteria were that the murders occurred during the required timeframe, the names of victims and perpetrators were known, there were psychological disorders reported, the relationship between victim and perpetrator was reported, and that there were an adequate number of articles able to be retrieved for analysis. Forty-six articles were selected, and Critical Discourse Analysis used to explore how discourses were used to construct the victims, perpetrators, and violence.

Analysis found a consistent use of depersonalisation and discourses of evil, randomness, and madness in the articles, as well as myths and stereotypes about victims, perpetrators, and violence. Through the use of sensationalism, episodic framing, contradiction, and the voices of powerful social actors, these discourses maintain the social practice of doubting victims, excusing perpetrators, and reinforcing social understandings that violence against women is an issue independent of gender. Overall, the discourses in Australian news media acknowledge that violence against women occurs but remain unable to acknowledge the responsibility of men. As such, Australian news media discourses reinforce distorted understandings of gendered violence which leads to deficit responses to the issue.

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I dedicate this thesis to my Grandmother, Elizabeth.

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## Introduction

My interests in society, inequality, and power structures have been life long, but it was not until I worked at a prison that I became more interested in the nuanced ways that society and power interact to create social practices and knowledge which benefit certain groups over others. In particular, I was drawn to how incarcerated men were spoken about by the prison staff as evil social outsiders who were inherently bad people, especially those who were violent toward women and children. I didn't agree with 'othering' the prisoners in this way, mostly because they were recognisable men to me. They weren't "evil others", they were fathers, brothers, sons, uncles, elders, workers, and students, and ignoring the normalness of these men meant ignoring that their crimes occurred in a social context. I began to wonder how people come to categorise certain people as "other". While I assumed there were overarching influences relating to race and class, I wanted to know more of the nuanced ways that society decides who has the power to categorise people and behaviours, and how the decisionmakers determine what is "good" and "bad". Building on this interest, I began graduate and post-graduate studies in psychology at Massey University and focused on social psychology in order to learn more about individuals, groups, social understandings, and how power structures worked in relation to these. As a result, I was introduced to feminist psychology, social constructionism, and the works of Foucault, Fairclough, van Dijk, and others, and I began critically considering discourse for its role constructing the world around us.

News media is considered to be one of the common ways, and in some cases the only way, that most people learn about social issues, especially that of gendered violence (Berns, 2004). As a result the news stories become their "experiences", which they draw on as knowledge (Berns, 2004). However, studies have found that news media do not present audiences with an objective reality of violent crime (Becker, 1967; Tranchese & Zollo, 2013). Stories are made up of selected snippets of information which often distort violence, victims, and perpetrators, and there is a preference for reporting extreme, decontextualised, and rare instances of violence against women by strangers (Berns, 2004; Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Morgan & Politoff, 2012) rather than men that women are familiar with. Furthermore, many of the explanations that news media offer about gendered violence draw on traditional social expectations and roles, racism, classism, myths, and stereotypes that researchers have identified maintains victim blaming and perpetrator exoneration (Kitzinger, 2004). As a result, news media have been implicated in constructing a reality about gendered violence that does not reflect the experiences of women and excuses society from acknowledging that gendered violence is an enduring social issue. Much of the research into news media constructions of violence against women are from North American and Western Europe perspectives, though there is a growing list of researchers considering news media in other contexts. This research contributes an Australasian perspective to the body of literature considering discourse, media, and gendered violence. Additionally, discourses are dynamic, and social issues shift and transform depending on context, therefore it is important to revisit how discourse is constructing social issues in current times.

In order to identify the discourses used by news media one must first understand that it is difficult to define what discourse is because there are several theoretical and disciplinary standpoints as well as definitions which overlap and conflict with one another (Fairclough, 1992). Discourse can refer to talk, text, non-verbal communications, sounds, gestures, interactions and context specific language (e.g. news, psychology, education) (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2008). Furthermore, discourse is not just about what was said, but what wasn't said and how this is situated within structures of meaning (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2008). Within these structures, discourse not only constructs meanings and relationships, it also reinforces existing ones (Fairclough, 1992). The aims of this research were to firstly identify the textual discourses used to construct victims and perpetrators of violence in Australian news media, and then to critically analyse the ways that these constructions impact how the issue of gendered violence is socially understood. In order to do this, I collected articles from The Age and Herald Sun relating to four highly publicised murders of women in Melbourne, Australia between 2018-2019. The selection criteria were that the names of victims and perpetrators were known, there were psychological disorders reported, the relationship between victim and perpetrator was reported, and that there were an adequate number of articles able to be retrieved for analysis. The specific research questions were: what discourses did news media use to construct these victims and perpetrators? How do these constructions reinforce or disrupt social understandings that researchers in this field have previously identified about gendered violence? And finally, how do these constructions contribute to gender power structures?

## **Organisation of Thesis**

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two outlines extant literature on news media discursive constructions of victims, perpetrators, and violence against women. Included in Chapter Two is an overview of literature that has explored how victims and perpetrators of gendered violence construct themselves and their behaviours. This is to demonstrate that news media and social discourses run parallel to one another, at times even overlapping and mirroring each other. Chapter Three details the theoretical concepts underpinning this research, social constructionism and feminism, and explains the rationale for the use of Critical Discourse Analysis. The research methods are explained, and the rigor of the research outlined. Chapter Three also includes the backgrounds of the victims and perpetrators of the four murders to set the scene for the reader.

In Chapter Four extracts from the data and findings from the analysis are split into two sections. The first section relates to discourses used to construct the victims and the second focuses on discourses used to construct the perpetrators. Woven throughout these findings are discussion points about how these discourses align with other's research. Chapter Five offers a critical perspective on the findings and consideration is paid to the ways that the discourses construct responsibility for violence and the social issue of gendered violence. Included in this chapter are reflections on the contributions and limitations of this research, and suggestions for future research.



## Literature Review

*“Most people learn about domestic violence from the popular media. The media are the most common and influential tour guides for exploring the landscapes of social problems”*

*(Berns, 2004, p. 37)*

News media plays an important role in the construction of social knowledge. Some researchers argue it is the way social knowledge is constructed, while others state it is one of many ways people gain knowledge on social issues. Regardless of these differences, all researchers agree on its importance, especially with regards to gendered violence. This chapter will begin by considering the role news media plays in the construction of knowledge, specifically with respect to violent crime, and how ideology is present in constructing knowledge. News media are informed by ideology, specifically ideology that upholds patriarchal systems of power, and through the reproduction of myths and stereotypes and promotion of specific voices in news stories, news media end up reinforcing many of the ideologies that subjugate women and excuse men's violence.

This chapter also includes an overview of how gendered violence is constructed by news media, specifically with relation to three forms of violence: stranger danger, intimate partner violence (IPV), and sexual violence. This section includes research that considers how news media construct a reality of violence that does not align with the real-world experiences of many people due to the inclusion and exclusion of expert voices. Additionally, a review of literature relating to how victims and perpetrators of violence are constructed is included in this chapter which will also consider how responsibility for violence is ascribed by journalists based on aforementioned gender and power ideologies. The role media play in constructing a causal link between psychology and violence is also considered in this chapter, and specific focus is paid to how this impacts the ways in which perpetrators construct their violence, psychological disorders are understood by the public, and how stereotypes and myths may be contradicted with a more inclusive range of voices in news stories.

Finally, this chapter includes an outline of how victims and perpetrators of violence discursively construct themselves and violence. This is included to demonstrate that news media discourses are social discourses and do not exist separate to society. The impact of gender and power ideologies, as well as social practices of victim blaming, perpetrator exoneration, and externalisation of blame, are all present in the discourses that victims and perpetrators draw on to construct their experiences, selves, and relationships.

### **News Media and Knowledge Construction**

A significant amount of research argues that the news media is one of many social sites where social, political, and cultural structures, and public attitudes, are constructed and reinforced through discourse. Researchers such as Nairn et al. (2011) argue that news media does not exist separate to culture, society, institutions, or language, and therefore researchers must take into account how discourse and knowledge intersect with this medium. For many people, news media is the one of the only resources they engage with to learn about social issues (Berns, 2004) and while there is debate about the extent to which news media

constructs knowledge, it is not disputed that it is influential. Boda and Szabó (2011) and Potter and Edwards (1990) argue that the consumption of news media is an active practice as it requires audiences to draw on their existing knowledge to understand what is being presented because articles consist of a selection of information rather than objective truths. Counter to this, however, there is the argument that news media plays a much more significant, but passive, constructive role in social knowledge (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Berns, 2004; Wahl, 1992).

Debates about new media's influence on knowledge constructions often considers the role it plays with respect to crime. On the one hand, some researchers argue that knowledge of crime is only partly formed by news media (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Gillespie & McLaughlin, 2002). Gillespie and McLaughlin (2002) specifically argue that participants' pre-existing sociocultural and political situations inform their knowledge on social issues in addition to news media. Similarly, Carlyle et al. (2008) and Bullock and Cubert (2002) suggest that news media is a link between audience's pre-existing assumptions and the reported events. Other researchers, such as Boda and Szabó (2011) and Roberts (1992), argue that it is very difficult to measure news media's impact on the public's knowledge and the effect it has on personal values and assumptions. Additionally, Roberts (1992) and Scott (2003) argue that it is difficult to conclude the impact on knowledge construction because research in this area has focused more on public *opinion* rather than *knowledge*.

Roberts' (1992) research, into the intersection of news media and crime knowledge, revealed that 94 percent of Australian, Canadian, and United States audiences cite the news as their primary source of information about crime. However, participant's knowledge about crime statistics and scientific research into crime was very low, and they consistently overestimated violent crime rates (Roberts, 1992). As the percentage of people who have direct experience with crime is significantly smaller than this 94 percent, Roberts (1992) suggests that the disparity reveals an ease in which the public form opinions on crime from news media reporting. Other studies support this conclusion and have also shown that public knowledge aligns more with news media representations of crime, whether accurate or not, than with official criminal statistics and reports (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Roberts, 1992). However, some have criticised the relationship between news media crime representations and public knowledge for inferring causation from correlational data. As Morgan and Politoff (2012) argue, the methods used to measure public knowledge of crime and its correlation with news media fail to capture the complexity of crime in the questions and information provided to research participants.

News media also fail to capture the complexities of crime, especially with respect to gendered violence, and reports are often a distorted and partial selection of information which consistently misrepresents violent events, victims, and perpetrators (Berns, 2004; Morgan & Politoff, 2012). One reason for this is that the stories of victims and perpetrators are not obtained as objective information, but are instead constructed and transformed by the journalist's processes of gathering news and applying discourse (Sacco, 1995). Another reason is a precedence for reporting only extreme forms of gendered violence, such as murder, or very rare instances of violence, such as that perpetrated by strangers in public spaces (Gruenewald et al., 2009; Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Reiner, 2002; Roberts, 1992). As a result of journalist bias and reporting precedence, little attention is paid to the day-to-day violence women experience in a range of spaces and from a diverse range of perpetrators.

Researchers and advocates argue that the news media have a fundamental responsibility to reflect gendered violence as realistically as possible (Consalvo, 2003). Realistic reflections of violent crime are important because so few people experience violent crime themselves, and so the stories in news media become their “experiences” and they draw on this as knowledge when engaging with subsequent stories of violence (Berns, 2004). However, news media operate within a framework of discourses, that include stereotypes and myths, which they use because they are familiar with them and so are audiences. As long as the stories constructed by news media fit within the framework of familiar discourses and narratives, they do not need to be accurate. One way that journalists create news stories is through presenting links to previous events so their audience can draw associations between existing and new knowledge (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Hall et al., 2019; van Dijk, 1988). However, there are instances where news media may break away from the dominant narratives if a crime is considered especially heinous by the social group the news media operates within (Dowler et al., 2006). Additionally, criminal incidents which are rare or depart from social norms are given more time and space by news media (Gruenewald et al., 2009; Reiner, 2002). In these instances, reporting takes on a more sensationalist approach.

Another important part of news media reporting crime is decontextualization, with news media frequently leaving out details from individual cases of crime as well as crime issues more generally (Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Reiner, 2002). For example, researchers have identified a noticeable gap in news media reporting the histories of men’s violence which precipitates the death or significant injuries of a victim (Berns, 2004; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Taylor, 2009). Removing this type of context from reporting violence against women reinforces the impression that gendered violence is sporadic, random or one-off, and so limits the opportunity for the public to understand the social issue more wholly (Phillips & Henderson, 1999; Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, decontextualised reporting, especially where it results in reinforcing assumptions that gendered violence is rare, contributes to stereotypes and myths about victims, victim blames, and excuses perpetrators’ actions (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Kitzinger, 2004; Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008). Ultimately, if instances of gendered violence are not linked in news media to broader issues around gender, race, and power, audiences may be unlikely to make a connection between episodic reporting and the wider sociocultural and political contexts (Morgan & Politoff, 2012).

### **News Media and Ideology**

Journalists are not objective writers presenting objective information to audiences, nor are they removed from the social practice of relying on assumptions and stereotypes to construct meaning. Instead, journalists produce stories which are influenced by ideologies relating to social values, journalism norms, socioeconomic factors, politics, sexism, racism, classism, bias sources, news organisations’ values and opinions, and structural hierarchy within news organisations (Hart & Gilbertson, 2018).

The ideological influence on Western news media reinforces a hegemonic system of social ranks and this impacts *whose* discourse is recognised and considered to be credible (Becker, 1967). Those who are at the top of the social hierarchy of credibility are an integral part of the discourse of crime, and male dominance in Western society is reproduced by male dominance in news production and discourse (van Dijk, 1988). It has been posited that

women's voices are not used in news media, but rather men speak on their behalf, often to women's detriment (van Dijk, 1988). Stallings (1990) suggests that news media and the voices they choose to include in their stories are "claims makers", while Gillespie et al. (2013) considers the voices in news media as gatekeepers of information. These selected voices decide, whether they realise it or not, how an event is discursively (re)presented to the lay audience.

Researchers who have considered ideological influence on news media argue that the stories journalists produce do not reflect criminal reality but rather a socially constructed reality of crime. For example, in American news media, higher socioeconomic white women are presented as being more likely to be victims of violence despite evidence that lower socioeconomic young black males are more often victims; and yet their position in crime news media discourse is predominantly that of perpetrators (Benedict, 1993; Reiner, 2002).

### ***Sources of Knowledge***

Further ideological influence in news media comes through expert voices selected for inclusion in articles by journalists. As most people do not have access to experts in the fields of gender, society, or crime, news media brings holders of knowledge in these areas into people's lives. Expert sources of knowledge are positioned by news media as objectively guiding through complex social landscapes (Berns, 2004), however, they bring with them their own ideologies, bias, and discourses, and their views are routinely manipulated to fit within the news organisations' narrative frameworks (Nairn et al., 2011). Furthermore, researchers have identified that a disproportionate amount of expert knowledge in news media generally is derived from law and justice perspectives (Gruenewald et al., 2009; Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Reiner, 2002; Sutherland et al., 2019; Taylor, 2009) and Taylor (2009) found that law enforcement are the primary sources of knowledge in the majority of stories about crime - especially IPV.

As Meyers (1997) explains, journalists and the public see law enforcement agents as legitimate and objective sources of knowledge, meaning that alternative voices (e.g. IPV advocates) are not sought because they are considered overtly biased. This is despite research indicating that when victim advocates are used as news sources they have helped to shape the non-experienced public's understandings in a way that aligns with the realities of gendered violence (Berns, 2004). However, the silencing of advocates means that it is law enforcement telling audiences about the way things 'are' for victims even though law enforcement maintains views on IPV and gendered violence which are deeply rooted in patriarchy (Taylor, 2009). Therefore, the exclusive use of law enforcement as sources primarily serves to maintain the patriarchal structures which endorse gendered violence (Michelle & Weaver, 2003) and the failure to include victim advocate and organisational knowledge reinforces taken-for-granted assumptions that gendered violence is not a structural issue, but rather a rare and random occurrence (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). As a result, it is difficult for the non-experienced public to understand the complexities of gendered violence, the structures that uphold it, and victims' positions because the most powerful media explanations are not from the perspectives of those who actually experience it but rather those who benefit from it (Berns, 2004).

In addition to victim advocates being absent from news media, victims are also very rarely given the opportunity to express their views or experiences and while family and friends of victims and perpetrators may be able to provide contextual information and a deeper understanding of events, they are rarely called on as sources (Taylor, 2009). Part of the absence of victims may be due to news media's propensity for reporting only violence that ends in death or serious injury. Instead, as Gillespie et al. (2013) and Taylor (2009) discuss, news media, especially in instances of murder, often promotes neighbours as legitimate sources, even though they may have very little knowledge of the victims, perpetrators, or context in which events have occurred and may only end up repeating harmful stereotypes or myths about IPV and gendered violence (Taylor, 2009).

### **Constructing Gendered Violence**

News media discourse is implicated in constructing and supporting existing cultural and social narratives, stereotypes, and myths about gendered violence, victims, and perpetrators (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; Michelle & Weaver, 2003; Reiner, 2002). News media in particular is noted as consistently downplaying and distorting the realities of gendered violence, especially with respect to IPV and sexual violence, while also misrepresenting the issue through narratives such as stranger danger (Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Reiner, 2002).

Through news media discourses women are consistently constructed as emotionally and physically abusive, and therefore equally responsible for the violence (Hillier, 1995), but as Fairbairn and Dawson (2013) state, "underlying this discourse of provocation is an assumption that men who kill female partners are simply succumbing to a natural tendency that may be inevitable and even understandable under certain circumstances" (p. 7). Therefore, running parallel to provocation discourse are discourses which exonerate men because of a suggested natural tendency. However, these constructions and explanations for violence are consistently refuted by researchers and victim advocates. Evidence shows that men are more likely to be physically bigger than women, they inflict more injuries more often and with more severity than women who are violent, and women are more likely to suffer injuries during a dispute and engage in self-defence forms of violence (Umberson et al., 1998).

Deficit narratives, stereotypes, and myths are sustained by the practice of episodic and brief reporting by news media. Reiner (2002) notes that the stories produced by news media are primarily "brief accounts of discrete events, with few details and little background material" (p. 386) and that there are few attempts made to analyse the causes of crime, patterns of crime, or meaningful remedies to the issue. This type of episodic and brief reporting of gendered violence demands audiences draw on taken for granted assumptions to fill in the blanks of what happened and determine how the events, victims, and perpetrators fit together in a sensical way (Michelle & Weaver, 2003). If an audience have only been presented with distorted or deficit constructions of the issue, then their assumptions will reflect this.

### ***Stranger Danger***

The most consistently reproduced narrative by news media is that of stranger danger and it being an ever-present threat to women. Not only does this narrative confirm social discourse

that constructs the world as a generally dangerous place, the high volume of stories focused on stranger perpetrated violence tells women they should be fearful of men they don't know (Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; Reiner, 2002), despite evidence showing that 80% of murders by male intimate partners follow a history of violence (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Morgan & Politoff, 2012).

