Victorian-based print media coverage of Aboriginal Family Violence

Stage 1: Research for the Strategic Framework for Working with Media to prevent Aboriginal Family Violence
August 2016. Research conducted by Lilly Brown, University of Melbourne. This research forms Stage 1 of a project developed by Kalinya Communications funded by the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet
Overview

Aim

This research study investigates the way family violence against women is framed in relation to Victorian Aboriginal people by the Victorian-based print media.

Method

Underpinning this research study is a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data was generated from an engagement with the way Aboriginal family violence was framed by Victorian print-based media over a five-year period from 2011 to 2016. Findings from this quantitative approach were augmented with qualitative inquiry enabling an in-depth analysis of reportage from a 12-month snapshot from the beginning of July 2015 to the end of July 2016.

Findings

Three primary findings emerged. Firstly, there is an absence of media coverage relating to Victorian Aboriginal women as victims of violence. This lack of reportage arguably renders Aboriginal women as invisible, further marginalising women who are disproportionately impacted by intimate-partner violence.

Secondly, the information source referenced in an article was an important indicator of the level of complexity used to frame Aboriginal family violence. Media coverage that highlighted the complexity of Aboriginal family violence often had as its source a representative of an Aboriginal controlled community organisation or an informed Victorian Aboriginal community representative.

Lastly, there was often a tendency in media coverage to generalise Aboriginal family violence. A lack of complexity in reportage often occurred when a community representative was not the primary source of information.

Recommendations

Based on these findings the following recommendations are made:

- Journalists and government departments responsible for media releases need encouragement and guidance to engage and work with Aboriginal controlled community organisations in providing relevant and appropriate reporting on the complexity of family violence experienced by Aboriginal Victorians.
- Support needs to be increased for Aboriginal controlled community organisations and their representatives in meeting the demand of journalists and government departments for accurate and appropriate information. The kind of support required must be identified in consultation with these organisations and their representatives.
- More qualitative research is needed to understand the challenges faced by journalists in reporting on Aboriginal women as victims of family violence.
- Resources need to be developed around reporting Aboriginal family violence within the Victorian context and taught as part of journalism education and training.

**Background**

This research study aims to investigate the way family violence is framed in relation to Victorian Aboriginal people by the Victorian print media. Intimate partner violence against women is an intractable problem within Australia, which is increasingly receiving deserved attention. The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, for example, heralds the state as a leader in the contest against this issue which has been described as ‘the most pervasive form of violence perpetrated against women in Victoria’ (Chernov, 2015, p. 1). Within this context, the media is identified as a ‘powerful setting for, and influencer of social change’ particularly in the area of primary prevention (DV Vic, 2015, p. 1). In recognition of the important role the media plays in informing understandings of and responses to violence against women, Domestic Violence Victoria—the state’s peak body for domestic violence services for women and children, developed Working with News and Social Media to Prevent Violence Against Women and their Children: A Strategic Framework for Victoria (the Strategic Framework). Yet a significant limitation of the Strategic Framework is its capacity to meet the specific needs of Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in working with the media to prevent family violence. This is despite statistics indicating that nationally Aboriginal women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised from family violence than non-Aboriginal women (Australian Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 492). Within the Victorian context according to conservative estimates, Aboriginal people are 6.5 times more likely than non-Indigenous Victorians to report a violent assault as an incident of family violence (Koori Justice Unit as quoted in FVPLS Victoria, 2015, p. 13). This research study extends on existing research (see Morgan & Politoff, 2012; and Sutherland, G., McCormack, A., Pirkis, J., Vaughan, C., Dunne-Breen, M., Easteal, P., & Holland, K, 2016) and initiatives such as the Strategic Framework to provide an overview of how the unique experience of Victorian Aboriginal family violence is contended with in Victorian print media.
The media plays a significant role as a cultural resource in reflecting, shaping and perpetuating social norms and behaviors, societal attitudes and public perception (Easteal, Holland, & Judd, 2015; Flood & Pease, 2006; Sutherland, G., McCormack, A., Pirkis, J., Vaughan, C., Dunne-Breen, M., Eastal, P., & Holland, K, 2016). The mass media, as a source of accessible information, informs collective understandings through the framing of particular topics and issues. A media frame can be understood as ‘the central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration’ (Tankard, 2001, pp. 100–101). Historically and more recently, the mainstream media has held a precarious position in relation to representations of Aboriginality and the coverage of issues facing Aboriginal people. While there is a lack of scholarly focus on representations of family violence in relation to Aboriginal people in the media, the significant role the media plays in shaping general attitudes toward and understandings of Aboriginal people has been explored extensively (e.g. Balvin & Kashima, 2012; Langton, 1993; Thompson, Green, Stirling, & James, 2007). Stoneham, Goodman and Daube (2014) for example, investigated portrayals of Indigenous health in selected print media. Findings indicate that media representations of Indigenous health issues overwhelmingly portray Indigenous people negatively. In surveying the way Aboriginal young people were portrayed within West Australian print media, Sercombe (1995) suggests that the construction of Aboriginal life in this context is an Aboriginalism understood via a criminal frame associated with a culture of crime. Indigenous people were positioned whereby very few entry points were presented as part of news reportage that enabled movement beyond criminalisation. Likewise, research undertaken in both Australia and internationally suggests the framing of violence against women is often found to compound the issue rather than contribute to preventing it (Berns, 2004; Gillespie, Richards, Givens, & Smith, 2013; Nixon & Humphreys, 2010; Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006). Yet despite the arguably problematic way in which content relating to Indigenous peoples and violence against women has previously been contended with, it is undeniable that the news and general media coverage has important implications for the way certain issues are understood, interpreted and responded to.

