

Femicide in the News: Jewish and Arab Victims and Culprits in the Israeli Hebrew Media

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Abstract : This article explores how newspapers cover murder of women by family members and intimate partners. Three major Israeli newspapers were compared in order to analyse the coverage of Jewish and Arab victims and culprits and to examine whether and in what ways the media contribute to the construction of symbolic boundaries between minority and dominant social groups. A sample of some 459 articles that were published between 2013 and 2015 was studied using a systematic qualitative content analysis. Our findings suggest that the treatment of murder cases by the media varies according to the ethnicity of both victims and culprits. The murder of Jews by family members or intimate partners was framed as a shocking and unusual event, a result of the individual personality or pathology of the culprit. Conversely, when Arabs were the killers, murders were often explained by focusing on the culture of the ethnic group, described as traditional, violent, and patriarchal. In two-thirds of the cases in which Arabs were involved, so-called 'honor killing' or other cultural explanations were proposed as the motive for the murder. This was often the case even before a suspect was detected, while police investigation was at its very early stages, and often despite forceful denials from victims' families. In case of Jewish culprits, more than half of the articles in our sample suggested mental disorder to explain the acts and cultural explanations were almost entirely absent. Beyond the emphasis on psychological vs. cultural explanations, newspaper articles also tend to provide much more detail about Jewish culprits than about Arabs. Such detailed examinations convey a desire to make sense of the event by understanding the supposedly unique and unorthodox nature of the killer. The detailed accounts were usually absent from the reports on Arab killers. Thus, even if reports do not explicitly offer cultural motivations for the murder, the fact that reports often remain laconic leaves people to draw their own conclusions, which would then be likely based on existing cognitive scripts and previous reports on family murders among Arabs. Such treatment contributes to the notion that Arab and Muslim cultures, religions, and nationalities are essentially misogynistic and adhere to norms of honor and shame that are radically different from those of modern societies, such as the Jewish-Israeli one. Murder within the family is one of the most dramatic occurrences in the social world, and in societies that see themselves as modern it is a taboo; an ultimate signifier of danger. We suggest that representations of murder provide a valuable prism for examining the construction of group boundaries. Our analysis, therefore, contributes to the scholarly effort to understand the creation and reinforcement of symbolic boundaries between 'society' and its 'others' by systematically tracing the media constructions of 'otherness'. While our analysis focuses on Israel, studies on the United States, Canada, and various European countries with ethnically and racially heterogeneous populations, make it clear that the stigmatisation and exclusion of visible, religious, and language minorities are not unique to the Israeli case.

Keywords : comparative study of media coverage of minority and majority groups, construction of symbolic group boundaries, murder of women by family members and intimate partners, Israel, Jews, Arabs

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