A predominant feature of the stranger danger narrative involves distorting the types of violence being perpetrated by strangers and their severity. One example of this, as identified by Mason and Monckton-Smith (2008) and Reiner (2002), is the disproportionate amount of reporting of stranger perpetrated sexual violence which ends in death. Furthermore, Reiner's (2002) study shows that often perpetrators are not named or referred to in articles and instead the focus shifts to the victim, and stranger danger and randomness narratives. Where men are identified in stories of stranger perpetrator violence, they are said to have significant psychological disorders and are deviant social outsiders (Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; Reiner, 2002).

There are a number of implications of news media consistently constructing violence against women as a stranger danger issue, conflating stranger perpetrated sexual violence and death, and constructing the perpetrators as psychological disordered and/or social outsiders. Firstly, despite evidence that women are more likely to be victimised by men they know, women believe they are more at risk of being attacked by strangers (Dowler et al., 2006; Reiner, 2002; Sacco, 1995; Scott, 2003; Stallings, 1990). This significantly impacts their understandings of safety behaviours and safe spaces, leading to women choosing to stay home for their own safety, even though this is a space where violence is most likely to occur (Scott, 2003). The second and third implications are that by portraying violence as a crime committed by noticeable social outsiders or psychologically ill men, a huge portion of the male population is obscured which reinforces deficit assumptions of who commits crime, and tells women that if a man is known to them, does not display disordered psychology, and engages in subjectively normative behaviours then they cannot be violent (Scott, 2003).

### ***Intimate Partner Violence***

The other predominant subject of news media stories about violence against women relates to IPV. News media and their constructions of IPV are commonly underpinned by biased gender ideologies, stereotypes, and myths and, despite an age of rapid information sharing and social understandings of issues changing quickly, IPV is still considered a rare and private issue rather than a social one (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Morgan & Politoff, 2012). This may be partly informed by lack of meaningful reporting on the issue, which is suggested to be linked to historical social, political and legal systems whereby violence against women was rarely considered a crime and so media did not cover it (Phillips & Henderson, 1999).

Understandings that IPV is a personal issue rather than social one may be because when IPV is reported by news media, it is constructed as a spur-of-the-moment action rather than part of the social structures of gender and power (Dobash et al., 2009; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Morgan & Politoff, 2012). As Dobash et al. (2009) explain, social discourse is centred around the idea that violence, especially when it ends in murder, is spontaneous and unforeseen. This reflects the social belief that men must be pushed or experience an adverse event to be violent and results in them being unaccountable for their behaviours. The most common way that

men are exonerated in IPV reports is journalists drawing on the myth that victims are just as violent as their partners and deliberately provoke men's violent reactions (Boonzaier, 2008; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). News media will often refer to a "cycle of violence" occurring between intimate partners, which suggests that all parties are responsible for the violence (Michelle & Weaver, 2003). Additionally, and in support of the provocation myth, news media will leave out the violent histories of perpetrators as Carlyle et al. (2008) found. In their research, Carlyle et al. (2008) found that over 90 percent of news media articles they collected did not report the violent histories of perpetrators who engaged in IPV. Other studies have had similar results, and as Fairbairn and Dawson (2013) noted, only 13 percent of articles in one study used IPV specific language to describe the incidents.

As with all constructions of gendered violence, race and class ideologies also permeate media constructions of what is and is not IPV (Carlyle et al., 2008; Hart & Gilbertson, 2018). As noted earlier in this chapter, men of colour are disproportionality positioned as perpetrators of violent crime (Benedict, 1993; Reiner, 2002) despite evidence to the contrary, and women of colour are also disproportionally constructed as violent participants in IPV incidents even when they are victims (MacDowell, 2013). This may be due to long held assumptions that women of colour are psychological and physically domineering, as well as volatile intimate partners (MacDowell, 2013). Additionally, in Western countries, violence toward women from immigrant backgrounds is often constructed as part of "traditions" or culturally specific practices, which distances the issue from white culture and society (Hart & Gilbertson, 2018).

The result of news media constructing IPV as spontaneous and their stories being grounded in race, gender, and class ideologies is that people tend to view violence in relationships less seriously than when it occurs between strangers; even when they know that IPV happens more often (Hillier, 1995; Michelle & Weaver, 2003; Webster et al., 2018). News media's failure to contextualise and adequately explain IPV as a social problem absolves society and men from obligations to address the issue and end it, and as a result news media is implicated in the maintenance of power disparities between men and women (Carlyle et al., 2008).

### ***Sexual Violence***

Sexual violence can occur in a range of contexts and is committed by a range of men, including intimate partners and strangers. As Kitzinger (2004) states, sexual violence makes "good copy" (p. 14), and as a result news media disproportionately report sexual violence over other forms of gendered violence. However, as Kitzinger (2004) explains, news media often decontextualises this form of violence, encourages stereotypes about virgins and whores, draws on racist discourses, conflates issues, and engages in victim blaming.

As noted earlier in the chapter, a common news media distortion is that sexual violence is perpetrated primarily by strangers. According to Carlyle et al. (2008), news media over-report stranger perpetrated rape and under-report rape carried out by acquaintances. Additionally, news media often conflate sexual violence with murder and as Mason and Monckton-Smith (2008) identified in their study, sex and death appeared together in 65 percent of reports across six newspapers, leading them to conclude that sexual violence is constructed through discourses of murder. This is supported by news media's reluctance to report on other forms of sexual violence, such as date rape, marital rape, and sexual violence

experienced by socially “othered” women (e.g. women of colour, sex workers) (Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Kitzinger, 2004).

Other distortions of sexual violence include news media labelling rape as “having sex” or sexual assault as “fondling” which obscures the nature and contexts of sexual violence against women, as these are words which form discourses used to understand consenting sexual activities (Kitzinger, 2004). In addition to myths such as rape does not occur in intimate partnerships, this contributes to sexual violence being understood as part of a consensual, mutual, experience where the victim is equally, if not more, responsible for the event than the perpetrator (Kitzinger, 2004).

### **News Media Constructions of Victims and Perpetrators**

*It appears that at every step in the process, from when victims and offenders first come under the purview of police to when their stories are read about in the daily newspaper, they are being categorized as typical or atypical crime participants based on their race, gender, and class statuses.*

*(Gruenewald et al., 2009, p. 263)*

Research into news media’s discursive constructions and (re)presentations of victims, perpetrators, and gendered violence have predominantly focused on United Kingdom and North American contexts (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Berns, 2001, 2004; Gillespie et al., 2013; Gillespie & McLaughlin, 2002; Hall et al., 2019). However, there is a growing body of literature which considers news discourse and gendered violence in Australasian contexts (Easteal et al., 2019; Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Howe, 1997; Little, 2015a; Michelle & Weaver, 2003; Sutherland et al., 2019). Regardless of geographical locale, researchers in this area focus on the discursive constructions of *woman* and *man*, being and doing masculinity and femininity, the use of stereotypes or myths to categorise victims and perpetrators, and how responsibility is assigned.

*Woman* and *man* are objects in discourses. Through discourses, they are organised into recognisable memberships and embedded in structures relating to authority, subordination, morality, social position, cultural and political power in news media discourse (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003). *Woman* as an object is achieved through depersonalisation, disembodiment, and dehumanisation (Dowler et al., 2006; Kitzinger, 2004; Little, 2015b). For example, women’s physical features and age are present in articles more often than men (Morgan & Politoff, 2012) because women are never just themselves. Instead, they are, or are not, femininity, victims, complicit participants in violence, an age, or a description of appearance. It is argued that if the object *woman* did not exist then men would not be able to commit acts of violence against them at the frequency that they do (Hillier, 1995).

The construction of the object *man* is done in accordance with existing social hierarchies and constructive discourse is centred around masculinity, race, sexuality, and social factors such as education or employment. Deeper constructions are then dictated by which of these categories the male belongs to (Consalvo, 2003). Further, the object *man*, Anastasio and Costa (2004) posit, is more personalised than the object *woman* and, as a result, social sympathy is often higher for them. This is important because the level of social sympathy



determines who the public considers responsible for violence and the degree to which news media report the incident.

### ***Constructions of Victims***

There are a number of ways that victims are constructed through news media, some of which have been explored in earlier sections of this chapter. Adding to this, research shows that victim's actions and modalities of being become part of discursive categories (e.g. good/bad, safe/unsafe), which are drawn on over and over to construct their identities and role(s) in violence (Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Morgan & Politoff, 2012). While occasionally sympathetic to women's experiences, most news media draw on socially embedded discourses which either subtly or overtly blame women for their victimisation (Benedict, 1993; Berns, 1999, 2001, 2004; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Howe, 1997; Meyers, 1997; Taylor, 2009). Additionally, victims are routinely positioned as either virgins or whores, categories which are derived from, and reinforce, patriarchal social ideologies of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality (Benedict, 1993; Meyers, 1997). Furthermore, Benedict (1993) explains that news media will often define women by their relationships with men, instead of as individuals, for example by repeatedly referring to women as "girlfriend" or "wife" rather than by name. This is important to note because news media constructions of victims contribute to women's ability to make sense of their experiences as women and victims (Berns, 2004; Carlyle et al., 2008).

### **Constructing Victim Responsibility**

News media have been implicated in the construction and reinforcement of a culturally endorsed understanding that women are obligated to prevent violence from men (Hillier, 1995). For example, in their longitudinal study, Morgan and Politoff (2012) identified that news media predominantly positions victims as responsible for violence, either through explicitly blaming the victim or through subtle suggestions that she enabled or provoked the violence. There are a number of ways that the media communicate to the public women's responsibilities in this area. The first is sharing the responsibility for women to mitigate violence through social practices, such as self-defence classes, limiting social activities after certain hours, engaging in the appropriate level of sexual activity, and dressing appropriately (Carlyle et al., 2008; Little, 2015b). Once a woman deviates from these expectations and responsibilities she can be blamed for her victimisation (Carlyle et al., 2008; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). Ethnicity also appears to determine the degree to which a woman is blamed for her victimisation. For example, in Australian news media, African Australian victims are more likely to be blamed for their victimisation than their European Australian peers according to Hart and Gilbertson (2018) and Morgan and Politoff (2012).

The second way that the public comes to understand women as responsible for violence is through a deep cultural scepticism which labels women who remain in violent intimate relationships as complicit victims (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). One of the contributing factors to this is news media use of law enforcement as expert sources which suggests to audiences that legal interventions are readily available thus reenforcing the questioning of victims as to why they stayed with their abusers (Berns, 2001, 2004). The assumption of complicit victimisation, Taylor (2009) states, also occurs because news media omit information about victims attempting to leave their relationships, or having already left prior

to their death. Evidence shows up to half of the women killed by their partners were separated or had indicated their intent to leave the relationship at the time of their murder but news media fails to report this (Chermak, 1995; Dobash et al., 2009). Additionally, news media does not share that when women attempt to end a violent relationship the risk of violence significantly increases as men engage in acts of possession and ownership (Dobash et al., 2009; Umberson et al., 1998). This lack of context and meaningful information leads to reinforcing assumptions that women don't want to leave their violent partners, and are therefore responsible for their victimisation.

### ***Constructions of Perpetrators***

The dominant discourses used to construct men and their violence in news media often maintain the interests of men, rather than questioning the interests and holding men accountable for their actions. It is argued that if news discourse were to include contextualised information about victims, it would undermine the endurance of gender-bias coverage and enforcement of inequality and patriarchy (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Howe, 1997). News media steadily construct and reinforce representations of the male perpetrators as "...the mad, the possessed, and the insane" (Nairn et al., 2006, p. 242). Pathologizing perpetrators is a common discursive practice which positions perpetrators as victims who passively suffer from psychological disorders (Meyers, 1997; Michelle & Weaver, 2003) and which places blame for violent behaviour elsewhere (Berns, 1999; Hillier, 1995; Michelle & Weaver, 2003; Reiner, 2002). Closely linked to this are the stereotypes of perpetrators of violence as undereducated, unemployed, and low-income earners with personal issues such as alcoholism and drug abuse, and a criminal history (Dobash et al., 2009; Roberts, 1992). When a man does not fit this stereotype of an abuser, he is quickly pathologized and this is treated as causation of behaviour, rather than him being part of social structures which have normalised his violence (Dobash et al., 2009). Psychological explanations for behaviour can serve as both an excusatory function and a stigmatising one. Depending on the broader social and cultural contexts a perpetrator has membership to, pathologizing him will function in different ways and have different implications (Nairn et al., 2006).

### **Constructing Perpetrator Responsibility**

News media only vaguely articulates men's responsibilities for violence, meaning that responsibility is shifted away from men (Berns, 2001; Little, 2015b). Additionally, discourses used by news media often obscure men in reports of gendered violence (Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Phillips & Henderson, 1999). For example, Phillips and Henderson (1999) explored the absence of men from news stories about gendered violence and found that often men are not explicitly positioned as a source of violence in news media. Instead, the victims and their behaviours are the primary focus of news stories (Dowler et al., 2006; Hillier, 1995). This matters because studies have shown that the more the victims feature in discourse, the more victim blaming and stereotyping occurs (Hillier, 1995). Phillips and Henderson (1999) also found that technical reports often exclude explicit references to men and instead violence is presented as 'domestic violence', 'family violence', 'violence against women', and 'wife abuse' all of which centre women and come with their own sets of assumptions, stereotypes, and narratives.

However, when men are visible in news media discourse, several causal stereotypes and narratives are used which excuse their behaviour. Most commonly, their behaviours are constructed as being caused by an external factor, such as the victim's behaviours, drug or alcohol use, an adverse life event, or an unforeseen psychological issue (Michelle & Weaver, 2003). Additionally, there is often a female lead featured in news stories who could have stopped this happening in some way, for example absent mothers, girlfriends who have provoked their boyfriend, or women who have rejected their sexual advances (Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008).

References to facets of contemporary society, such as masculinity, feminism, and social actions, are also used to excuse violence. It is argued that Western society promotes violence as a marker of masculinity and that as a result men cannot be held responsible when they enact this identity (Hillier, 1995; Michelle & Weaver, 2003). Additionally, news media blames other forms of media (e.g. music, video games, fictional television) for teaching and condoning violence (Hillier, 1995). Feminism is another facet of contemporary society which serves as an excuse for men's violence because it is claimed that feminism triggers feelings of emasculation in men which then causes them to become frustrated and violent (Hillier, 1995). Referred to as the backlash discourse, feminism is seen as a cause of conflict in domestic relationships and the breakdown of the traditional family unit which results in domestic violence occurring (Berns, 2001).

### **Media Constructions of Psychology and Violence**

In lieu of firsthand experience, the public's primary source of information about mental illness, as with crime, is media, both non-fictional and fictional (Coverdale et al., 2002; Nairn et al., 2006; Nairn et al., 2011; Wahl, 1992, 2003). However, literature has focused primarily on fictional media's representations of mental illness (Wahl, 1992). Only a few studies have considered news media's representations specifically. However, these studies have established that there is an association between negative attitudes toward mental illness and exposure to news stories (Coverdale et al., 2002; Francis et al., 2004; Gwarjanski & Parrott, 2017; Little, 2015a; Nairn et al., 2006; Wahl, 1992).

News media representations of psychological disorders or phenomena are inaccurate, negative, sensationalist, and are biased toward severe forms of emotional dysregulation and psychotic disorders (Stuart, 2006; Wahl, 1992). Through news media, the public are presented with consistent discourse that constructs and reinforces a correlation between psychological disorders and violence despite almost no empirical evidence to support this (Blood & Holland, 2004; Coverdale et al., 2002; Francis et al., 2004; Nairn et al., 2006; Sieff, 2003). The intersection of negative psychological constructs and news organisations' inclination to cover violent crimes not only tells people what to think about psychological disorders, but *how* to think about them (Gwarjanski & Parrott, 2017). As a result, a fear of psychological disordered persons and their 'natural' inclination to violence is promoted, which can have wide-reaching ramifications with respect to policy and public resourcing. This public fear fuels resistance to community-based care and interventions, and more people are likely to call for tough on crime responses which do not culturally or socially contextualise mental illness, behaviours, or treatments (Nairn et al., 2011; Stuart, 2006; Wahl, 2003).

Studies across the western world have found news media often reinforce negative stereotypes and myths about psychological disorders including a link between disorders and violence. In Aotearoa New Zealand, news media are implicated in constructing and reinforcing significant negativity around mental illness, and there is an enduring practice of associating violence with psychological disorders (Coverdale et al., 2002; Sieff, 2003). From a data set of 600 news media items, Coverdale et al. (2002), found that only 150 engaged in positive discourse about disordered psychology. The study concluded that this number of positive items is not enough to counter the consistently negative discourses in reporting, and the absence of formal diagnosis for many of the perpetrators meant that audiences were required to draw on their existing, potentially biased, knowledge about psychology (Coverdale et al., 2002). In an Australian context, Blood and Holland (2004) found that media routinely publish sensationalist headlines which quickly act to confirm social assumptions that disordered psychology and negative behaviours are linked. Dominant practices include promoting an inherent dangerousness and dislike of mentally ill persons, inclinations for violence, shocking imagery, risk, and fear (Blood & Holland, 2004). In Europe, studies have found negative discourse is a consistent feature with respect to disordered psychology, and schizophrenia is especially reported as being closely associated with violent crime (Sieff, 2003). Similarly, in both Canadian and United States news, disordered psychology is often associated with crime, social deficit, and dangerousness to self and others (Day & Page, 1986; Wahl, 1992)

In particular, schizophrenia is greatly overrepresented in news stories relating to violence crimes regardless of whether a formal diagnosis has been confirmed (Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Wahl, 1992). Schizophrenia has also been found to be used as a metaphor in crime news media in both Scotland and United States (Duckworth et al., 2003). When comparing it the use of cancer as a metaphor in these geographies, researchers found that schizophrenia was used 28 times more as a metaphor (Duckworth et al., 2003). This is despite evidence that persons with schizophrenia are no more likely to be violent than others (Gwarjanski & Parrott, 2017). The discursive construction of schizophrenia as a violent disorder not only impacts non-schizophrenic audiences but also those with schizophrenia. Being constructed in this way, people with schizophrenia may experience stigma so strong that they are unable to ask for help and resources, and their symptoms may also be exacerbated as a result which can lead to unhealthy coping behaviours that act as confirmation of stereotypes and myths (Duckworth et al., 2003). When specific disorders are not included in news stories, the vague descriptor 'mentally ill' is used as a catch-all for psychological and behavioural issues (Francis et al., 2004; Nairn et al., 2006).