In considering the factors which influence violence against women, Flood and Pease (2006) suggest that the media plays a significant role in shaping attitudes. Attitudes, in turn, are an important factor in the perpetration of, and individual and institutional responses to, gendered violence in addition to women’s own responses to victimisation. Institutional responses are influenced by the mass media, particularly through the development and implementation of social policy, where heightened media attention has been found to attract increased policy attention, and to guide the approach taken in doing so (McCallum, Waller, & Meadows, 2012; Yanovitzky, 2002). The recognition of the strong link between public
perception and attitudes, policy and the media has increasingly informed agenda-setting research and policy strategies in relation to violence against women. This shift is reflected in increasing government support for and development of initiatives that aim to improve the portrayal and reporting of violence against women in the media (VicHealth, 2006).

A growing body of Australian scholarship also seeks to investigate the way gendered violence is framed in the media for the purpose of better understanding how this issue is articulated via the news as one of the most accessible information sources available. Morgan and Politoff (2012, p. 11), for example, extend this aim to consider the question ‘What effect might the media have on preventing violence against women?’ Drawing on relevant literature in the field Morgan and Politoff (2012) present a longitudinal analysis of a range of Victorian print-based newspaper articles. While their findings indicate that coverage of violence against women within the Australian Victorian context is comparatively less-problematic than international studies had found, there was still a tendency to individualise incidents of intimate-partner violence rather than frame these incidents within a structural context. There was also a tendency to leave the relationship between a perpetrator and victim as unspecified, building on the misconception that gendered violence is overwhelmingly committed by someone not previously known to the victim. This framing locates gendered violence as an individual pathology rather than a structural issue enabled within broader social frameworks of gendered inequality. The Sutherland et. al. (2016) mixed methods study of violence against women in news coverage in print media, television and radio broadcast in New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland similarly found an over-emphasis on individual incidents of violence without the provision of social context or information on the underlying causes of violence. Findings from this study also revealed that male perpetrators were often rendered invisible vis-à-vis an emphasis on the victim while little reportage provided information about male perpetrators. The increased focus from both a scholarly and policy perspective on the role of the media in the prevention of violence against women, occurs in parallel with the recognition that Aboriginal women are disproportionately affected by intimate-partner violence compared to non-Indigenous women. Yet despite this acknowledgement, a profound gap in the research exists documenting the way family violence is framed in the media in relation to, and experienced by, Aboriginal women. In tending to this gap, this research project aims to extend existing research which considers the way violence against women has been portrayed in the media, to investigate the complexities and particularities of the way family violence in relation to Aboriginal people is framed in Victorian print media.
Scope and study design

This study is underpinned by the question: How is family violence in relation to Aboriginal people portrayed within the Victorian print-based media? This section will make explicit how the question underpinning this research project was answered. This study presents a mixed-method analysis of Victorian based print media in its reportage of family violence in relation to Aboriginal people.