It is argued that because news media produces stories and not biographies of people, there is little opportunity for positive discourses around psychology and mental wellbeing that the audience can use to balance their knowledge (Nairn et al., 2006; Stuart, 2006). While there have been instances where the media have produced positive stories relating to mental health, they are ultimately responsible for producing an enormous catalogue of negative discourse that links psychological disorders with violence (Stuart, 2006). Mental health advocates explicitly blame media for promoting negative stereotypes and stigma toward persons with mental illness and call for inclusion of more detailed information about mental health and psychological disorders in news stories (Stuart, 2006) as analysis has shown that psychiatrists included as sources in news media will present psychological disorders more positively than what is traditionally reported (Nairn, 1999). However, Nairn (1999) also notes that the

inclusion of psychological experts is not exempt from being manipulated to fit within the frameworks already established in reporting disordered psychology and crime. There is also a practice of conflating authority with opinion, which knowledge holders like psychiatrists are not immune to (Nairn, 1999). Furthermore, the more an audience is accustomed to discursive frameworks around disordered psychology, the harder it is for the media to amend these frameworks in the future with the inclusion of more balanced psychological discourse (Sieff, 2003).

### **Discourses Used by Victims and Perpetrators**

This section on the discourses that victims and perpetrators use to construct themselves and violence demonstrates that discourse is a social process and news media is just one site where these discourses are used. Victims and perpetrators use a variety of discourses which align with those found in news media, including femininity, masculinity, misrepresentation, justification, and externalisation. While there are some counter discourses used by women, the majority of discourses identified across a range of studies show that women draw on discourses that excuse violence and position themselves as to blame for it. Men also use a range of discourses to separate themselves from violence while implicating their partners, along with other life experiences and external factors, as the causes of their anger. Men are also more likely to use psychological explanations to excuse their violence.

#### ***Victims' Discourses***

For victims, the discourses they use when discussing victimisation and violence affirm their identities as women, wives, and partners, while locating themselves within their relationships and communities (Boonzaier, 2008; Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003, 2004). Studies show that women's discourses often involve complex negotiations between the intersections of gender constructs and identities, love, femininity, and violence in heterosexual relationships (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003; Towns & Adams, 2000; Wood, 1999). Victims' discourses are often aligned with dominant social constructs of love, relationships, and femininity and masculinity, with femininity being considered a key quality that women should possess to ensure safety from violence. When victims appear to violate qualities or positions relating to dominant social constructions, roles, and categories, the violations are used to justify and rationalise a perpetrator's violence, and blame victims (Berns, 1999; Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011). Additionally, victims' discourses reflect the social practice of minimising and externalising perpetrator responsibility, with many women suggesting that there are external drivers to their partner's violence.

#### **Femininity Discourse**

Femininity is often associated with qualities of mothering, being a 'good' wife, nurturing, sexual fragility, and softness (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003). Emphasised femininity is a key feature of some victims' discourses when they discuss the roles they are expected play in their intimate partnerships (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004). Traditional feminine ideology positions women as mothers and selfless carers for male partners, even if the partner is violent (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004). When victims position themselves as a mother-figure to their partner, it constructs men as childlike and serves to excuse their behaviours. The women in Towns and Adams, (2000), study expressed that the mother-figure position gives

them feelings of power and a sense of identity while holding their relationships together. However, it is not a position of power and often binds women to the violent partners who they feel they need to care for (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004; Towns & Adams, 2000). Additionally, it may be difficult for women to break away from these caring roles they believe they have to fulfil as they are often reinforced by wider family and community members. Religious discourse and mortality may also be used by women as a way to reinforce the roles they have taken on and bind them to their violent partners (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003).

### **Sexuality Discourse**

Boonzaier and De La Rey (2003) states that discursive constructions and positionings of women's and men's sexual drives and needs are aligned with dominant passive-female and aggressive-male discourses. As a result, women's sexuality discourses often draw on shame, humiliation, and lack of knowledge to explain sexual violence and victimisation (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003). Additionally, there is a tension between how women talk about sexual violence and how they experience it (Gunnarsson, 2018). Some suggest this tension exists because sexual violence has been socially constructed as a normal part of sexuality for women (Gunnarsson, 2018). For example, the women in Boonzaier and De la Rey's (2004) study shared that they will give into coercive sexual tactics from their partners for fear of retaliation and that being a wife meant being sexually available to their husbands at all time. However, others argue that this tension exists because of the social practice of shaming and/or blaming victims for sexual violence and misrepresentations of what sexual violence is (Kitzinger, 2004).

When discussing rape in particular, victims may not describe having been raped, but rather describe their experience as *feeling like* rape because they are either hesitant to label it so for fear of blame or they do not understand that the act done to them constitutes rape (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004; Gunnarsson, 2018). Victims of sexual violence may not see themselves in the way that victims of these acts are discursively constructed socially (e.g. weak, broken, provoking) and feel they are not 'real' victims and therefore cannot describe themselves as such (Gunnarsson, 2018).

### **Love Discourse**

Discourses of love are used by victims because they help make sense of the contradictions between violence and love (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003, 2004; Dobash et al., 1998; Towns & Adams, 2000). In Towns and Adams' (2000) study, women constructed jealousy, possession, and dominance as forms of attentive love, rather than controlling behaviours. For example, a man calling his wife 15 times in a day was considered attentive rather than domineering or controlling. At other times, women explained that this was "how it's supposed to be" (p. 576) based on storybooks. Additionally, women in the study described their partner's love as being connected with their need for feeling in control, and that the intersection of love and control can push a man to violence. The way that these felt they could operate within this complex intersection was to love their partner "enough" so that he stopped the violence. This sentiment is shared by the women in Boonzaier and De la Rey's, (2004), study who suggested that being tender and loving toward violent partners will change them.

## **Minimisation, Justification, and Externalising Discourses**

Research from Wood (1999) identifies that victims' discourses will allow them to position themselves as responsible because of something they said or did to their partner, or their failings as wives and partners. At the same time, the women will minimise the violence they have experienced. Wood (1999) shows that women will discursively position violence on a scale, from acceptable to nonacceptable, and then construct meaning from there.

Minimisation discourses, however, should be considered contextually. For example, a woman may label one smack acceptable if she is used to sustained beatings. Another minimisation practice involves women comparing the severe experiences of other victims to their own or to imagine worse case scenarios which then minimises the violence they are experiencing (Wood, 1999).

Across multiple studies, the most frequent form of reasoning for violence was victims discursively separating their partner's "real self" from the violent other (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003, 2004; Wood, 1999). In these studies, women frequently referenced the time they met their partners and described how they had behaved non-violently then while drawing on discourses of love and togetherness, and concepts like the honeymoon phase. Men's "real selves" were also said to be present following violence, when they would act remorseful for having been violent (Wood, 1999). For victims, the separation of the violent man from the "real" man provides an explanation for violence while validating their decision to remain in violent relationships (Wood, 1999).

## **Victims' Counter Discourses**

In contrast to the above, not all women accept the hegemonic representations of violence, victims, and perpetrators (Boonzaier, 2008). Some research has identified that some victims are more likely to object to the representations of victims in media and are less likely to accept victim blaming narratives than audience members who have no firsthand experience (Berns, 2004). Furthermore, some are less likely to use victim blaming discourses and will instead use discourse that reflects the complexities of IPV and victimisation (Berns, 2004). Additionally, some women view love and relationships as spaces which endorse violence and state that the stereotype of men as protectors is a tool to silence women and perpetuate violence (Towns & Adams, 2000). Victims also describe violence as being more than just physical acts and include things like restricting access to financial and social resources (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003) as part of a sociocultural practice of gendered violence (Berns, 2004). Additionally, victims' discourses articulate that they are acutely aware of the contradictory positions they hold while in violent relationships and the risk of being blamed for violence. The women in studies by Boonzaier and De La Rey (2003) and Towns and Adams (2000) spoke of being embarrassed at being victims and the roles they have taken on in their relationships, and are hesitant to bring violence to other people's attention because of the risk of being blamed.

## ***Perpetrators' Discourses***

Research has identified that the discourses used by perpetrators of violence tend to serve specific functions such as justifying, rationalising, and misrepresenting their violent behaviours (Adams et al., 1995; Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004;

Coates & Wade, 2004; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011). In attempting to justify and rationalise their violence, perpetrators will draw on discourses relating to provocation myths, masculinity, and femininity. Woven throughout the discourses, men use are claims of an instinctual drive. These are presented as inherent qualities and facts about men and are reproduced across men's discourses and news media discourses, as presented earlier. While justification and rationalisation discourses often position the men in the violence, their roles are constructed as innocent men responding to lifestyle pressures and social norms instead of instigators of violence. At times, their discourses also position them as victims of early life experiences, other people's behaviours, and external factors such as drugs and alcohol.

### **Justification Discourse**

Justifications for IPV involve men consciously using discourse to acknowledge some involvement in violence while absolving themselves from responsibility. Often linked to masculinity and control, participants in studies largely justify their violence on the bases that their partners failed to accept their authority, violated gender and social norms, and they thought their partners had betrayed them and they felt jealousy (Boonzaier, 2008; Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003, 2004; Lau & Stevens, 2012).

Men will construct violence as being an action where they can realise their masculine identities (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). For some men, violence is seen as a symbol of ideal masculinity and a way of meeting the social requirements of masculinity (Lau & Stevens, 2012). Some men have also explicitly stated that, in their culture, you are not a man if you don't beat up a woman (Lau & Stevens, 2012). Instead of this being a point of reflection as to why their culture promotes IPV, the men used it to justify their behaviours. Additionally, violence has also been described as a means to accomplish the male gender more broadly (Boonzaier, 2008). For some men, feeling that they are not masculine enough or their wives are too masculine, are considered catalysts and justifications to use violence (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004). Similarly, the men in Anderson and Umberson's (2001) study described how they felt emasculated by strong-willed wives and therefore they were the victims and as such needed to use violence to re-establish their masculinity, and thus dominance, in the relationship. It has been suggested that masculinity can be achieved in three ways: procreation (heterosexuality and sexual domination of women), protection (physical control over others), and provision of goods (the ability to work and have access to economic resources) (Kersten, 1996). These three ways of being and doing masculinity support the use of violence, or at least domination over women to some degree.

Similarly, discourse pertaining to an innate and important male sexual drive are routinely used to explain violence (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004; Morgan & Politoff, 2012). Men position themselves as being entitled to have their sexual needs met and that the biological basis removes responsibility (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004). Men's use of these discourses is supported across a range of social constructions relating to gender and sexuality. This is evident in the Madonna-whore construction being part of men's discourse, similar to news media discourse using virgin/whore categorisations with victims (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004). Because most social discourse relating to sexual violence is laden with stereotypes and myths, and is disproportionately related to stranger danger, many men do not fit within these constructions and so they are able to disassociate themselves from the issue (Gunnarsson,



2018). This disassociation minimises individual responsibility and men are able to claim their behaviours are not sexual violence (Lau & Stevens, 2012).

### **Externalising Discourse**

Another common way in which men explain their violent behaviours is through externalisation discourses which position reasons such as psychological disorders and adverse events as causes for the violence. This then removes primary responsibility from the perpetrator and positions them as victims of circumstance which manifests in violence (Boonzaier, 2008; Lau & Stevens, 2012). Drawing on psychological discourse to construct violence is common and men position psychological disorders or phenomena as predominantly external forces they cannot control. While psychological explanations do somewhat internalise the violence, men largely construct psychological issues as external forces that happen to them randomly and thus do not take full responsibility for their actions (Lau & Stevens, 2012). This is closely linked to stereotypes of male emotional responses being precarious and uncontrollable as evidenced in phrases used by men such as; “loss of control”, “it just happens”, “snapped”, “outburst” (Lau & Stevens, 2012, p. 428). Another common circumstance that the men in Boonzaier’s (2008) study referred to was having witnessed IPV in their childhood which the men then used to position themselves as life long, traumatised victims and claim that their violence is the result of others. This practice also draws on, and reinforces, the stereotype that male trauma is static, meaning they cannot treat or stop the violence even if they want to (Lau & Stevens, 2012).

Additionally, Lau and Stevens (2012) found that men position drugs and alcohol as the source of their anger and subsequent violence. Alcohol is identified by some participants in Lau and Stevens’ (2012) study as a key reason for their loss of control. The discourse surrounding drinking is also heavily implicated in hegemonic discourses of masculinity and social norms and in cases where a wife or partner has questioned a perpetrator’s drinking, or herself partaken in drinking to excess, this perceived social violation warranted punishment through violence (Lau & Stevens, 2012). Shifting blame to external circumstances has been critiqued as supporting the dismissal of gendered violence as a social issue and the continuing practice of constructing perpetrators as victims themselves (Boonzaier, 2008).

### **Misrepresentation Discourse**

As noted earlier in this chapter, misrepresentation of violence is a vital component to constructing gendered violence as an individual issue and draws on many stereotypes and myths. As Coates and Wade (2004) and Dobash et al. (1998) identified, perpetrators routinely misrepresent violence through concealing their actions, underreporting violence, blaming victims, and decontextualising violence so as to avoid responsibility. In Lau and Stevens (2012), perpetrators discursively constructed themselves as having two sides by using phrases such as “I’m not that person” (p. 428) to separate themselves from the violence. As noted earlier in victims’ discourses, the separation of ‘real self’ from violent self is a meaningful construction that allows parties to violence to understand and rationalise the contradictions between love, intimate relationships, and violence.

Additionally, in a study by Dobash et al. (1998), men were less likely to provide sequential details of violence, and would begin their accounts of violence by implicating their partners

before then downplaying their violence with phrases such as “I only...” and “It was just...” (p. 392). Similarly, Boonzaier (2008) identified men describing violence as a “fight” or “argument” which downplays the severity of their violence while suggesting is a reciprocal factor at play. In another study by Boonzaier and De la Rey (2004), perpetrators stated that they would not admit to having used violence unless they have been legally prosecuted or convicted for doing so. However, as Stokoe (2010) identified when looking at the discourse used by men during police interviews about violence, even when faced with legal issues men will misrepresent or deny their involvement in violence. They will also, Stokoe (2010) shows, discursively construct narratives and categories that misrepresent the relationships and power dynamic between perpetrator and victim so as to minimise their violence and the roles they played in it.

## **Conclusion**

There is considerable research into how mental health is discursively constructed in news media and how victims’ and perpetrators’ discursively construct themselves, but there is a gap in how victims and perpetrators are constructed by news media, especially in an Australian context. Researchers must address this gap because of the unique indigenous histories and contemporary sociocultural contexts of Australia.. This research not only hopes to fill this gap, but also aims to contribute to a more contemporary body of research. As discourses and contexts shift over time, there is a need to revisit the social issue and the discourses surrounding it in order to have relevant perspectives. Much of the literature is now over a decade old, and while still meaningful, contemporary perspectives are required in order to understand how discourses are changing as we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and gender inequity is critically questioned more.

## Methods

This chapter presents and discusses two important components of this research. Firstly, the theoretical frameworks of social constructionism and feminism are explained and their applicability to this research discussed. Secondly, the chapter outlines critical discourse analysis as the most appropriate methodology for undertaking this research and explains how it has informed data selection, treatment, and analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion about rigor in qualitative research, and how the theoretical frameworks and methodology have led the research process to be underpinned by determined and consistent reflexivity of my position in society and politics.

### Theoretical Frameworks

#### *Social Constructionism*

Social constructionism draws on a multidisciplinary background and is influenced by a range of intellectuals from different backgrounds such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who view language as a critical site of knowledge construction, modification, and disruption (Burr, 2015). Social constructionism supports focussing on individuals and groups as they are constructed within social and power relations and provides the grounding to interpret discourse from an alternative perspective to mainstream psychology and focus on power, politics, oppression, and social justice. Social constructionism calls us to question what knowledge is, how and where it is constructed and shared, and what the implications of this social process are (Andrews, 2012). The current study shares this view of power and social behaviour, and as such investigates how the discourses from the news articles are located within existing power relations. However, this research does not seek out a final or indisputable truth about the discourses that media use with respect to gendered violence and their implications. Rather, the research seeks to interpret the discourses and present a critical view of how the discourses operate and are situated within the social issue.

Social constructionists argue that there is no universal, objective knowledge and that the construction and sharing of knowledge through social processes must be critically approached (Burr, 2015). There are multiple, conflicting, perspectival, and changing social realities and therefore knowledge of the world is not a direct assessment of reality (Burr, 2015; Durrheim, 1997). It is argued that the continually changing psychological and social aspects of people's lives means that there cannot be definitive, objective descriptions of phenomena, behaviours, attitudes, or beliefs (Burr, 2015). Rather, social constructionists take the view that knowledge of the world is continuously constructed, reinforced, and modified within historical and culturally specific social interactions and processes. The categories we use to construct the world around us are determined by the historical and cultural contexts we occupy. Knowledge, therefore, is not something someone has or does not have, but rather something that is constructed and enacted between people, together (Burr, 2015). Ultimately, social constructionists are of the view that we cannot be separated from our own humanity, nor can we approach the world from a historically and culturally decontextualised position (Burr, 2015). Therefore, our contexts also determine how we enable and disrupt social practices and phenomena (Burr, 2015).

Language has been highlighted by scholars as an important site of power and meaning-making (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Social constructionists view language as a subjective process whereby social and psychological worlds are constructed and knowledge is modified, disrupted, and reinforced (Andrews, 2012; Burr, 2015). From this perspective, language is a

prerequisite to thought and people are not born understanding social categories of the world, but learn them as they acquire and use language with others (Burr, 2015). Language is therefore a social process and tool developed historically and culturally. By approaching language in this way, research turns to investigating how language is employed between people and the way actions, ideologies, and attitudes are part of a social process (Gergen, 1985).

### **Rationale for a Social Constructionist Framework**

Working within a social constructionist framework offers radically different perspectives of social realities, language, and phenomena and it is appropriate to this research for several reasons. Firstly, the framework positions discourses as important tools in the construction of knowledge. To understand how violence against women continues to be a dominant social issue, it is important to explore how society not only understands the issue but how they came to have the understanding(s).

Secondly, social constructionism appropriately supports the use of discourse analysis as a methodological approach to gathering textual data and contextualising the discourses of a society. While there is no rule that social constructionism and discourse analysis are used together in social research, they are a complementary framework and methodology which many working in this area have taken up. In this research, discourse analysis is appropriate for exploring how the language of violence against women, perpetration, victimisation, and psychology work alongside one another and intersect to create a reality about the social issue.

Thirdly, social constructionists call out the constructive nature of research itself and researchers. Language which researchers use is part of the discourse of science and through this a particular version of humans and society are constructed (Burr, 2015). Social constructionism requires critical reflexivity from the researcher throughout the research process and for those conducting discourse analysis with participants; this reflexivity promotes an equal status between all parties (Burr, 2015). It is important that this research contributes positively to discussions and research into gendered violence without promoting one view or making claims that reflect the researcher's perspectives and feelings about the social issue. The reflexive requirements of social constructionism will assist in ensuring that victims are not revictimised through the republishing of the violence, nor that the perpetrators are excused or judged through the researcher's views and experiences as a woman and feminist.

### ***Critical Feminist Psychology***

Like that of social constructionists, critical feminist scholars reject the notion that there are absolute truths - especially with respect to gendered issues as they are traditionally constructed by men and perpetuate power interests (Gavey, 1989; Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Critical feminist psychology seeks to transform social power relations and social issues in several ways, including through the voices and perspectives of social minority groups and individuals. The inclusion of marginalised discourses, which are usually concealed in structures and processes of power and privilege, is viewed as a direct disruption to social hierarchy and patriarchy. Furthermore, feminist research is especially committed to resisting patriarchal prescriptions of experiences and redefining women's experiences in positive ways (Gavey, 1989). With respect to gendered violence, much of the existing research is produced by academics whose work is grounded in feminist theory and who seek to disrupt and transform power and gender relations for the benefit of victims (Boonzaier,

2008; Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003, 2004; Frazier & Falmagne, 2014; Hooks, 2020; Mardorossian, 2002). A critical feminist approach to research directly challenges mainstream psychology's assumptions about gender/sex differences and the values which legitimise social inequality (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Similarly, critical feminist psychology believes that research is never objective but instead reflects power relations (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). The questions asked in research, Lafrance and Wigginton (2019) suggest, are inevitably political and affect how we construct the world and our place in it.

Gavey (1989) proposes that feminist poststructuralism is of particular benefit to feminist psychologists and researchers seeking to understand gender and subjectivity. Poststructuralist feminism is a distinctive approach which is explicitly politically orientated and maintains that the social, economic, and cultural arrangements of power can be changed at a discursive level. Like social constructionism, it is influenced by a range of theories pertaining to language, subjectivity, social processes, and knowledge production, which Gavey (1989) argues makes it a useful foundation for work exploring gender. Feminist poststructuralism welcomes the multiplicity of meanings and discourses, arguing that traditional discursive understandings of gender and subjectivity are one amongst many (Gavey, 1989).

Poststructuralist feminism does not assume that individuals are passive users of neutral discourses, but rather that they are active and position themselves in relation to discourses. Subjectivity, it is argued, is constituted by discourse (Gavey, 1989). This ties together with social constructionist assumptions that there are no objective experiences as they are underpinned by the process of language and social relationships. Within poststructuralist feminism, identities, meanings, and experiences are constructed through the expression of language, narratives, and discourses and focusing on individual experiences dismisses the political and discursive structures and social processes surrounding a person. This view extends to researchers themselves, as within all critical work, and how researchers mobilise their discourses throughout the research process (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019).

As poststructuralist feminism aligns closely with social constructionism in its approach to how the world is constructed, its inclusion in the overarching framework of this research is appropriate. It allows for this research to consider not only the discourses surrounding gendered violence, but the power structures underpinning these discourses. Furthermore, feminist discourse analysis primarily critiques "discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order" (Lazar, 2007, p. 145). Finally, this research seeks to critique news media discourses as part of broader transformative work being undertaken with respect to gendered violence and as noted earlier, much of this work is grounded in feminist theory.

## **Methodology**

### ***Critical Discourse Analysis***

Discourse analysis methodology can be found in research across a number of disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Discourse analysis is broadly concerned with the relationships between language and contexts, while critical discourse analysis (CDA) analyses the relationships between discourse and power relations. CDA focuses on social structures and social actions and the intersection of language and power (Burr, 2015; Tranchese & Zollo, 2013). This enables researchers engaging in CDA to identify the ideologies of power relations in text and explore how discourse constructs, reinforces, or disrupts these power relations (Fairclough, 2010; Tranchese & Zollo, 2013). In practice, CDA encourages a critical focus toward what is included or excluded, passive and active voice, and

word choice in texts and speech, all of which are important to the properties of discourse (Easteal et al., 2019).

CDA challenges the notion that language can be separated from its social, historical, and cultural contexts because the world can only be constructed and transformed through and with properties of existing representations (Fairclough, 2010). Fairclough (2010) writes that while discourse is shaped by social structures and actions, it also plays a role in shaping, reproducing, and transforming them because all discourse is underpinned by ideologies. Burr (2015) also argues that already established assumptions and ideologies are required to make communication between people possible. With this in mind, the critique of social issues, like that of gendered violence, includes critique of the discursive constructs and representations of social life.

Rather than applying pre-established methods to critique discourse, CDA supports a cross-theoretical and transdisciplinary approach. It is a preferred methodological approach for social constructionists as it is viewed as being less likely to decontextualise the discourse of participants or texts (Burr, 2015). According to Durrheim (1997), undertaking CDA serves two functions for researchers. The first is defining ‘objects’, social processes, and showing the structures that these are embedded within. The second is to then disrupt these objects, processes, and structures by highlighting marginalised discourses in order to show the constructive nature of discourse. While changes to discourse may occur for rational reasons, Fairclough (2010) argues, they are still subject to ideologies and changes take place inside and outside existing power relations.

Demonstrating that CDA is an appropriate methodological approach within a social constructionist framework is that CDA approaches social issues as a *consequence* of power relations (Fairclough, 2010). Fairclough (2010) suggests that discourse is partly power, and power is partly discourse, and that while they are different, they are not separate from one another. By focusing on power, discursive strategies which operationalise ways of being, identities, and power relations are uncovered and critiqued (Fairclough, 2010). The complex nature of power relations and society are simplified through discourse and CDA allows researchers to explore such relations (Burr, 2015; Fairclough, 2010). In order to appropriately examine discourse and social issues, Fairclough (2010, p. 235) formulated a four-stage CDA methodology:

1. Focus on a social issue, in its discursive form.
2. Identify obstacles in addressing the social issue.
3. Consider whether the society ‘needs’ the social issue.
4. Identify ways to remedy the social issue.

Using Fairclough’s (2010) stages as a methodological framework, this research is focused on the social problem of gendered violence and grounds the research in social constructionist epistemology in order to understand how this is constructed and legitimised through discourse. The research also considers gendered violence within a feminist knowledge framework which views discourse as part of a social and political structure of gender inequality.

## **Methods**

The focus of this study is how violence against women in Australia is constructed through news media discourses. Additionally, it aims to explore how psychological disorders are used in the constructions of victims and perpetrators. I also wanted to capture the constructions of

victims who had experienced violence from strangers and men known to them, and include men and women from diverse social and cultural backgrounds where possible. Based on these aims four high-profile instances of gendered violence were chosen. The victims, who were killed between June 2019 and May 2019, were Eurydice Dixon, Aiiia Maasarwe, Courtney Herron, and Natalina Angok. Following the decision to cover these murders, I collected articles from the newspapers *The Age* and *Herald Sun* websites. The date range of the articles analysed are 2019 - 2020, as this covers the cases from their initial reporting through to the sentencing of the perpetrators.

### ***Publications: The Age and Herald Sun***

Two Melbourne newspapers were chosen to ensure a range of discourses are captured and analysed as both publications have clear political and social perspectives. *The Age* tends to publish perspectives aligned with centre-left ideologies, while the *Herald Sun*'s perspectives tend to reflect centre-right ideologies. *The Age* and *Herald Sun* both have the highest cross-platform readership, across print, digital and mobile versions, in Melbourne, and some of the highest in Australia generally (*Australian Newspaper Readership, 12 months to December 2021*, 2021). In the 12 months to December 2021, *The Age* had an average cross-platform readership of 6.1 million per month and the *Herald Sun* had a cross-platform readership of 4.7 million per month (*Australian Newspaper Readership, 12 months to December 2021*, 2021).

The two newspapers are owned by the two biggest communications companies in Australia, with *The Age* being owned by Nine and the *Herald Sun* owned by News Corp. Nine is an Australian mass media corporation, having merged with Fairfax Media in 2018. There are currently seven Australian newspapers under the Nine brand, including *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *Financial Review* (Brands, n.d). News Corp is also a mass media corporation and has an international presence. It was founded by, and continues to be run by, the Murdoch family. News Corp currently owns approximately 142 newspapers in Australia, which includes State and Territorial, community, and national publications. Their newspapers include the *Herald Sun* and *The Australian* (Audience Networks, n.d).

### ***Data Collection***

Table 1 outlines the details of the victims, perpetrators, number of articles initially retrieved, and other details relating to psychological disorders and relationships. Using search phrases which included the victims' and perpetrators' names, locations of the violence (Princes Park, Chinatown, Parkville, Latrobe University, Bundoora), and key dates, 83 articles were initially collected from *The Age* and 69 from *Herald Sun*. These were then narrowed down to ensure the articles were all written between the first reports of the incidents and the sentencing. Subsequently, the final number of articles analysed in this research was forty-six. The decision to only look at articles up until sentencing was made to ensure size of the dataset was manageable for a Masters project, and because some of the cases are being appealed so news reporting will extend beyond the timeline of this research. The AustLII legal online database was used to confirm the dates of the crimes and sentencing. research.

### ***Rationale***

This research uses Fairclough's (1992) data-selection strategy of focusing on "moments of crisis" (p. 230) because of the potential to show up aspects of routine practices that otherwise

might go unnoticed. There were several reasons why these four cases of gendered violence were chosen out of the many which occurred between 2018 and 2020. Firstly, these incidents were highly profiled across news media, social, and political spaces. Given the high-profile nature of these cases there are not only a high number of articles available, but there is also a substantial amount of information about the victims and perpetrators that is often not available in other instances of gendered violence. Several other highly reported instances of gendered violence were excluded from selection because the reporting didn't include perpetrator details or suppression orders were in place which limited the reporting of the crimes. Secondly, the news reports about the four cases included the backgrounds of the victims and perpetrators which were felt to be important to this research because of its grounding in feminist poststructuralism and in consideration of how discourses may vary depending on variables such as relationship between victim and perpetrator, social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. In particular, the range of relationships between the victims and perpetrators is of interest to this research as there are a number of social assumptions and understandings about who perpetrates violence that are not reflective of reality. They were also chosen because they all took place in public spaces (parks and streets) which are not typical spaces where violence against women occurs, although, as discussed earlier, there is a social assumption that they are more dangerous for women than private homes (Michelle & Weaver, 2003)

From the beginning of this research, I have reflected on how the victims and perpetrators are constructed and represented within the research I produce. I was hesitant to name the perpetrators because of the power that comes with naming. For this reason, the victims are referred to by their first names, while the perpetrators are identified by the initials of their first and last names (see Table 1). These men are well known, and I was motivated to ensure this research placed the victims at the forefront of the research over the perpetrators. In some small way, I hope that this research gives back power to the women whose lives were taken by the perpetrators.



**Table 1***Victim/perpetrator details and number of articles collected for analysis*

Victim	Date of Murder	Location	The Age (n=)	Herald Sun (n=)	Total articles retrieved (n=)	Perpetrators' initials	Reported psychological disorders of perpetrator	Reported relationship between victim and perpetrator
Eurydice Dixon	13/6/18	Princes Park Parkville, Melbourne	33	28	61	JT	Autism Spectrum, Sexual Sadism Disorder	Strangers
Aiia Maasarwe	16/1/19	Plenty Road Bundoora, Melbourne	24	23	47	CH	Personality Disorder, Substance Abuse	Strangers
Courtney Herron	24/5/19	Royal Park Parkville, Melbourne	15	14	29	HH	ADHD, Autism Spectrum, Delusional Disorder	Acquaintance
Natalina Angok	24/4/19	Celestial Avenue, Chinatown, Melbourne	11	4	15	CB	Schizophrenia	Partner

## Data Analysis Strategy

In order to investigate where discourses were located in the social processes and structures of gendered violence, the articles were closely read a number of times to ensure that I was familiar with them. Part of this process included removing articles that were not relevant to the research. For example, an article that was published about Aiiia's murder was found to be more focused on her father than on her and the perpetrator and was therefore excluded from analysis. Following the reading and the final selection of articles, I developed a code for referring to the articles in the research (see Appendix 1) and a list of recurrent language that was being used by journalists to describe the victims, perpetrators, and violence as shown in Table 2. Following that I was able to identify dominant and counter discourses used to construct the victims and perpetrators as also shown in Table 2. During the analysis of discourses, it became clear that the construction of violence against women occurs through the discourses used to construct victims and perpetrators. Therefore, I did not analyse the construction of violence against women as a separate category, and instead critically consider it as it is constructed *through* discourses used with victims and perpetrators. Throughout the time I was conducting data analysis I routinely engaged with my supervisor and we critically discussed what the discourses I was identifying were, how they were named, their meanings and importance, and whether something was a discourse or just a feature of a discourse.

**Table 2**

*Themes, language, discourses*

	Recurrent language	Dominant discourses	Counter discourses
Victims	Woman, young woman, girlfriend, victim, homeless woman, good, responsible	Goodness Personalisation	Depersonalisation Deficiency Complicit
Perpetrators	Killer, man, bad, drugs, mental illness, sadistic, evil, angry,	Badness Madness	Normative Excusatory Sympathetic
Violence	Murder, killed, death, evil, random, inexplicable, bad men, responsibility		

## Rigor & Ethics

To produce rigorous research, I have engaged in consistent reflexivity during this research process. This has included critical questioning of how my own assumptions, values, and social positions (gender, sexuality, ethnicity) are embedded in the research from beginning to end. Focusing on gendered violence reflects my personal and social concerns as a woman and

feminist. Similarly, the questions asked about perpetrators and psychology reflect my interests both academically and professionally. During the research process, I routinely engaged in critical discussions with my supervisor which included meetings, reviews of work, constructive feedback, and ensuring compliance with Massey University's ethics framework and research commitments. Dr Kahu and I were confident in the low-risk nature of this research and submitted an ethics application as per Massey University's ethics criteria. Subsequently, the research was deemed low risk by the ethics panel and was randomly selected for additional review by the ethics panel at a later date, where the low-risk rating was again confirmed. We discussed early in this research process the positions I hold in the world and how I must be attuned to my knowledge and discourses as they are interwoven with the research. Being acutely aware of the subjective assumptions I have brought to this research contributes to the rigor of research, by ensuring that the focus and analysis are relevant and meaningful.

At the beginning of this research process, I was employed in the Victorian State Minister of Corrections office as a political staffer, therefore it was particularly important that I engage in critical reflection about where my knowledge of the four cases was coming from. To ensure that I was not gleaning information from non-public sources, I kept a research journal with all my notes including citations and I ensured I did not engage in reading anything about the victims or perpetrators that was not publicly sourced. In mid-2020 the Cabinet shuffled and the Minister I worked for moved to non-justice portfolios, I also took a role with the Minister of Health later which allowed me to distance myself professionally from criminal justice and engage in the research purely from the perspective of a post-graduate student. However, I am aware that being employed in politics generally, especially within a party which is vocal against gendered violence, means I am immersed in a values-laden political environment which comes through in any research I produce. In this way, I am not only a citizen engaging in the social process of politics, but I am also a part of the political structure of Victoria, and Australia more broadly.

## Findings

This chapter outlines the findings from the critical discourse analysis and concludes with a discussion about the implications of news media constructions and positionings of the victims and perpetrators.

### Victims

Dominant discourses, less dominant discourses, and counter discourses were used to construct Natalina, Eurydice, Courtney, and Aiiia and position them as good and/or questionably good victims. Across all of the discourses, the personal attributes and behaviours of victims were presented as evidence of the ways they had met, or not met, the social expectations of womanhood and victimisation. Through the use of voices from family, friends, advocates, powerful social actors, and acquaintances the media were able to legitimise their constructions and positionings of the women.

### *Discourses of Goodness*

The dominant discourses of goodness constructed the victims as social insiders, which was demonstrated through presenting their socially desirable backgrounds and behaviours which showed they had attempted to mitigate their victimisation. Their social relationships were presented as evidence that they were good women who people loved and respected, and the voices of powerful social actors were used to legitimise their victimisation and tell audiences that their deaths were worthy of social consideration. Discourses of goodness positioned the victims empathetically as good women, and therefore good victims, who female audience members could relate to. This connection between victims and audiences also gave the media the opportunity to convey messages to the women of Melbourne about how they should behave. This reinforced the social expectations that women are ultimately responsible for mitigating risk, and failure to do so may result in victim blaming.

### Personalisation

As Anastasio and Costa (2004) discuss in their research, the personalisation of a victim results in an increase in empathy and a reduction in victim blaming. In the articles analysed in this research, personalisation was achieved in a number of ways. This included emphasis of socially normative or desirable backgrounds and behaviours which constructed the victims as good, normative, Australian women. With Eurydice, Courtney, and Aiiia, rich positive descriptions of their backgrounds and personalities not only personalised them, but also told audiences that they were innocent, relatable women, and importantly, good victims.

*...she was authentically herself, theatrical but unpretentious, passionate, curious, playful, loyal and loving and perfectly imperfect.*

[Article 1, The Age, 2018]

*“Melbourne is all full strong, funny women like Eurydice Dixon and this has hit us hard.”*

[Article 2, Herald Sun, 2018]

*Former classmates of Ms Herron at the exclusive Genazzano FCJ College in Kew on Tuesday shared photos of her as a “bubbly” teen.*

[Article 3, Herald Sun, 2019]

*In victim impact statements, family members described Ms Maasarwe as a vital, beautiful, optimistic and caring young woman...*

[Article 4, The Age, 2019]

These descriptions of the victims become opportunities for the media to not only construct the women as personable and normative women, but also create connections between the victims and audiences. These connections generate social sympathy which impacts whether the victim is considered good or bad. Additionally, by telling women audiences how similar victims are to them, the discourse contributes to reinforcing myths and fears about stranger danger and outdoor spaces, despite evidence showing that women are more likely to be assaulted in the home by men they are familiar with (Michelle & Weaver, 2003)

A particular example of personalisation was evident with Aiiia, who was Arab-Israeli. She was constructed as an Australian social insider through explicit statements explaining how she behaved in accordance with Western social norms.

*Aiiia dressed in Western clothes and did the things young Westerners travelling the world often do.*

*...this normal young woman going about her normal life became the latest of a handful of victims of random killings of a type that stir deep-seated fears in us all.*

[Article 5, Herald Sun, 2019]

The above shows how discourse draws on stereotypes about Western behaviours and sociocultural traditions being “normal” while everything else is “abnormal”. The emphasis on Aiiia’s apparently Western behaviours not only disregards her identity and background as an Arab-Israeli woman, but it also alienates any women who doesn’t fit within Western social norms and categorises them as abnormal or other. In this way, the discourse contributes to Aiiia being positioned as being blameless while simultaneously victim-blaming other women if they don’t adhere to Western sociocultural norms or appear to be a “normal young woman”.

Natalina was similarly constructed as a normative and relatable young woman, however this occurred in noticeably fewer articles than the other victims.