Initially it was intended, for comparative reasons, that this study be modelled on previous research undertaken in the Australian context by Politoff and Morgan (2012) and subsequently extended by Sutherland et. al. (2016). However, soon after beginning data collection, it emerged that the nature of news reporting on Aboriginal family violence, compared to general coverage of violence against women, differed to the extent that a comparative project would not be possible. Politiff and Morgan (2012) employed a methodology informed by available literature which problematised the way domestic violence was reported on in print media, with a specific emphasis on the lack of complexity of reporting on violence against women as a gendered issue. In doing so, they applied a deductive coding technique to a print media sample only including articles which described incidents of violence against or by women involving either sexual violence, intimate partner homicide (or attempted), other murder (or attempted murder) and ‘violence against women’ when that particular term, or a related phrase was used.

During the five-year period under analysis within this research project, only two incidences were generated where violence occurred in explicit relation to an identified Aboriginal victim or perpetrator. In the majority of articles referencing violence against women in relation to Aboriginal people, the violence itself is not the focus of reportage. To some extent the limited transferability of the Morgan and Politoff study is to be expected. The literature review shaping Morgan and Politoff’s (2012) research approach, while considering the gendered nature of violence against women, did not account for the possibility that reportage of issues may differ according to the ethnicity of populations in question. Thus while the gender analytic was used by Morgan and Politoff to consider reportage on violence against women, race as an analytic framework was not.

In departing from previous studies that analysed the general reporting of domestic violence within the media, a more inductive grounded theoretical approach was taken in this research study when it came to organising data beyond descriptive indicators like date, title, word limit, author and publication. An inductive approach was taken where codes and themes were identified and then applied in an iterative process. The accumulation of these themes indicated a focus area, which was important in generating and developing appropriate criteria for analysing the particularities of reportage on Aboriginal family violence.
Data Collection and Sample

This study analysed reportage presented in mainstream print media published in Victoria in relation to:

i. Aboriginal family violence; and,

ii. family violence reported in relation to Victorian Aboriginal people specifically

Print-media is an important site of analysis in its role in shaping public opinion. Research indicates that print media continues to be an authoritative source of news content, while audiences augment their consumption of print-based media with other information sources such as blogs for additional perspectives rather than as a replacement (Reece et. al. 2007).

Scope

So as to present a relevant and reflective picture of current news reportage, the sources analysed as part of this study were published between the 1st July 2011 and 31st July 2016.

A snapshot analysis presents a more detailed account of recent print-based media from July 2015 – July 2016 via a mixed methods approach where quantitative data is bolstered with qualitative inquiry.

Search terms

A range of search terms were used to identify relevant sources. The combination of search terms varied so as to return a majority of relevant sources. These include:

(Abornin* or Koori* or Indigenous) and (“domestic violence” or “family violence” or “intimate partner violence”) and rape* or raping or rapist* or ((sex* or domestic or indecent) adj (assault* or abus* or violence)) or domestic homicide or stalking or stalker or (intimate partner adj (homicide or abus*))) or (violence against adj (women or females)) or (sex* near3 coerc*) or ((beat or beaten or beating or bash* or attack* or victimised or strangled* or stab or stabbed or stabbing or murder* or kill* or abus* or assault* or violence or homicide or manslaughter or molest* or batter*) near5 (partner or wife or spouse or lover or girl* or boyfriend or woman or men or mother or female or husband or her or she or daughter or sister)) or sexual offence* or (domestic adj dispute) or (sexual* adj (penetrate* or molest*)) or Women’s refuge
Data Sources

The publications searched for relevant samples include the Victorian-based national broadsheet *The Age*, the tabloid newspaper the *Herald Sun* and regional Victorian newspapers. Databases used to access these publications were *Factiva* and *Proquest* (see Table 1 for list of publications and databases).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proquest</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>National broadsheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>State tabloid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factiva</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benalla Ensign</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ballarat Courier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bendigo Advertiser</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Berwick Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brimbank and North West Weekly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brimbank Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cranbourne Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knox Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyabram Free Press</td>
<td>Regional papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maroondah Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northcote Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Riverine Herald</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shepparton News</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Springvale Dandenong Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Ararat Advertiser</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Warrnambool Standard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wimmera Mail Times</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cataloging of data sources

A number of articles generated using the above search terms contained any one of the descriptive terms in addition to (Aborigin* or Koori* or Indigenous) yet did not reference, for example, domestic violence in explicit relation to Aboriginal people. Rather the article may have made reference to either search term or topic in an unrelated manner. These articles were removed from the sample.