*"Natalina was a generous & kind girl, her selfless, friendly, loving and humble character has always drawn people to her. She would always (sic) seek the happiness of others...."*

[Article 6, The Age, 2019]

*"[Natalina] was a loving and caring sister, and a down-to-earth person, not a troublemaker. She loved everybody, even if someone did something bad to her, she would just talk and laugh with them."*

[Article 7, Herald Sun, 2019]

The above extracts are some of the only instances where Natalina was constructed more wholly through the discourse and audiences are given the opportunity to consider her outside of her relationship with the man who murdered her. This lack of positive personalisation and discourses of goodness surrounding Natalina may not be enough to disrupt the discourses of

badness that were primarily used to construct her and are explored in later analysis. If goodness discourses do not disrupt the dominant discourses of badness, audiences are told that while Natalina's family consider her a "generous & kind girl", her positioning as a good woman and victim is not secure.

### **Good Social Behaviours**

Presenting some of the socially acceptable, or good, behaviours the women engaged in was another way of constructing these women as good women and victims. One way this was demonstrated to audiences was through sharing positive relationships victims had with others, particularly family, while positioning the victims as objectively good people from socially acceptable backgrounds.

*Ms Herron was raised in the northern suburbs and was "part of a beautiful caring Greek-Aussie family" and had a brother and sister.*

[Article 8, The Age, 2019]

*The Maasarwe family released the final, cherished photograph of all four sisters together with their parents on a holiday in China.*

[Article 9, Herald Sun, 2019]

The above extracts show how the discourse positions Aiia and Courtney as women from socially desirable backgrounds with Courtney having been raised by a caring family in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, which are considered to be good middle-class suburbs, and Aiia having enjoyed a family holiday in China, which suggests a reasonable level of financial status. This not only legitimises the media's constructions of Aiia and Courtney as good social participants, it draws on a stereotype that white women from well-established socioeconomic backgrounds are a target for violence by strangers (Benedict, 1993; Reiner, 2002).

The stereotype of the well-established white woman being a target for public violence was further reinforced through the discourse focusing on other socially desirable personal aspects of the victims, such as their educational backgrounds.

*Ms Herron attended exclusive Catholic school Genazzano FCJ College in Kew in Melbourne's east from years seven to nine.*

[Article 8, The Age, 2019]

*Former classmates of Ms Herron at the exclusive Genazzano FCJ College in Kew...*

[Article 3, Herald Sun, 2019]

*[Courtney] was a private schoolgirl who had left Genazzano College in year 9...*

[Article 10, The Age, 2019]

As seen above, Courtney's education at a private school in Melbourne was selectively included in a number of articles, which legitimises the narrative that she was socially and economically well off at some stage of her life. In emphasising this socially acceptable aspect of her life, audiences are told that she was overall a good woman, from a good background and therefore was a good victim.

Similarly, the tertiary backgrounds of Natalina and Aiia were included in personalising them and showing that they were engaged in positive social behaviours.

*She [Aiia] spoke Arabic, Hebrew, English and Mandarin, having also previously studied in China.*

[Article 4, The Age, 2019]

In the above extract, Aiia's status as a socially and financially well-established, and therefore socially acceptable young woman, is reinforced by sharing her status as an international student. Similarly, Natalina's status as a student places her within normative Australian society.

*Ms Angok was an aspiring dental nurse, and studied dental hygiene at RMIT.*

[Article 6, Herald Sun, 2019]

Sharing that the victims were tertiary students also positions them as part of normative Australian youth culture, which may prompt audiences to have sympathy for them and view them positively. It contributes to the construction that these victims are like the women reading these articles, and they like them. Further, this positions them as productive members of society which is an important part of them being considered normative, and thus good women and victims.

Alongside this emphasis on positive characteristics of the women's lives, the behaviours of the women immediately prior to their attacks also positioned the women as good, blameless victims.

*"[Eurydice] was keeping an eye on her surroundings. Looking out for herself. Being responsible. Doing everything we expect. But Eurydice did not make it home safe," the Premier said.*

[Article 11, The Age, 2018]

Eurydice being labelled "responsible" and "doing everything we expect" demonstrates that there is a social expectation that in Australia women are responsible for mitigating violence against them. However, what is expected of women and what looking out for oneself actually entails are not explicitly stated in the above extracts and this demonstrates the subjective and changeable expectations placed on women to keep their bodies safe.

*Ms Dixon fought back, scratching him on the face.*

[Article 12, Herald Sun, 2019]

*She then heard Aiia screaming and swearing in Arabic before saying: "You piece of shit."*

[Article 4, The Age, 2019]

*The court was told it was Aiia's habit to phone a trusted family member when she was walking late at night. It is a tactic many women employ to feel safer in the dark...*

[Article 13, The Age, 2019]

The suggestion in these extracts is that Eurydice and Aiia are good victims because they had followed the socially accepted methods of keeping their bodies safe from strangers by carrying cell phones, "being responsible", and fighting back. However, while Eurydice and

Aiia's behaviours are considered good, not all victims who fight with their perpetrators are considered positively, as demonstrated with Natalina in the later section on counter discourses. This supports the suggestion that women are held to subjective expectations which are determined by a range of variables including their overall victim status.

The underpinning discourse which positions women as responsible for their own safety was also explicit at times.

*Victoria Police Superintendent David Clayton stood up to tell people there would be 24-hour patrols but in doing so told the community to "take responsibility for your own safety"*

*"[Women] should be able to [walk anywhere at any time] but it's not a question of rights, it's a question of risk and people evaluating risk."*

*"Make sure people know where you are and if you've got a mobile phone carry it."*

[Article 14, The Age, 2018]

*[Aiia's] death reminds us of the murders of Jill Meagher, Masa Vukotic and Eurydice Dixon: names that are now code for the deadly stranger-danger that is posed to Melbourne's young women by unhinged assailants.*

[Article 5, Herald Sun, 2019]

The extracts above position Melbourne women as responsible for keeping their bodies safe from an ever-present stranger danger and "unhinged assailants" – both of which draw on discourses of randomness as discussed in the perpetrator findings section.

In contrast to Eurydice and Aiia's proactiveness being positioned as good behaviours, Courtney's apparent passivity was positively positioned through the discourse despite her engagement in socially "bad" behaviours. Courtney is constructed as a helpless young woman who relied on others, particularly male partners, for help, and who had been led to drugs, and ultimately her death, by bad people.

*The court heard Ms Herron was an intelligent young woman who had fallen in with a bad crowd at the time of her death leading her to illicit drugs and a deteriorated mental state.*

[Article 15, Herald Sun, 2020]

*"She lived with me [ex-boyfriend] for two years in a house in Pascoe Vale ... I was looking after her all the time."*

[Article 10, The Age, 2019]

*Her former boyfriend, Ahmet Ozkurt, said he tried to protect her. Her family also supported her and put her into rehabilitation.*

*"She would hang out with bad people. People who used drugs and used her," he [former boyfriend] said.*

*"They would call her and invite her to use drugs together..."*

*"She was not a bad girl. She was a good girl," he [former boyfriend] said.*



[Article 3, Herald Sun, 2019]

In the extracts above, audiences are explicitly told that Courtney is a “good girl” and that her involvement with drugs and homelessness was passive. Her ex-boyfriend is positioned as having to make the “right” decisions for Courtney which creates an image of a helpless, weak woman who was reliant on men, while descriptions of her “falling” into a bad crowd legitimises the construction that she was blameless.

The media further reinforced positioning Courtney as a passive drug user and homeless woman by labelling her substance abuse and homelessness as issues that she “suffered” from.

*...when there is a child that suffers drug use and mental health issues...*

[Article 16, The Age, 2019]

*The 25-year-old had suffered "many mental illness issues and recurring homelessness"...*

[Article 8, The Age, 2019]

In stories focused on Courtney’s homelessness, acquaintances and housing advocate voices were used to construct her homelessness as an issue she experienced due to a housing crisis and failed social system, as opposed to any behaviours of her own. This construction legitimises passivity and works to not disrupt the overall discourses of good.

*Affordable housing advocate Robert Pradolin says Courtney Herron’s tragic death is a sign of Melbourne housing crisis*

*“Ms Herron’s violent death was a wake-up call for society... We have to face the facts. There is a chronic failure in our society that results in people being out in the cold, vulnerable and isolated,”.*

[Article 17, Herald Sun, 2019]

*“There wasn’t enough help out there for her. And there wasn’t enough help out there for him, either. The system let them both down.”*

*One woman said if there was enough housing for people "you wouldn't have to walk through the park at night".*

[Article 18, The Age, 2019]

Through passivity discourses, homelessness is positioned as an explanation for Courtney’s death because had she had a home, it is suggested that she would not have had to be outside at night. However, research has shown that “home” is not a safe space for women, and is more likely to be a site of violence than a public space (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003) so the media are reinforcing this myth through positioning her homelessness in this way.

One of the ways a woman will be considered a good victim in society, according to MacDowell (2013), is through being constructed as passive, vulnerable and reliant on a male partner. As the above extracts show, Courtney was constructed as meeting all of these requirements and therefore she was a good victim. However, as explored in later in analysis, Courtney’s drug and homelessness issues were not always constructed as the result of passivity and vulnerability, and, at those times, her good victim identity was subtly questioned.

## Powerful Voices

The final way that some of the victims were constructed as good women, and thus good victims, was through the voices of powerful social actors. Politicians from Australian State and Federal levels, including Prime Ministers, acted and spoke out in support of some of the victims, and the media used their voices to support their constructions and positionings of those victims as good women. However, this only occurred with two of the victims, Eurydice and Aiia.

*Premier Daniel Andrews and his wife Catherine held hands as they lay flowers for Ms Dixon.*

*Ms Andrews was seen wiping away tears as the couple hugged.*

*PM Malcolm Turnbull and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten attending a candlelight vigil for Eurydice Dixon at Parliament House in Canberra.*

[Article 2, Herald Sun, 2018]

*Politicians from all sides have condemned the “tragic and despicable” killing of Israeli student Aiia Maasarwe.*

[Article 19, The Age, 2019]

*Prime Minister Scott Morrison met with [Aiia’s] father, Saeed, on Saturday.*

*Accompanied by his wife and daughters, Mr Morrison also laid flowers at the scene of Ms Maasarwe’s death in Bundoora.*

[Article 20, The Age, 2019]

The use of powerful social actors in the reports of Eurydice and Aiia tells audiences that their status as good, blameless, victims is unquestionable, and that their murders are important not only to Australian society but also Australian media. The discourses of powerful social actors may also impact how the media choose which victims’ murders are covered and to what degree. Eurydice and Aiia being given the most attention by media and powerful social actors may be due to the fact that they were killed by strangers and therefore there is less risk in positioning them as innocent and good victims. Additionally, being killed by strangers who have been constructed as random bad or mad men may mean that those in power can be vocal with their support without having to consider the structures of power, gender, and patriarchy which underpin violence against women.

## Counter Discourses

In addition to the dominant discourses, a number of counter discourses were identified which positioned some of the victims as not entirely good women or victims. Through these discourses, Natalina, Courtney, and Aiia were suggested to be social outsiders, whose behaviours, assumed complicity, and mutual abuse as well as lifestyle choices, contributed to their murders. Discourses which constructed the women as complicit victims drew on negative stereotypes and myths about victims and violence, and showed that the discourse media uses does not acknowledge the complexities and intersections of violence against women. In some cases, victims were constructed through discourses of both goodness and counter discourses and the duality gave the media the opportunity to question their victimisation and engage in victim-blaming at times. Natalina and Courtney being

constructed through counter discourses more than Eurydice and Aiia may be because Natalina was partnered with her killer and Courtney was acquainted with her killer through drug use.

### *Depersonalising Discourses*

While at times discourse focused on personalising the victims and positioning them as insiders of normative society, at other times the women in particular Natalina and Courtney, were constructed through less dominant discourses, like depersonalisation, which suggests to audiences that their good victim status is questionable. In both *The Age* and *Herald Sun*, Natalina and Courtney were consistently depersonalised and positioned as social outsiders through the use of adjectives like “murdered woman”, “homeless woman”, or “girlfriend”. Meanwhile, Aiia was explicitly called an outsider in Article Five, though this was not qualified in any way. This depersonalisation occurred even after the names of the victims were known and at times in the same articles that their normative, social insider identities were constructed. As with the perpetrators, this demonstrates that audiences are presented with multiple constructions of victims but with the use of depersonalisation discourse they are told there is little else they need to know about them other than these characteristics. As a result, audiences may draw on stereotypes and myths in order to construct and position the women and social empathy toward the victims may be limited.

Of the four victims, Natalina, who was murdered by her partner, was the only one who was constructed in a noticeably different way to the others and through more counter discourses than dominant ones. She was also the focus of fewer articles than the other victims and this aligns with other research showing that incidents of IPV are rarely covered in news media (Phillips & Henderson, 1999). The primary discourse through which Natalina was constructed was depersonalising discourses which may be due to a number of factors such as a media the tradition of victim-blaming IPV victims, consistently negative constructions of African-Australians (Nolan et al., 2016), and women of colour generally being excluded from reports of violence in Australian media (Hart & Gilbertson, 2018).

Within depersonalisation discourses Natalina was consistently referred to as “murdered woman”, as opposed to the other victims whose names and positive attributes (e.g., comedian, student, loving) were more often used together.

*Mourners have gathered in the CBD in an emotional candlelit vigil for murdered woman Natalina Angok...*

[Article 21, Herald Sun, 2019]

*Murdered woman Natalina Angok's boyfriend [CB] faced court of Friday...*

[Article 22, Herald Sun, 2020]

*Several hundred mourners, including family and friends, attend a vigil for murdered woman Natalina Angok.*

[Article 23, The Age, 2020]

Further contributing to depersonalising Natalina was the repeated use of “girlfriend” to identify her.

*Delusional killer who strangled girlfriend in laneway gets 21 years*

[Article 23, The Age, 2020]

*A man has admitted strangling his girlfriend to death in a Chinatown laneway...*

[Article Twenty-two] Herald Sun, 2020.

*...[CB] has been charged with murdering his girlfriend Natalina Angok.*

[Article 7, Herald Sun, 2019]

The term “girlfriend” is laden with social expectations, constructed by hegemonic discourse and studies have shown that based on these social expectations women are assigned roles in a relationship and failure to adhere to these roles then justifies violence (Boonzaier, 2008; Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004). Therefore, within the discourse which labels her “girlfriend” are possibilities that she has violated the relationship and role(s) socially assigned to her. Having fewer articles overall may contribute to Natalina being considered a social outsider. Fewer articles also means that there are fewer opportunities to construct and position her more wholly as a woman, so the depersonalising labels of “murdered woman” and “girlfriend” become the dominant identifiers of Natalina.

Like Natalina, Courtney was partly constructed through depersonalising terms, specifically “homeless woman”, even after her name was reported. Although Courtney was not partnered with the man who killed her, she was reported to have been acquainted with him prior to the night she was killed, and this may have been a reason for some depersonalisation. This depersonalising discourse positions her outside of normative society and suggests personal deficiency.

*Police say the 25-year-old homeless woman had been the victim of a "horrendous bashing".*

[Article 24, The Age, 2019]

*A homeless woman who was killed in Parkville in a "horrendous bashing" was a "vulnerable" person...*

[Article 16, The Age, 2019]

While the depersonalisation of Natalina and Courtney contribute to constructing them as social outsiders, with Aiia, she was explicitly called an outsider.

*Aiia did not work at the ABC like Jill Meagher, or appear on the stand-up comedy circuit like Eurydice Dixon, and she wasn't a popular local schoolgirl like Masa Vukotic, with dozens of local classmates and friends and extended family to mourn her publicly. She is, or was, an outsider.*

[Article 5, Herald Sun, 2019]

This discourse is an explicit contrast to the dominant discursive positioning of Aiia as a good, socially normative victim who audiences can relate to and subtly draws on outsider discourses to suggest that her victimisation may, have in some way, been a result of her outsider status. However, in other ways Aiia *is* like these women because Jill Meagher was also an immigrant, Masa Vukotic was also a student, and Eurydice had also been at a comedy show the night she was killed. Furthermore, all of these women were killed in public spaces by strangers. Members of Aiia's family also came to Melbourne from Israel following her murder, while those back in Israel were interviewed by the *Herald Sun* and described Aiia using similar discourses of goodness used with the other victims named. Additionally, many

gathered at public memorials for Aiiia, including friends, classmates, and the Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Regardless of these parallels, the above attempt to construct Aiiia as social outsider casts doubt on her inclusion in Australian society, previously described normative qualities, and potentially her status as a good victim.

### **Deficit and Complicit Victim Discourses**

Discourses of deficiency and complicity were also used in constructing Natalina and Courtney. Through these discourses, Natalina was constructed as having sought out, or willingly stayed, in her abusive relationship while Courtney is constructed as a complicit drug user, and whose homelessness was a result of this. Additionally, Courtney was constructed as having made the choice to not access help or shelter through friends and family, and instead spend time with “bad people”, including her killer.

*“She would hang out with bad people. People who used drugs and used her,”*

[Article 3, Herald Sun, 2019]

*Courtney Herron was at gathering with alleged killer hours before her death*

[Article 10, The Age, 2019]

Natalina was also constructed as being a complicit victim through media presenting audiences with evidence that she knew CB would kill her one day.

*Ms Angok's half-sister Sabrina said she felt guilt for not being more insistent that she permanently break up with Bell after Ms Angok expressed a fear that “someday [Bell] will kill me”.*

*“She told me ‘this man will kill me one day’. I remember telling her to leave you,” she told Bell.*

[Article 23, The Age, 2020]

While the above appears to be a tragic and dramatic foreshadowing of her murder, it simultaneously suggests that Natalina was demonstrably aware that she was in danger. As Anastasio and Costa (2004) suggest, when the media include victims’ histories of abuse in this way, audiences may conclude that the victim is to blame because of her failure to leave her abuser. In positioning victims like Natalina in this way, the media fail to acknowledge that while many women may be able to recognise abuse, negative social attitudes, consequences, and the cyclical nature of violence often hinders their ability to seek practical help (Webster et al., 2018).

In addition to being a willing partner to a violent man, Natalina was also constructed as an active participant in the abuse by presenting audiences with examples that demonstrated she had behaved counter to what is expected of ‘good’ victims on the night of her murder.

*...a taxi driver, who gave the couple a lift that night, described Ms Angok as swearing and abusing [CB] for most of the trip.*

[Article 22, Herald Sun, 2020]

*Taxi driver Mohammed Sultan Ali said during the ride he remembered Ms Angok repeatedly using the word “f---ing” and raising her voice as she spoke to [CB]...*

[Article 25, The Age, 2019]

Despite the above being based on one encounter, the discourse presents the taxi driver's knowledge as objective and factual evidence that Natalina was abusive toward CB. This reinforces the narrative established through the discourse of complicity that her behaviours directly contributed to her murder.

*The court heard the pair had a relationship "characterised by turbulence and repeated conflict".*

[Article 26, Herald Sun, 2020]

*... it was likely that ...turbulent relationship dynamics with Ms Angok and inhibition caused by drug and alcohol use on the night contributed to the murder.*

[Article 27, The Age, 2020]

The positioning of Natalina as drunk and abusive on the evening of her murder and descriptions of her "turbulent relationship" with CB draw on, and reinforce, the stereotype that reciprocal abuse is common in IPV and upholds the myth that it "takes two to tango" (Berns, 2004, p. 110; Boonzaier, 2008). This myth is grounded in the theory that in order for domestic violence to occur, both parties must have actively engaged in some kind of abusive behaviour toward each other (Berns, 2004; Michelle & Weaver, 2003). It also draws on discourses which claims that behaviours by women always precipitate violence by men (Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Morgan & Politoff, 2012), and that men's violence is a spur of the moment and justifiable response to women's "bad" behaviours (Berns, 2004; Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). Given Natalina was a woman of colour, there is also the potential that this discourse is grounded in racial stereotypes which position women of colour as physically and psychologically dominant and volatile (MacDowell, 2013).

With respect to Courtney, who was predominantly constructed as a good woman and good victim, there was a duality at times when counter discourses constructed her as a socially deviant drug user who chose to sleep rough.

*Courtney Herron was reportedly couch-surfing and sleeping rough before her tragic death in Royal Park...*

[Article 17, Herald Sun, 2019]

*Detective Inspector Stamper said Ms Herron had been staying on friends' couches and possibly sleeping rough before her death.*

[Article 28, The Age, 2019]

*Ms Herron has a sister and brother and was "a part of a beautiful caring Greek-Aussie family... So to end up homeless and on the street is truly shocking for people to grasp."*

[Article 24, The Age, 2019]

Accounts of Courtney couch-surfing with friends and having a caring family suggest that she had easy access to safety, but chose not to access it. Statements about how her homelessness was shocking in the face of this apparent access to shelter reinforce the construction that she was actively rejecting help, chose to be homeless, and therefore failed to keep herself safe. Courtney was also positioned through the discourse as having actively chosen to spend time with "bad people" and engage in bad behaviours with them. Through the constructions of Courtney as helpless, media suggest to audiences that she may be deficit because she wasn't

able to do things for herself or make the “right” decisions on her own. However, suggesting this does not adequately explain the intersections of vulnerability people who have substance and mental health issues face and audiences may conclude that she had consciously chosen to be in a dangerous situation with her killer and leads to doubt over the dominant discursive construction so her being a good, social insider and victim.

This chapter section has presented a number of discourses and noted how these discourses do and do not align with extant literature. Through the dominant discourses of goodness, the victims were constructed as good, blameless women whose lives were mostly normative prior to their murders. There were also counter discourses uncovered and analysed which show that despite being good, blameless victims, some of the women were positioned as potentially being responsible for their victimisation. The counter discourses explored in this chapter are closely aligned with others’ studies in this area, which show that news media often question victims’ experiences and whether they have a role to play in violence.

## **Perpetrators**

Discourses of badness were the dominant discourses used to construct the perpetrators and these included depersonalisation, non-normative, evilness, and madness discourses which constructed each of the men as social outsiders with clear progressions from either childhood or sudden adverse events to murder. At times some of the discourses also suggested that the perpetrators were fundamentally bad and/or mad men as evidenced by non-normative childhoods and personal relationships. Counter discourses, labelled Excusatory Discourses, sympathetically constructed the men as passive sufferers of psychological disorders and victims of circumstance. Through both dominant and counter discourses, the mens’ behaviours were excused, attributed to external forces, and their violence degendered. Blame was also shifted to internal/external forces, their victims, other women in their lives, and social systems. Through these contrasting discourses the perpetrators are dually constructed as mad, bad, and inherent social outsiders and as normal men who have been victims of circumstance and suffer passively from psychological disorders. Occasionally, these dual constructions occur in the same articles or sentences, which created a tension between and within discourses. While the discourses are presented separately for clarity in this chapter, many overlap and reinforce one another or create a discursive structure upon which subsequent constructions and positions of the perpetrators can occur.

### ***Discourses of Badness***

#### **Depersonalisation**

Depersonalisation was a noticeable feature of the discourses of badness and used to initially construct the perpetrators’ identities and behaviours without needing to go into detail. Depersonalisation discourse uses easily accessible labels like “man” and “killer”, either in headlines or the first few sentences of an article, which firstly constructs perpetrators as unrecognisable characters and secondly reinforces the individualisation of violence against women (Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Michelle & Weaver, 2003; Morgan & Politoff, 2012) through categorising perpetrators and their violent behaviours as outside of normative society.

*Mercy given to killer who showed none*

[Article 29, The Age, 2019]

*Courtney Herron was at gathering with alleged killer hours before her death.*

[Article 10, The Age, 2019]

*A man who strangled his girlfriend to death in a Chinatown laneway...*

[Article 27, The Age, 2020]

*Man charged with murder after body discovered in Chinatown*

[Article 7, Herald Sun, 2019]

*A homeless man has been charged with murder...*

[Article 30, The Age, 2019]

*The man accused of raping and killing Aiiia Maasarwe...*

[Article 31, Herald Sun, 2019]

As with the victims, depersonalisation suggests there is nothing more that needs to be known about the perpetrators other than these basic descriptors. At times, as in the extracts below, the descriptors construct not only the perpetrator but also their motives for violence.

*...Police hunt random, opportunistic killer after brutal murder...*

[Article 32, The Age, 2019]

*The sadistic man who killed young comedian Eurydice Dixon sensed her panic and was “excited” by it...*

[Article 33, Herald Sun, 2019]

While depersonalisation does not anonymise the men, it may prompt audiences to draw on previously reported incidents of violence, which are typically extreme (Gruenewald et al., 2009; Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Reiner, 2002; Roberts, 1992), in order to fill in the gaps about who these perpetrators are. By filling in the gaps based on previous constructions of violent men, the audiences then may be less likely to consider the men as part of their social worlds and as a result end up reinforcing myths about all violent men being social outsiders, and vice versa (Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; Reiner, 2002).

### **Constructing Perpetrators as non-Normative**

The second dominant discourse of badness highlighted the men as non-normative, social outsiders who engaged in non-normative behaviours both passively and actively. For the most part, each perpetrator was individually constructed through non-normative discourses, however at times there were also more general statements made about men who are violent toward women. This is seen in Article 34 where the media presents audiences with explicit statements that separate “bad men” and “perpetrators” from other, normative, men.

*“Everyone is concerned about violence against women — but unfortunately there is always going to be bad men who do bad things and it’s that small cohort that need to be targeted.*

[Article 34, Herald Sun, 2020]



In the above audiences are told there is a type of “bad man” that exists, and that violence (a non-normative behaviour) will always occur because of them. Not only does this construct a separation between men, but it also tells people that only a small number of these bad men exist and that they are easily identifiable.

*“I believe we’ve really got to focus on what we can do around the actions of perpetrators to ensure we’re dealing with those because the city should be safe for everybody...”*

[Article 14, The Age, 2018]

Similarly, the above extract tells audiences that it is not *men* who are responsible for violence against women, but rather *perpetrators*. This discursively constructed separation between socially normative men and “bad men” by Australian news media aligns with what other studies have shown to be a dominant discursive construction by media in other Western countries (Dobash et al., 2009; Dobash et al., 2004; Kitzinger, 2004).

With respect to the specific perpetrators who are the focus of this research, the media reported detailed accounts of their lives prior to the murders which legitimised the discursive constructions that these men were long-time social outsiders, and therefore bad men. With respect to CH, who was almost exclusively constructed through non-normative discourses, the media reported on his behaviours from the time of childhood through to his adult life. This presented not only an account of his life to audiences, but it also showed them how he was born a social outsider, raised as one, and was one as an adult – thus suggesting this was his core identity.

*[CH], who is Aboriginal, was adrift from his culture and socially isolated, and his early years were marked by poverty, chaos and dysfunction.*

*By the time he started school, in the care of a foster mother, [CH’s] severe behavioural problems had started to emerge.*

[Article 35, The Age, 2019]

The above shows the process of constructing CH’s social outsider status as inherent through including that he is part of a group (Aboriginal) who are historically treated as outsiders by Australian society and that he engaged in socially deviant behaviours from a very young age. Furthermore, this article also said that *[CH] hurt other children and had difficulty forming friendships* which constructs a natural, linear progression from non-normative child to murderer that audiences may then assume occurs in all cases of violence against women. The media also focused on how non-normative behaviours were standard for HH by suggesting that chaos was a natural component of his life.

*Before he savagely attacked, raped and murdered young international student Aiiia Maasarwe, [CH’s] life had its own chaotic rhythm.*

*Every fortnight, when his Centrelink payments came through, [HH] bought methamphetamine and cannabis and shared them with his friends.*

*He subsisted on croissants and chocolate milk. He slept rough. He shoplifted what he needed...*

[Article 35, The Age, 2019]

The use of “rhythm” suggests that the chaos and disorder of CH’s life had a natural and active element to it which he willingly participated in. The suggestion that he was proactively engaging in non-normative behaviours is further supported in the positioning of his drug use and criminal behaviours as wilful, along with being homeless and choosing to spend time with other non-normative persons. Furthermore, by including information about him sharing drugs with friends while sleeping rough, and shoplifting, CH’s world is constructed by the media as being entirely non-normative. Even the reporting of his dietary choices is used to reinforce that this was a man who did not behave in accordance with social norms. Further supporting the construction that CH wilfully engaged in non-normative social behaviours were statements which included active language suggesting he made these choices, such as *He turned to drugs in his teenage years...* [Article Thirty-six. Herald Sun, 2019].

Similar to CH, HH’s drug use and the negative impacts this had on his interpersonal relationships was also presented as demonstrative of an active choice to engage in social outsider behaviours.

*In 2015, [HH] posted a link about "magic mushrooms and the healing trip". Another link was to an article about marijuana and spirituality.*

[Article 37, The Age, 2019]

*Ms Herron and Mr [HH] then went together to a friend's apartment where they smoked cannabis and methamphetamine.*

[Article 38, The Age, 2020]

However, unlike with CH, the media reports explicitly excluded HH’s drug use as reason for his violence.

*Mr HH was suffering from schizophrenia and not a drug-induced psychosis, and that while the drug use may have exacerbated the offending it wasn't the cause.*

Additionally, the media also told audiences that HH was purposefully rejected by his peers for his lifestyle choices.

*Others have told The Age they avoided [HH] for years because of his lifestyle choices.*

[Article 37, The Age, 2019]

Both JT and HH were also constructed as having pretended to be normative in order to hide their “real” bad selves and desires from the world. Headlines such as *The image accused killer [HH] presented to the world* [Article 37, The Age, 2019] and *The house where killer [JT] hid his secret obsession* [Article 39, The Age, 2019] primed audiences to view the men in this way, while the content of articles reinforced the construction.

*In the months before [JT] stalked and killed budding comedian Eurydice Dixon in Carlton North, the 19-year-old kept up the facade of a normal life and attended his aunt's wedding in Melbourne's north-west.*

[Article 39, The Age, 2019]

Through the above extracts audiences are not only told that HH and JT are non-normative, but it is suggested that men violent men cannot be normative – though they may be pretending to be by creating a façade.

The inclusion of the criminal histories of some of the perpetrators also served to construct the men as bad men who intentionally behaved outside of what society considers normative behaviours.

*He [CH] has recently faced a string of charges including car theft, careless driving and criminal damage.*

[Article Thirty-one. Herald Sun, 2019]

*[CB] had only recently been released from prison over an assault on a former partner when they met.*

[Article Twenty-six. Herald Sun, 2020]

*A man accused of murdering Courtney Herron had weeks earlier scored an early release from jail over a “savage” attack on his girlfriend.*

*“He [HH] just literally walked out the gates...This is a guy released to kill.”*

[Article Forty. Herald Sun, 2020]

Saying that “...this is a guy released to kill” not only constructs HH as a bad and evil man, but it also suggests that Courtney’s murder was partially the result of him being released from jail and so shifts some responsibility for her death to the justice system.

### **Constructing Perpetrators as Evil**

The construction of violent men as non-normative social outsiders is further supported in the third discourse identified in this analysis, which is the evilness discourse. While this was the least dominant of the discourses of badness, it is used in a number of articles to construct the perpetrators and the violence and offer a reason as to why these events occurred. Along with explicit references to “evil” and “evilness”, the media used language that centred on darkness, senselessness, and randomness in this discourse.

*Darkness in the heart of one of Melbourne’s most popular parks*

[Article 41, The Age, 2018]

*“This is a desperately sad case, a terrible waste, an act of evil...”*

[Article 2, Herald Sun, 2018]

*...evil was watching from across the street.*

[Article 42, The Age, 2019]

In the above examples, JT is explicitly described as “evil” which immediately sensationalises him and the crime, while statements such as the below construct JT’s evilness as natural, welcomed by him, and unstoppable.

*The sadistic man who killed young comedian Eurydice Dixon sensed her panic and was “excited” by it...*

[Article 33, Herald Sun, 2019]

*“It follows, as night follows day, that [JT] intended to kill [Eurydice]”*

[Article 12, Herald Sun, 2019]

Another way the men were constructed as evil was through the media sharing examples of their apparent remorselessness following the murders. In particular, CB and JT’s normative behaviours were positioned as evidence that they were remorseless.

*If you [CB] had taken one single step which evidenced some sort of remorse at the time rather than buying cigarettes, gambling at the casino, buying a bottle of wine and eating a souvlaki, there might be some force behind what you say.*

[Article 23, The Age, 2020]

*[JT] had a nap, bought a coffee and pie and went home to watch more violent porn in the hours after the killing, later admitting he “didn’t really have any feelings”.*

[Article 43, The Age, 2019]

The media’s inclusions of an expert forensic psychologist finding JT’s post-murder behaviours and lack of feelings “*profoundly disturbing but...not uncommon in offenders*” [Article 43, The Age, 2019] legitimises the construction that not only JT is evil but that other offenders are as well.

The degree to which each perpetrator was constructed as evil varied. For example, CH was constructed as having a muted response and being detached from killing Courtney which still positions him within discourses of evil because it is not considered socially normative to feel as little as it was reported he did.

*Mr Marsh said [CH] had seemed “perplexed and disconnected” after his arrest, and showed a “curious detachment”.*

*“There is some evidence of remorse, but I have to concede it’s very muted ... Mr [CH’s] overall emotional range, similarly, is very muted.”*

[Article 35, The Age, 2019]

By constructing the men and their behaviours through discourses of evil, violence against women is constructed in this way and therefore removed from the context of normative Australian society. Therefore, discourses of evil reinforce the social practice of discursively separating violent men from the society they live in and gives “normal” men the ability to separate themselves from the issue of gendered violence. Furthermore, these discourses contribute to the other dominant discourse considered earlier, which position perpetrators as objectively and/or inherently bad men and social outsiders.

## Constructing Perpetrators as Mad

Another discourse which was routinely used to position men as bad, social outsiders was madness. News media often publish stories which position violence and mental illness as being linked, which constructs negative social understandings and fears of mental illness, and reinforces the stereotype that violence is an inherent part of disordered psychology and vice versa (Blood & Holland, 2004; Francis et al., 2004; Gwarjanski & Parrott, 2017). A link between the perpetrators' madness and their violence was constructed very early in the reporting of the murders and included descriptions of madness in the early lives of the perpetrators, immediately prior and following the murders. Not only does the continual construction that these perpetrators were mad reinforce other constructions of the perpetrators having an inherent non-normative, disordered nature, it also contributes to broader social constructions that all violent men are disordered (Blood & Holland, 2004).

Of the perpetrators, JT's madness was reported on the most. This may have been in part due to there being more articles published about Eurydice's murder, but also because the murder of Eurydice was considered extremely shocking and so the media attempted to explain this through discourses of madness. In the below extracts, JT is constructed as having been psychologically disordered his whole life through sharing his formal diagnoses of ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder which also legitimises the use of madness discourse.

*[JT] had a turbulent upbringing as the middle of three boys who was diagnosed with mild autism spectrum disorder and ADHD as a child.*

*There were early signs of violence and [JT's] anger problems ...and he was seen by a string of child psychologists before being expelled from high school for bad behaviour.*

[Article 39, The Age, 2019]

*"He has been exposed to [sexual sadism] thoughts for at least a fifth of his life and they are quite consuming," Prof Ogloff said.*

[Article 43, The Age, 2019]

The above discourse shows the media constructing a linear progression from being a psychologically disordered child to adult killer. By including JT's formal diagnoses alongside reports of early life violence, anger problems, and bad behaviour a link is drawn between his madness and violence. Similar linear constructions were applied to CH and HH. Both of their historical instances of disordered psychology were included in reporting, though they were said to have occurred later in life and suddenly in HH's case.

*"...apparently something happened. I don't know, [HH] became psychologically dislodged."*

*"Apparently at one point [HH] thought he was Jesus"*

[Article 37, Herald Sun, 2019]

*The man accused of raping and killing Aiaa Maasarwe rapped about demons in his mind...in the months leading up to last week's horrendous murder.*

[Article 31, Herald Sun, 2019]

HH's history of madness was confirmed through acquaintances and a television show HH appeared on, and as such legitimised the media's constructions that he engaged in behaviours that are evidence of madness.

*He never seemed totally all there. [He] had a strange distant look in his eyes.*

*He was always a strange boy*

[Article 37, Herald Sun, 2019]

*Several people there noticed Mr [HH] behaving strangely, and saw the pair communicating with each other using hand signals and talking about magic and dragons.*

[Article 38, The Age, 2020]

*A dishevelled [HH], who was playing a recorder, told [The Footy Show] host Sam Newman: "I've put bamboo through my nose because I'm a very powerful shaman."*

[Article 44, The Age, 2019]

HH's violence was then legitimised by the media's use of an expert psychological voice to detail HH's thinking before and during the murder of Courtney.

*[HH] felt that [Courtney] intended harm to him. He felt she was interfering with his mind. He felt she had been involved in some way in a past life in which she had harmed him or people close to him," [A psychiatrist] said.*

*"And I [psychiatrist] think he believed she was actually not who she was but was someone else, perhaps a spirit, that had entered her body and felt it was linked to a wider conspiracy ... because of that he had to destroy her."*

[Article 38, The Age, 2020]

Through the inclusion of a psychiatrist, the media construct a link between HH's madness and his violence and this is legitimised when he is found not guilty by reason of mental impairment.

*Man found not guilty by way of mental impairment of murder of Courtney Herron*

[Article 38, The Age, 2020]

The media's use of acquaintances and a psychiatrist not only constructs HH's madness, but explains Courtney's death in a way that audiences can understand because the link between violence and mental illness is viewed as common-sense (Blood & Holland, 2004; Nairn, 1999). Reporting the outcome of his trial as being found not guilty by reason of mental impairment legitimises the construction and the link. Further support for the construction of a link between disordered psychology and violence is seen in reports on CB and CH.