After identifying the relevant articles to include in the data set, articles were catalogued according to:

i. Date
ii. Author
iii. Title
iv. Publication
v. Location published
vi. Information source
vii. Length
viii. Community of focus
ix. Article Focus
x. Level of reference to FV
xi. Perpetrator/victim
xii. Reasons for violence
xiii. Referral to support services

Articles were then sorted according to 1) Article Topic or Focus, 2) Community of Focus and 3) Information source (see Table 2).
Table 2: Article Classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Article Topic or Focus (in relation to FV) | - Lack of services/funding  
- Funding Announcement  
- Launch of Program  
- Community Event  
- Good news story  
- Royal Commission  
- FV as a determinant of X1  
- Close the Gap  
- X as a determinant of FV2 |
| Community of Focus                      | - Victorian Aboriginal  
- National Indigenous population  
- General National/Victorian population  
- Another state/territory  
- Remote |
| Information Source                      | - Community member  
- Representative of Aboriginal community organisation  
- Government Representative  
- Police or justice system representative  
- Other (e.g. Commissioner) |

1 E.g. homelessness, child-removal  
2 E.g. addiction, experience of colonisation

These three classifications emerged as important in determining the level of reference to Victorian Aboriginal people, the complexity articulated in reportage, and whether an article reinforced or challenged stereotypical or generalised perceptions of violence within Aboriginal communities.

Sample overview and analysis: Five-year period

Over the five-year period (2011-2016) N=145 articles emerged which made reference to the experiences of Aboriginal people with family violence or violence-against Aboriginal women.

A number of observations emerged:
- The Age published 42% of these articles, while 43% of articles were published by regional papers and 21% by the Herald Sun.
- The level of reportage in a given year was heavily influenced by particular occurrences,
such as the Royal Commission into Family Violence (Victoria) in 2015.
- Since 2011 there has been a significant increase in the level of reports mentioning family violence in relation to Aboriginal people.

See articles by publication and year in Table 3: Print Media by source 2011 – 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>ALL YEARS*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Papers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*July 1st 2011 – July 31st 2016

Sample overview and analysis: 12-month Snapshot

In the 12 months from July 1st 2015 to July 31st 2016 (See Table 4):
- N=42 articles were published
- 48% of these were published by the Age
- 19% by the Herald Sun
- 33% by Regional Paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>1 Jul 15 - 30 Dec 15</th>
<th>1 Jan 16 - 31 Jul 16</th>
<th>ALL YEARS*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Papers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the 42 articles published over the 12-month period, 52% (n=22) did more than mention Victorian Aboriginal people (See Table 5). Only two articles were published by the Herald Sun in the snapshot period which focused on family violence in relation to Victorian Aboriginal people. This is compared to 7 articles published by The Age and 13 articles published by regional Victorian papers.

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Most of the articles published during the 12-month Snapshot (see Table 6) period that more than mentioned Victorian Aboriginal people (N=22) focused on lack of services in relation to Aboriginal Family Violence (n=6) or a funding announcement (n=4). Only one (n=1) article focused specifically on violence against women in the context of Victoria in relation to Aboriginal Victorians. See below (Table 7) for a list of article titles, and each articles corresponding focus.

### Table 5: Year Snapshot 2015 - 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community of Focus</th>
<th>1 Jul 15 - 30 Dec 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern/remote</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Vic mention of Victorian Aboriginal</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Aboriginal</td>
<td>n=22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National focus</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>N=42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6: Direct focus on VIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>1 July 15 - 31st July 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Papers</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

August 2016. Research conducted by Lilly Brown, University of Melbourne. This research forms Stage 1 of a project developed by Kalinya Communications funded by the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet.
Using an inductive approach, each article in the year snapshot was read for emergent themes in an iterative process where these themes came to inform the coding of subsequent articles. Emergent themes and codes included:

1. Mode of engagement with issue
2. Community of focus
3. Topic of article
4. Article source
5. Other
Coding articles which focused on violence against women or family violence in relation to Victorian Aboriginal people from the 12-month snapshot period according to 1. Mode of engagement with issue generated qualitative data which served to augment quantitative findings from wider study in terms of complexity. Three primary findings emerged from the quantitative and qualitative inquiry. These include 1). A lack of overall reportage 2). Increased complexity of reportage when representatives of an Aboriginal community controlled organisation are the primary source of information, and 3). A tendency to generalise when making reference to Aboriginal family violence, particularly when the primary source informing coverage was not a representative of a community controlled organisation.