*The court heard [CB] had a long history of mental illness and had not been recently treated with an antipsychotic drug that he required.*

[Article 7, Herald Sun, 2019]

*...he had admitted himself to the Flynn Unit at Latrobe Regional Hospital in Traralgon...A week later his girlfriend, Natalina Angok, was dead.*

[Article 23, The Age, 2020]

*A man has admitted strangling his girlfriend to death in a Chinatown laneway a week after being released from a mental facility.*

[Article 22, Herald Sun, 2020]

The above extracts demonstrate the media constructing CB's madness through sharing his medication needs and inpatient care history, while establishing a correlation between his release from care and the murder of Natalina. This also parallels the connection made in Article Forty between HH's release from prison and Courtney's murder, which demonstrates news media's practice of shifting the focus of blame toward institutions and systems.

### ***Excusatory Discourses***

In a similar way to the victims, the perpetrators were also partially constructed through counter discourses, and these cast doubt on the extent to which they are responsible for their violence. These are labelled as Excusatory Discourses because, while not positioning the men as "good" they do offer excuses or reasons that offset the discourses of badness. The first excusatory discourse, "perpetrators as socially normative men" constructed the men as social insiders, and positioned the relationships they had with others, and in particular women, as evidence that their violence was not premeditated or based on gender. Constructing the men as normative also supported the second excusatory discourse, "perpetrators as victims", whereby the men's lives were constructed in a sympathetic way and thus the men themselves were positioned as victims of circumstances beyond their control, people, and systems. The third discourse identified "perpetrators as sufferers of psychological disorders" counters the inherent madness discourses discussed earlier in this chapter and constructs the men more as passive sufferers, particularly in the moments where they are being violent.

### **Perpetrators as Socially Normative Men**

At times the perpetrators were constructed as socially normative men through news media highlighting positive aspects of their personalities, lives, and relationships with others, particularly women.

*... a former classmate of [CB]'s, said the accused murderer was a popular student at Mornington -Secondary College and was known as the class clown.*

*"He was always telling jokes and being silly in class,"*

[Article 7, Herald Sun, 2019]

*[JT] would wake each morning and put on clean clothes before travelling to his hospitality and training program at Hester Hornbrook Academy in Prahran...*

*By all accounts he socialised well, had friends and maintained a long-term relationship with a woman...*

[Article 39, The Age, 2019]

*Early photos show a strikingly handsome young man.*

*A "happy" hippy with a wide circle of friends, a fiancée and a baby.*

*[HH] said to be from good family and schooling, who worked sometimes as a barber...*

*The images he projected to the world are spread across three separate Facebook profiles.*

[Article 37, The Age, 2019]

With the news media highlighting JT, CB, and HH's normative heterosexual relationships, the construction that their violence was not a gendered issue was reinforced, and also supported the other constructions of these men having experienced a sudden change in behaviour or psychology, and being out of control in the moment they committed murder. Additionally, in JT's case, gender was removed more explicitly from his reasons for killing Eurydice through the news media stating that he didn't hate women.

*"...[JT] didn't kill Eurydice Dixon because he hated women"*

*"[JT] wasn't a man who would be seen as having patriarchal or misogynistic attitudes."*

[Article, 42, The Age, 2019]

However, there were conflicting discourses used at times, whereby the men were constructed as both normative and non-normative in the same sentences.

*The father of four [CB] had only recently been released from prison over an assault on a former partner when they met.*

[Article 26, Herald Sun, 2020]

*But by night the aspiring restaurateur [JT] stayed holed up in his bedroom watching "snuff porn" – a genre where the woman ends up dead.*

[Article 39, The Age, 2019]

Conflicting, or dual, constructions of perpetrators are not uncommon in news media, as studies such as Fairbairn and Dawson (2013) show. Nor are they uncommon when perpetrators themselves construct their identities and violence (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004) which explains how and why news media are able to use conflicting discourses like these. Despite these extracts positioning CB as a historically violent man toward women, and JT as a man who enjoys sexual violence against women, they are embedded within normative constructions and so reinforces the narrative that gender is not part of these men's violence.

### **Perpetrators as Victims Discourse**

Another discourse which excused the men's violence constructed them as victims of circumstances and forces that they had no control over. At times the men themselves may not be constructed as victims but rather their circumstances are constructed in a way that sympathetically positions the men, as seen with HH in the below.



*"You'd understand how [HH] be feeling in the circumstances. It's a very tragic and complex situation,"*

[Article 8, The Age, 2019]

In this extract, rather than HH being constructed sympathetically, his circumstances are and as such, it absolves him of having control in his life and therefore Courtney's death. Similar was done with CH and JT, who had their lifestyle circumstances constructed sympathetically.

*[CH], who is Aboriginal, was adrift from his culture and socially isolated, and his early years were marked by poverty, chaos and dysfunction.*

*He was hospitalised with scabies at 17 months old, and by the time he was three authorities had received multiple notifications of drug and alcohol abuse, family violence and neglect in the family home. He suffered rotten teeth and skin problems.*

[Article 35, The Age, 2019]

*Inside that dysfunctional home, [JT's] growing predilection for homicidal rape fantasies went undetected.*

[Article 39, The Age, 2019]

The above extracts demonstrate the way that news media construct the circumstances surrounding CH and JT and therefore position them sympathetically. This also supports earlier constructions of the linear progression from non-normative younger years and family dynamics to murder. However, as outlined earlier, the dominant discourses constructed CH and JT as evil men; positioning them as victims of circumstance may not fully disrupt that. Instead, it may prompt audiences to consider the degree to which they not responsible for becoming evil men and so shifts a portion of blame to the people and systems who failed them in their younger years. Further shifting of blame to other people, particularly women, occurred with both CH and CB.

*"There is a core of anger in Mr [CH]," [CH's lawyer] said. "Anger at the world, and especially females."*

*By the time he was 12 months old, [CH] had been effectively abandoned by his mother, who suffered from substance abuse problems.*

[Article 35, The Age, 2019]

*...a taxi driver, who gave the couple a lift that night, described Ms Angok as swearing and abusing [CB] for most of the trip.*

[Article 22, Herald Sun, 2020]

In presenting the audiences with the suggestion that CH's mother abandoning him created a "core of anger" toward women and that JT was the responding to violence toward himself, both men are positioned as victims themselves, and women are partly blamed for the men's violence. It is of note that no mention is made of CH's father's role in his childhood. Though neither are absolved entirely of responsibility for killing Aia and Natalina, this discourse offers explanations for the murders in line with dominant discursive practices that lessen

men's responsibility, and implicate the women in perpetrators' lives in their violence (Little, 2015a; Tranchese & Zollo, 2013).

In addition to people and life circumstances being constructed as partially responsible for the perpetrators' behaviours, social services were implicated in the case of HH.

*Ms Lee Jones said when she tried to get Mr [HH] psychiatric help last year she was left on hold for two hours until someone could speak to her.*

[Article Forty-four. The Age, 2019]

*"There wasn't enough help out there for her. And there wasn't enough help out there for him, either. The system let them both down."*

*One woman said if there was enough housing for people "you wouldn't have to walk through the park at night".*

[Article Eighteen. The Age, 2019]

In the extracts above, the media shifts a degree of responsibility from HH and places it onto social services that failed to provide psychiatric help and housing for him. This is in addition to the justice system being positioned as responsible, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Further, there is the suggestion that if neither HH nor Courtney were homeless, then the murder would not have occurred. Additionally, this reinforces earlier identified constructions of Courtney as a victim of social service failures instead of violence, while also positioning HH as an equal to Courtney because he is also a victim of "the system".

In addition to constructing the men as victims of historical circumstances, news media also suggested that they were victims of inexplicable events or forces before the murders. This is a common means through which news media and perpetrators explain "unexplainable" violence (Boonzaier, 2008). With HH, the discourse explicitly constructed him as a normative man one day, and then a non-normative man the next when *something* happened.

*One woman who knew [HH] described him as a "happy go lucky fellow" ...whose life fell apart...*

*"...apparently something happened. I don't know, he became psychologically dislodged."*

[Article 37, The Age, 2019]

In the above, HH is not only constructed as having randomly become the violent man who killed Courtney, he is also partially removed from the violence because he was not his usual self when the killing occurred. This aligns with discourse that constructs men as having a "real self" that is not violence, as thus, degendering violence against women (Lau & Stevens, 2012).

CB's violent behaviour toward Natalina was also constructed as having randomly occurred through this discourse.

*"Things sort of went a bit funny and then I remember being on top of her and panicking, not really knowing what I was doing or how I even ended up on top of her"*

[Article 26, Herald Sun, 2020]

In saying “*not really knowing what I was doing*” CB’s violence is constructed as unexpected and as the result of force that cannot be explained. That alongside the mention of him panicking while the violence occurred, also suggests he was not in control of the situation. Consequently, a subtle suggestion is made to audiences that he may not be *entirely* responsible for what occurred.

### **Perpetrators as Sufferers of Psychological Disorders**

The third discourse which serves to excuse the men’s actions was “perpetrators as sufferers of disorders” which sits in contrast to the earlier discussed discourse of madness. Where madness was used to support the discourses of badness and focused on the men’s mental health and less sympathetic, with this discourse, passive language is used to sympathetically position the men as sufferers of their respective psychological disorders. Furthermore, it is also suggested that in the moments before and during the killing of their victims, there were additional, random, psychological phenomena occurring, as seen in the extracts below.

*The court heard [CB] had suffered untreated schizophrenia...*

[Article 26, Herald Sun, 2020]

*... [CB] suffered from schizophrenia...*

[Article 45, The Age, 2019]

*... [HH] possibly suffered from a delusional disorder and autism spectrum disorder.*

[Article 46, Herald Sun, 2019]

*Dr Rajan Darjee, a forensic psychiatrist, told the court he believed [HH] has suffered from schizophrenia since at least 2017...*

*...Mr [HH] was suffering from schizophrenia and not a drug-induced psychosis...*

[Article 38, The Age, 2020]

Overall, media’s construction of CB and JT being unable to control themselves and their violence being spontaneous, aligns with how society discursively constructs violence against women as spur of the moment, random, and the result of psychological dysregulation (Boonzaier, 2008; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Lau & Stevens, 2012).

*“On balance, although multiple factors were most likely at play, I consider it more likely than not that the symptoms of [CB’s] untreated schizophrenia made a significant causal contribution to the offending”*

*“It is certainly possible that [CB] delusions regarding the victim were a necessary causal factor in the killing, but I cannot be definitive on that point.”*

[Article 27, The Age, 2019]

The perpetrators’ disordered psychologies are positioned as illnesses which the men suffer from, and, in the case of JT and CB, their psychological disorders were constructed as something that only affected them in relation to killing Eurydice and Natalina respectively.

*Prof Ogloff said [JT] was “frightened” after realising he had the capacity to act on his depraved obsessions and said he was “glad he got caught”.*

[Article 33, Herald Sun, 2019]

*“....[JT] had also been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, which could...have affected his ability to moderate his behaviour.”*

[Article 43, The Age, 2019]

*“Things sort of went a bit funny and then I remember being on top of her and panicking, not really knowing what I was doing or how I even ended up on top of [Natalina]” - CB*

[Article 26, Herald Sun, 2020]

*[CB] told the court via videolink that he regretted the killing “pretty well immediately after I had come to my senses”.*

[Article 23, The Age, 2020]

The suggestion above that CB was only disordered and out of control while he was killing Natalina reinforces the sympathetic and sufferer discourses surrounding him, as well as the broader stereotypes that IPV occurs spontaneously or as a response to something being done to the perpetrator – either by a partner, or a “force” (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). Further support for JT not being able to regulate himself or his behaviours occurred through the media reporting that killing Eurydice was spontaneous and he was only acting in response to the immediate situation he was in.

*[JT’s] defence team argued that despite stalking Ms Dixon for almost an hour, he did not decide to sexually assault her until she stepped off the footpath and onto the grass of Princes Park.*

*The intention to murder her formed “spontaneously” while in the throes of the attack to further “subdue” her*

[Article 43, The Age, 2019]

In addition to constructing JT’s suffering from psychological disorder and dysregulation, the news media also subtly shift of blame through the discourse to Eurydice for having stepped off the footpath and subsequently this triggering JT’s decision to sexually assault her.

## Discussion and Conclusion

*The overall, underlying subtext is that [violence against women] is simultaneously random and specific, dramatic, and mundane: not a societal problem, not a gendered problem, but a misfortune that befalls problematic individuals.*

(Easteal et al., 2019, p. 458)

### Discussion

Paralleling findings by Sutherland et al. (2019), Morgan and Politoff (2012), and Hart and Gilbertson (2018) the victims in this research are constructed through multiple, at times conflicting, discourses depending on a range of variables which include their own behaviours, lifestyle choices, social norms, and discursive traditions. The dominant discourses identified in constructing victims were around goodness, whereby positioning the women as socially acceptable meant that they could then be constructed as good victims. Meanwhile, the dominant discourses used to construct the perpetrators were those of badness and madness, which parallel the discourses identified in other studies (Blood & Holland, 2004; Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; Scott, 2003). This shows that there is little variation in the discourses used in Western news media with perpetrators but there may be a shift in discourses surrounding victims.

The dominant discourses of goodness used with the victims positioned the women as socially acceptable and meant that they could then be constructed as good victims. The predominant feature of discourses of good was personalisation, whereby the victims' middle-class, socially normative family dynamics and educational achievements were highlighted. Additionally, the women's positive interactions and relationships were presented as evidence that they were socially accepted, normative young women. As Anastasio and Costa (2004) states, this personalisation of victims results in an increase in social sympathy and increased reporting on them. With a foundation of discourse that constructs and reinforces that the women are socially normative, and a supportive structure of social sympathy, media are able to then position the women as good victims.

All four of the victims centred in this research were constructed as good victims to varying degrees but Eurydice and Aiiia were the two most consistently reinforced as being good, blameless, women. Having been being killed by strangers meant that from the beginning of reporting, the media were able draw on discourses like stranger-danger and levy blame at sources other than the victims. Additionally, this allowed for the murders of Eurydice and Aiiia to be used to convey messages to audiences about women's safety and their responsibilities for it. Such suggestions in the media that women's safety is linked to their ability to assess risk and do things like carry a mobile phone does two things: Firstly, it shifts the responsibility to mitigate violence from men to women, and secondly it tells audiences what is, and is not, appropriate behaviour for victims. These suggestions support holding victims responsible for violence if it is perceived that they failed to follow the prescribed safety measures to keep their body safe (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Hillier, 1995; Little, 2015b) while reinforcing the stereotype that certain behaviours and private residences are objectively safe.

Increased use of discourses of goodness with victims may indicate that there is a shift from the explicit victim blaming which has been found in past studies (Blood & Holland, 2004; Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Morgan & Politoff, 2012), however further research is needed, in particular longitudinal studies, to establish if that is occurring. Furthermore, even if discourses of goodness become dominant across news media, audiences may still hold inadequate knowledge about gendered violence overall because the most powerful media explanations are “neatly packaged” (Berns, 2004, p. 52) and do not explain the underlying structures of the issue. As discussed earlier, discourses of goodness still include a focus on women’s safety responsibilities which excludes discussion about the systemic issues of gendered violence and thus reinforces the shift of responsibility from men to women. This maintains the social practice of judging a woman’s victimisation based on her behaviours instead of the perpetrators’ actions and social context in which they occur.

With respect to perpetrators, the dominant discourses of badness that were used were sensationalist and legitimised by the voices of legal experts. Through discursively constructing the men as bad, social outsiders and distancing them from normative Australian society, news media draws on and reinforces skewed understandings that violence against women is perpetrated by individuals and is not related to, nor does it reflect, the society in which it occurs in. The use of expert voices reinforced the constructions of badness, in particular through deeming some of the men as remorseless killers. This remorselessness may be considered evidence that there is a fundamental part of the perpetrators that is bad, or evil, and that they are not like the rest of us. Additionally, as some of the perpetrators were strangers to their victims, them being constructed as bad men reinforces to women that they need to be fearful of strangers. The implication of this constant reinforcement that unknown men are the most dangerous type of man to women results in misaligned fears and safety behaviours and puts them at greater risk because, as studies have shown, they assume that male acquaintances are not violent (Carlyle et al., 2008; Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; Scott, 2003). Furthermore, discourses of badness contribute to incorrect assumptions about violent crime rates may be increasing or are out of control (Boda & Szabó, 2011).

The use of psychologists and psychiatrists by news media was identified as having played a key role in establishing and legitimising the construction that the perpetrators were mad and that there is a connection between disordered psychology and violence. In doing this, the psychological experts offered *The Age*, *Herald Sun*, and their audiences’ easy explanations for why these murders occurred. However, the impact of this is that it reinforces the practice of individually pathologizing men (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013) and limiting people’s ability to consider the systemic, gender power issues that underpin violence against women (Boonzaier, 2008). Additionally, the use of experts gives the appearance of objective psychological diagnosis and explanations of violence to audiences (Nairn et al., 2011, p. 204). However, objectivity cannot be guaranteed and experts may reinforce inadequate discourses of madness and connection to violence, while positioning perpetrators as “dangerous others” situated outside of normative society (Blood & Holland, 2004, p. 327). Furthermore, even when psychologists and psychiatrists are used, detailed information about psychological disorders is not provided which leads to the reinforcement of inaccurate knowledge that violence is a feature of psychological disorders.

An interesting finding during the analysis was that CB’s disordered psychology was constructed as both long term and spur of the moment. Depending on the context of the

articles, he was either disordered only during the killing of Natalina or he was disordered for long enough that his own mother wanted to have him placed in psychological care. The impact of these contradictions is that CB is not responsible either way for his violence. Constructing him as mad in the moment suggests to audiences that something happened and he “snapped” or had a “break”, as is often how men’s violence is constructed in news media (Dobash et al., 2004; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). In conjunction with Natalina being constructed as abusive toward him on the night of the killing, audiences may assume that her actions led to his sudden shift in psychology. Alternatively, by constructing him as having a long-term disorder and in need to professional care, it suggests that he had no control over himself or his behaviours and therefore he is not entirely responsible for his actions. Furthermore, as the news media had constructed Natalina as a complicit partner in their relationship, the long-term psychological illness construction suggests that she stayed with him knowing he was not in control of himself and is, again, partially responsible for her own death.

Part of describing psychological disorders in relation to violence is the inclusion of excessive details about the killings (Morgan & Politoff, 2012) and in this research I identified this with two of the cases. With JT, his sexual sadism disorder was said to have played a key role in the murder of Eurydice, though not the only role, and news media reported the details of his fantasies to hurt women during sex and his sexual assault and murder of Eurydice in explicit detail. With HH, his psychological perceptions during the killing of Courtney were shared by an expert in detail alongside graphic retellings of Courtney’s final moments. Reporting psychological disorders alongside graphic details about the killings reinforces assumptions of a link between disordered psychology and violence, which also generates unwarranted social fear about mentally ill people (Blood & Holland, 2004). It also reinforces the skewed social understanding that violence against women is always extreme and as such contributes to a future practice of only reporting extreme, yet rare, cases

Counter to the dominant discourses of goodness, some of the victims, particularly Courtney and Natalina, were constructed through counter discourses which included the highlighting of socially deviant behaviours, complicit involvement with their killers or other non-normative people, and stereotypes and myths relating to IPV. Courtney had doubt cast on her victimisation through news media highlighting her deviant social behaviours and choices, which included her acquaintance with HH and other social outsiders. The construction of Natalina as a good victim was much less common than the others, arguably because of combination of being in an intimate partnership with her killer, being a woman of colour, and because counter discourses accused her of being equally abusive and complicit in her violent relationship.

Counter discourses that sought to question victims’ experiences and goodness were particularly evident with Natalina, who was constructed as being an equally abusive participant in her “turbulent” relationship with CB. Constructing Natalina as abusive toward CB is a common reproduction of the patriarchal myth that women are as violent as men and provoke men into being violent (Boonzaier, 2008; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). In particular, women of colour, as Natalina was, are often constructed as psychologically and physically domineering (MacDowell, 2013) which is counter to good victim discourses. While Natalina had a number of articles dedicated to her, the majority of intimate partner killings only merit a few lines in newspapers (McManus & Dorfman, 2005; Smith et al., 2019) and typically the

deaths are constructed as the result of “domestic squabbles,” “arguments,” or “domestic troubles.” (Campbell, 1992, pp. 109-110) and this was the case with Natalina, and CB’s relationship being described as “turbulent”. These terms leave out the complexities victims face in their violent relationships including financial and housing insecurity, social isolation, and poverty – all variables that affect a victims’ ability to seek help (Smith et al., 2019). For Natalina there may have been a significant number of factors which hindered her ability to seek help (Berns, 2004) which the news media did not include in their articles. Instead, the articles in this research reproduced inadequate explanations and myths about IPV which contribute to the reproduction of culturally entrenched assumptions that victims like Natalina are just as violent as perpetrators and actively choose to stay in their relationships.

In addition to Natalina being constructed as a violent participant in her relationship, counter discourses also constructed her and Courtney as complicit participants. For Natalina, her complicit behaviours were remaining with CB, despite her telling her sister she believed he would one day kill her. For Courtney, she was positioned as complicit because she appeared to choose to spend time with drug users and be homeless instead of staying with friends and family. Once a woman is constructed as a complicit participant in their victimisation, there is a risk that their newsworthiness will be reduced and there will be less opportunity to disrupt victim blaming discourses and assumptions (Dowler et al., 2006). Furthermore, discourses of complacency fail to acknowledge that while many women may be able to recognise abuse, negative social attitudes, lifestyle consequences, and the cyclical nature of violence often hinders their ability to seek practical help (Webster et al., 2018).

Over thirty years ago Finn (1989) stated that white middle-class men who are violent toward women are consistently constructed by media discourses as victims of external forces, such as provocation or socioeconomic circumstance, and therefore as deserving of understanding and sympathy. Building on Finn’s (1989) conclusions, this research identified that it was not just white middle-class perpetrators who were constructed as victims by Melbourne news media and through the victimisation of men, a number of women were subtly blamed. The excusatory discourses identified did not construct the men as “good” but did construct them as victims of circumstance and unexplainable forces, and as passive sufferers of psychological disorders. In particular, CH, an Aboriginal man, was constructed as a victim of circumstances which were said to include being abandoned by his mother, poverty, poor childhood health care, and homelessness. While CH was very much constructed and positioned through the dominant discourses of badness as an inherently deviant and remorseless killer, the suggestion that his early life experiences, especially his mother’s abandonment, impacted his adult behaviours, explains how he became the man who killed Aiiia. In addition to his impoverished background, positioning his mother’s abandonment as causation for his adult behaviours implicates his mother in Aiiia’s death and absolves him of some responsibility. It is also interesting to note that there was no mention of CH’s father having a role in his life in any of the articles analysed, and it was reported that CH was cared for by a foster mother. This suggests that news media may avoid implicating *any* men in gendered violence and that there remains a social expectation that only mothers raise children and are therefore responsible if they behave in socially deviant ways.

Shifting responsibility to Natalina also occurred with CB being positioned as a victim of her abuse on the evening she was murdered, while JT was said to have not planned to sexually assault Eurydice until *she* stepped off the pavement and onto the grass at the park. Positioning



the victims in this way results in the men's actions being constructed as reactionary rather than proactive which positions them as less responsible for the violence. However, *The Age* and *Herald Sun* shifting responsibility to the women in the perpetrators' lives is not unique, and many studies have identified news media and men themselves engage in this practice (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). Therefore, this demonstrates that Australian news media are drawing on recognisable, easily understood discourses and are just reenforcing the "reality" that men are not solely responsible for violence.

Another excusatory discourse used by journalists was highlighting the ways in which the men were normative, at least at some stage of their lives, or came from socially acceptable backgrounds. With HH, CB, and JT their positive relationships with women were positioned in a way that suggested that their violence toward Courtney, Natalina, and Eurydice respectively was not to do with gender. For example, the dominant construction of JT was that he is a bad, evil man with an insatiable desire to engage in sexual violence against women, but later expert voices claimed that he did not kill Eurydice because of patriarchal or misogynistic attitudes. This supports randomness and loss of control explanations, in addition to explicitly degendering his violence. Further reinforcement for randomness and loss of control excuses came through the constructions of HH and CB as popular, socially engaged family men and despite both men having recorded histories of domestic violence, the murders they committed were not positioned as a continuum of violence. However, this may have been because the women they killed were not the ones named in their histories of violence (former partners). If this is the case, it could be because news media do not consider men the primary actors in violence, but rather women. If so, then this shifts the focus away from the perpetrators and towards the women by suggesting that there's *something* with these particular victims that caused the men's violence, and to a murderous degree.

The counter discourses used in both victim and perpetrator articles reproduce inadequate explanations and myths about gendered violence which contributes to the reproduction of culturally entrenched assumptions that women are to some degree responsible for their victimisation. They also reinforce inadequate knowledge about violence against women and can have significant repercussions for women who experience violence. This includes not seeking help because they believe they will be blamed for provoking violence (Boonzaier, 2008), being unable to recognise violence because they believe that this is a natural part of intimate partnerships (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003; Towns & Adams, 2000) or because of stigma attached to the lifestyles they are living (Kitzinger, 2004). Additionally, there were no gender violence experts or advocates included in the articles nor did many articles include links to IPV or victim assistance resources. As Berns (2004) highlights, the lack of victim advocate voices in news media means many women may not know understand the violence they experience or seek help for it. However, the absence of advocate voices may be a result of the assumption that IPV is a rare form of violence and therefore there is no need to provide resources to audiences (Richardson, 2006).

## Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore the discourses used by Australian news media to construct violence against women in an Australian context. In order to explore this, critical discourse analysis was used to not only identify discourses, but also considered for impact on social knowledge about gendered violence. The focus for uncovering discourses was how

they were used to construct victims and perpetrators and the way these constructions then impacted how the act of gendered violence was constructed. Constructing the victims and perpetrators occurred both directly through articles focused on them specifically, and indirectly through references in articles focused on others and through commentary offered on issues relating to homelessness, crime, and safety.

Previous studies (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Taylor, 2009) have identified that victims are consistently blamed through news media discourses, however this research has shown that these four women were predominantly constructed as good women and blameless victims, which is counter to these studies. The dominant discourses of goodness used with the victims was an interesting finding because as literature has shown, usually dominant discourses are negative toward women and often explicitly victim blame. It could be argued that the reason discourses of goodness were the dominant in these cases was because these were fairly extraordinary instances of violence as they occurred in public places, within an 11-month timeframe, and there were elements of stranger danger. The cases also generated a significant amount of social interest and sympathy at the time and as a result, journalists may have been more purposeful with their language and positioning of the victims. Alternatively, it could signal there is a broader shift occurring in how victims are constructed.

However, counter to this dominant construction, some subtle victim blaming and shifts in responsibility were evident through victim and perpetrator counter discourses. The counter discourses identified in this research align with earlier studies in that they shifted a portion of responsibility toward the victims and women more generally, decontextualised the murders, and drew heavily on stereotypes and myths about women, victimisation, and violence. Victim counter discourses primarily served to sow seeds of doubt about their characters, choices, and behaviours in the lead up to their deaths. A standout from the counter discourses was that Aiiia was explicitly labelled an outsider but there was no follow up or explanation for how she was an outsider, when for the most part she had been constructed as not only like other young Australian women who studied and travelled, but she was also like other Australian murder victims. This suggests that journalists are bound to traditionally dominant discourses which always, at a minimum, question women's victimisation even if this contradicts other constructs occurring.

Other counter constructions of the victims drew on stereotypes and myths, most prominent was the accusation that Natalina had been abusive toward CB the night she was killed. Additionally, Courtney's reported drug use and association with socially deviant people, including her killer, constructed her as complicit in her own death. This was supported by numerous references to a stable, loving family environment and housing which appeared to be easily accessible to her. In suggesting that Courtney rejected the help of friends of family and chose to engage with her killer, *The Age* and *Herald Sun* reinforce the social understanding that women are primarily responsible for avoiding violence. Additionally, this shifts a portion, if not all, of the responsibility for violence from men to women. These included victims, but on occasion other women in their lives such as mothers and those who have spurned their advances.

The dominant discourses of badness, which parallel other's studies (Boda & Szabó, 2011; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Hart & Gilbertson, 2018) used with the perpetrators do more than

separate violent men from society and shift focus from the issue of gender-based violence, they help maintain the structures that allow for violence to occur and continue. This is through making women mistakenly feel safer with men they know, skewing their ability to assess risk and safety measures, and by constructing a reality about the type of man who perpetrates violence which is not accurate. As a result, women may believe that the violence they endure from partners or acquaintances is not violence at all (Gunnarsson, 2018) or that they are somehow to blame for provoking their partners (Boonzaier, 2008; Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003). Meanwhile, the men who perpetrate it are legitimised in not considering themselves or their actions violent because they do not fit into the construction of the bad, mad, violent stranger (Lau & Stevens, 2012).

In addition to badness discourses, excusatory discourses placed blame for their violence on circumstances such as being abandoned as a child or being homeless, psychological disorders, and “unexplainable” forces, all contribute to the ongoing practice of shifting responsibility from violent men. At the same time, the broader systemic issues of patriarchy and misogyny are left unexplored because the men’s violence is individualised or pathologized. Along with shifting blame, this research shows that gendered violence in Australian news media is still episodic and sensationalist, and this reinforces social assumptions that violence against women is random and perpetrated by noticeably socially non-normative, disordered, men. While the degree to which each perpetrator is excused is varied, this research hopes to have shown that there is always either an overt or subtle questioning of whether a man is *entirely* responsible for the violence he has perpetrated. This questioning maintains victim blaming, responsibility shifting, individualisation, and degendering of violence while also excusing people from having to consider the broader social and powers structures of gendered violence. Not only do excusatory discourses help to maintain patriarchal social dynamics, but they also impact policy decisions as many politicians use the media to identify important social issues (Smith et al., 2019).

When considering how violence against women is constructed through the victim and perpetrator discourses, I am reminded of Meyers (1994) work, which included comments on how serious distortions of women’s experiences with violence occur primarily through media and that one of the primary distortions is that men cannot help but be violent, and even if they could, women deserve it. In the current research, almost 30 years later, only Natalina was explicitly suggested to have deserved the violence she experienced because she was said to be abusive to her boyfriend on the night she was killed; the rest of the women were predominantly positioned as undeserving, blameless victims. However, the issue remains in that the perpetrators were positioned as being unable to stop their violence for one reason or another and in constructing the men this way, the violence they perpetrated against women was acknowledged, but their responsibility for it was not. Additionally, while the murders of Eurydice, Aiaa, Natalina, and Courtney were constructed as random, at other times there was commentary about violence against women more generally being something that will always happen because “bad men” exist. The construction of these murders in particular as random acts may have been helped in part where the victims and perpetrators were strangers. Where the victims and perpetrators were not strangers, the randomness was built into the explanations of psychological episodes and provocation. Explaining violence against women as random is very common in news media (Eastal et al., 2019) and an easy conclusion to

draw because there is a discursive structure already created by the individualisation of perpetrators, psychology stereotypes, and provocation and stranger danger myths.

Across all of the discourses there was a failure to address the complexities of victimisation, especially in the cases of Natalina as a woman of colour from a marginalised community, and Courtney who experienced homelessness and substance abuse issues. As a result, the discourses used by *The Age* and *Herald Sun* reinforce inadequate social knowledge about violence and victimisation, and this not only negatively impacts how society responds to violence and victims, but also how women understand their experiences. The suggestions surrounding women's safety are also deficit because they do not actually keep women safe, nor do they support discussion about why women need to take these measures in the first place. Instead, the suggestions reinforce to women they have to take these safety measures and social discourse will continue to remind them as such. Furthermore, the places that the women were murdered become the sites where prevention methods are applied, rather than the issue of gender inequality, as evidenced by suggestions for crime prevention measures like public lighting and increased police presence.

The discourses identified in this research largely align with what other researchers have identified to be important in maintaining perpetrator exoneration, and skewed understandings of violence against women (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Carlyle et al., 2008; Gillespie et al., 2013; Morgan & Politoff, 2012). However, there is less explicit victim blaming which is counter to other studies and may suggest an overall shift toward less victim blaming or that victims are constructed as responsible through the exoneration of perpetrators. Finn (1989) claims that there is collusion between state and media to excuse perpetrators and condone violence against women. I do not take the view of conscious collusion, but rather see the media undertaking an automatic, perhaps even subconscious, continuance of discursive traditions which serve patriarchy through any means necessary. This may be through excusing perpetrators, explicitly blaming victims, or as explored in this thesis, through planting seeds of doubt about the legitimacy of women's victimisation and perpetrators control over their actions. With this in mind, I undertook this research understanding that the articles published by *The Age* and *Herald Sun* are not neutral descriptions of violence against women, victims, or perpetrators. What the journalists have and have not included about the victims, perpetrators, and violence, and what they present as facts, all have implications. Furthermore, all behaviour is complex, and the media are only able to offer short descriptions of it. What is and is not relevant to audiences is first decided by the writer, and then by the audience themselves as they engage with the texts and discourse. Therefore, what really happened in any case of violence against women is itself a matter of opinion – for media, audiences, and researcher.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

All research is limited, and this research focuses on only four cases where women were killed in public places and there may be other discourses used when women are killed in their homes. I chose the four cases because they were widely reported, and I wanted to capture a sufficiently large dataset, but a limitation of that decision was that three of the four women were white. As other studies have identified (Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Kitzinger, 2004), women of colour are noticeably absent from news reports of violence and this research reflects that.

Additionally, discourse is complex and during this research process I realised in order to identify and interpret these complexities a range of perspectives are required. In particular, all research into violence against women would benefit greatly from the inclusion of voices normally marginalised. These include women of colour, indigenous women, and members of the LGBTQI+ community. Furthermore, discourse is a collaborative process, and with that in mind I felt that there was an overall limitation to doing this type of research on my own. While doing this research, there were times I was unsure of my own interpretations of the discourse because of my positions as a woman, feminist, and researcher, while having a social constructionist view of the world. Therefore, if I were to undertake discursive research in the future, I would do so in collaboration with others because discourse is itself a collaborative process. Critical discourse analysis requires us to not only be critical of discourses others use, but of our own and how we may be replicating or drawing on the very discourses we are exploring. With this in mind, future research into how news media are implicated in the production and reinforcement of knowledge about violence against women would benefit from collaborative research projects.

The topic of violence against women is a fundamentally negative one, and I approached analysis with bias, as most women would, and as someone acutely aware of how society generally views women and victims. However, there were a number of positive aspects in the victim-focused articles which could signify a shift in discourse, and consequently attitudes towards gendered violence and victims. For example, many of the articles focused on victims' memorial services included the voices of women who would otherwise not be given such a broad audience to hear their experiences and views. This is incredibly powerful and perhaps shows a shift in focus for news media, and an increasing recognition of how many women have experiences with gendered violence in Australia.

This thesis captures but a small part of the issue of gendered violence in Australia. There continues to be cases of gendered violence being reported in news media and across social media platforms. There also appears to be a significant gap in knowledge amongst Australians about gendered violence as was evidenced by Prime Minister Scott Morrison who, when asked in 2021 what he thought of an alleged rape in Parliament House, told the media:

*"Jenny and I spoke last night, and she said to me, 'You have to think about this as a father first. What would you want to happen if it were our girls?' – Jenny has a way of clarifying things, always has." (Morrison, 2021)*

The Prime Minister was unable to comprehend violence against women and to imagine his own daughters as victims before he recognised that rape is a bad thing. His statement highlighted that there is not only a gap in knowledge about violence, but that significant responsibility still falls on women to name it, explain it, and make it understandable to men. Therefore, there is a clear need for further research into gendered violence. This includes examining how politicians and policy makers construct the issue of violence and how their views align with news media discourses or other social discourses. Furthermore, what is the impact of their constructions on policy, government funding, and legislative decision making. Carlyle et al. (2008) states that American media portrayals of IPV do impact American policy making decisions, but is it the same in Australasia where more women are in political positions of power?

Given the unique cultural, social, socioeconomic, and political landscapes of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, there needs to be more research specific to these locations. In particular how news media construct perpetrators and victims from marginalised socioeconomic, sexuality, and cultural groups in the two countries. This area of research would also benefit from comparative studies into the discourses used to construct violence involving Indigenous men and women versus white men and women. This could also extend to consider how non-heterosexual partnership violence is discursively constructed. There should also be consideration paid to how violence by socially powerful people such as, politicians, sports people, and television personalities are constructed by news media. Looking into how socially powerful people are constructed may be beneficial to understanding some of the ways that Australasian society accepts violence to a degree. Research could also extend to how other instances of violence, not just toward women, are constructed in news media and the ways this contributes to violence being a tool of masculinity and maleness. Furthermore, in order to address the systemic issue of gendered violence, in all its forms, we must understand all the ways in which it is constructed, named, categorised, utilised, and socially accepted, if not approved. Considering the discourses used in news media is just one small part of a bigger body of media that influence social understandings of the world. Future research should consider social and fictional media.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature in Australasia into how news media constructs the social issue of violence against while also showing that there are a number of new avenues for future researchers to explore. While many constructions in *The Age* and *Herald Sun* were aligned with what other studies have identified, there were also a number which did not align with previous findings. The most significant of these was that explicit victim blaming was minimal in these cases and this could indicate a change in discourse surrounding victims. Furthermore, while other studies have shown that men of colour are overrepresented as perpetrators of violence in news media, only one of the four perpetrators at the centre of this research was non-white and therefore this research may contribute to changing the perceptions about who perpetrates violence.

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