Findings and discussion

Lack of reportage

A significant body of scholarship indicates the importance of media coverage in shaping and informing societal attitudes and policy responses to certain issues. The literature also indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overwhelmingly portrayed negatively with Australian mainstream press, particularly when it comes to recounting criminality, dysfunction and violence. Yet one of the strongest findings to emerge from this research project is a lack or absence of print-based coverage on family violence in relation to Aboriginal Victorians. This absence is evident in the comparative volume and type of reporting on domestic, intimate-partner or family violence experienced by the general Victorian and wider population. Morgan and Politoff (2012) for example, found in the Herald Sun and The Age during a 12-month period from 2007-2008 that 804 articles were published. Articles that only mentioned violence against or by women were not included in their sample. Comparatively, the Herald Sun and The Age for the Year Snapshot included in this research project, generated only 28 articles. Only 46% (or 13) of these articles more than mentioned family violence in relation to Aboriginal people.

The type of reporting on family violence experienced by Aboriginal people also differs from coverage on domestic violence perceived to occur in the general population. Again Morgan and Politoff’s study is a useful comparative example here. They found that 64% of their sample from 2007-2008 made significant reference to either gender-based violence in relation to incidents of violence (as particular criminal events) or could be defined as ‘stories which describe more than who, what, when and where. These articles are more in-depth, often explaining violence against women as a structural problem, offering statistics or...
including analytical information about the problem’ (p.27). In the context of this research study:

- 7 (or 4.5%) of the articles over the five-year period made reference to the perpetrators of specific incidences of violence.
- 4 out of the 7 incidents covered were Victorian based;
- Significantly 3 out of those 4 articles focused on Aboriginal women as perpetrators; and,
- A large proportion of articles (44%) published over the five-year period mentioned Aboriginal family violence either in relation to a lack of services, an announcement of funding or program launch.

This comparison highlights a disparity in coverage where individual incidents of violence, which may be categorised as Aboriginal family violence, are not reported on in the media. This dissonance in reportage resonates with international studies which indicate that women of colour, including Indigenous women and their experiences of violence, receive less coverage in the mainstream media (Gilchrist, 2010; Jiwani & Young, 2006; Meyers, 2004; Wortley, 2002). In the context of Canada, Gilchrist (2010, p. 384) suggests that the invisibility of Aboriginal women in mainstream press reportage is the result of ‘intersecting legacies of oppression’ which situate Aboriginal women at the margins of both the press and society. This invisibility may also reflect the ‘marketability’ of violence experienced by Aboriginal women (Wortley, 2002, p. 75).

Within the Australian context, the invisibility of Aboriginal women as victims of violence has been highlighted by public intellectual Marcia Langton (2016) who states that ‘Aboriginal women have died from assaults and criminal misconduct, and they have passed without any public attention or anything like justice’. This comparative absence does not necessarily indicate that cases involving either or both an Aboriginal perpetrator or victim are categorically not reported on. But it may indicate that journalists are apprehensive to make explicit either a perpetrator or victim’s ethnicity or perceived racial background, particularly if Indigenous. More research needs to be undertaken to discern why this issue is not understood or believed to be relevant, significant or newsworthy. This absence may also reflect an apprehension on the part of journalists to deal with Aboriginal family violence and its complexities.

Engaging community controlled organisations: Framing a more complex picture

An important indicator of the level of complexity used to frame Aboriginal family violence was the information source referenced in an article. Overwhelmingly, media coverage that highlighted the complexity of Aboriginal family violence had as its source a representative of an Aboriginal controlled community organisation such as Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV), Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service (FVPLS), Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) or an informed Victorian Aboriginal community representative such as
Victoria’s Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People. Themes contended with in articles which referenced voices of community representatives included:

- The complication of the notion that family violence is inherent in Indigenous communities. Within these accounts, Indigenous families and communities were not only positioned as part of the problem, but importantly were highlighted as integral to the solution;
- An emphasis on the systemic nature of Aboriginal family violence, including the issue of a lack of appropriate services and funding;
- A challenge to stereotypical understandings or generalisable assumptions relating to Aboriginal family violence, such as all violence against Aboriginal women is perpetrated by Aboriginal men; and,
- A framing of family violence which accounted for both the complexity of its determinants and impacts.

Despite the depth and level of complexity underpinning articles which did reference community organisation representatives as their primary informant, only 21.5% articles over the five-year period did so. Whereas 25% of reports were informed by media releases where police and/or government representatives were the primary information source.

Based on findings, the inclusion of community representatives emerges as important in portraying a more accurate and appropriate picture of Aboriginal family violence, which is less likely to reinforce stereotypes or entrench ill-informed assumptions. An engagement with these sources means that news coverage is presenting the problem in the way Aboriginal Victorian’s want it presented. This is demonstrated in the framing of determinants of Aboriginal violence within media coverage. A guiding principle set out in the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force report, for example, is the recognition that ‘from an Indigenous perspective the causes of family violence are located in the history and impacts of white settlement and the structural violence of race relations since then’ (Department for Victorian Communities, 2003, p. 11). Yet, over the five-year period taken into account in this research project, very few articles mention possible determinants of Aboriginal family violence beyond alcohol or drug addiction. The four articles over the five years which note family violence in relation to both perpetrators and victims, in part, as a legacy of colonisation and intergenerational trauma, have as their primary source community representatives or representatives of Aboriginal controlled community organisations.

Tendency to generalise

There was often a tendency in news coverage to generalise Aboriginal family violence by situating violence in Aboriginal families and communities. In this instance, all articles that decontextualised family violence as ‘part of’ or ‘in’ the Aboriginal community or communities and families had as their primary source government representatives, representatives of the police or the source was not noted. This style of reportage also focused on the general
collective experience of family violence by Aboriginal people and communities, while an emphasis on Aboriginal women and their children as the disproportionate victims of male-violence against women was not noted. Where violence against Aboriginal women was mentioned, there was a tendency to reproduce statements or repeat statistics that highlight Aboriginal women as disproportionately impacted by family violence without providing any further context.

The framing of Aboriginal family violence in this way could be understood as contributing to:

- A denial of the gendered nature of violence perpetrated by men against Aboriginal women;
- Reinforcing the assumption that violence against Aboriginal women is perpetrated only by Aboriginal men; and,
- Reinforcing family violence as inherent in Aboriginal communities and part of Indigenous culture, and thus may also deny that Indigenous communities and their representatives are at the forefront of prevention against violence experienced by Aboriginal women.

A good example of the tendency to generalise or over-simplify the complexities of family violence experienced by Aboriginal women is that only two articles over the five-year sample noted that not all perpetrators of violence against Aboriginal women and their children are Aboriginal men. In both cases, statements were sourced from representatives of community controlled organisations who work on the ground with victims of violence. As FVLPS (2015, p. 39) stated in their submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence:

[we] … routinely sees Aboriginal clients, mostly women, who experience family violence at the hands of men from a range of different backgrounds and cultures, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The only certainty in the existing data is that Aboriginal women are at disproportionately higher risk of family violence.

This is a significant point, particularly as statistics show that 85% of Aboriginal women in Melbourne, 67.9% in Shepperton and 82.4% in Bendigo have a non-Indigenous partner (Biddle, 2013, p. 12). In relation to these finding, Biddle suggests “when attempting to reduce the rate of domestic violence or marital dissolution experienced by the Indigenous populations (for example), it is important to keep in mind that the majority of the partners of Indigenous Australians who experience such traumatic life events are likely to be non-Indigenous’ (p. 12). The ongoing repetition within the media that violence is explicitly located within Aboriginal families and communities, in addition to an absence of acknowledgement of non-Indigenous perpetrators may serve to demonize Aboriginal men, pathologies Aboriginal communities as inherently violent and misrepresents the family violence experienced by Aboriginal women.
Recommendations

In taking the subsequent approach to data collection and analysis, three primary findings have emerged. Firstly, there is a comparative lack of reportage on the family violence experienced by Victorian Aboriginal women. Secondly, media coverage that was informed by representatives of Aboriginal community controlled organisation or informed community representatives more readily captured the complexity of Victorian Aboriginal family violence. And lastly, Aboriginal family violence was often framed as inherent in Aboriginal communities and families.

Based on these findings the following recommendations are made:

1. Journalists and government departments responsible for media releases need encouragement and guidance to engage and work with Aboriginal controlled community organisations in providing relevant and appropriate reporting on the complexity of family violence experienced by Aboriginal Victorians.

2. Support needs to be increased for Aboriginal controlled community organisations and their representatives in meeting the demand of journalists and government departments for accurate and appropriate information. The kind of support required must be identified in consultation with these organisations and their representatives.

3. More qualitative research is needed to understand the challenges faced by journalists in reporting on Aboriginal women as victims of family violence.

4. Resources need to be developed around reporting Aboriginal family violence within the Victorian context and taught as part of journalism education and training.

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References


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