

The Press Coverage of Violent Crime:  
Evidence from a Newspaper Content Analysis

By  
Stella Chiasson

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Approved: Dr. John McMullan  
Supervisor

Approved: Dr. David Perrier  
Committee Member

Approved: Dr. Chris McCormick  
External Reviewer

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The Press Coverage of Violent Crime:  
Evidence from a Newspaper Content Analysis

By Stella Chiasson

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the newsmaking process that affects the integrity of the information presented to the public. Using content analysis and the social constructionist perspective, I analyzed 295 violent crime articles from the *Chronicle Herald* from January, 1994 to December, 1998 to evaluate how crime, victims and defendants are represented in the news in relation to race, class and gender. The findings indicate that the overemphasis of stranger-related crimes in news reports is disjointed with the reality of crime, driven primarily by organizational and business decisions that exaggerate the frequency of dramatic and infrequently occurring crimes. Racial stereotyping and crime myths are supposedly prevalent in crime news reporting, introduced through media discourses intended to persuade readers to similarly espouse media viewpoints that blame minorities for the crime problem. But I found that this was not the prevailing structure of crime news reports; in fact, discourse structures about racial minorities were primarily episodic, disputing most research studies. The dominant ideology about the deviancy of lower social classes, however, was reinforced by the press reporting. This thesis details how images of crime are controlled and manipulated by the press and news sources and that crime, victims and defendants are typified as a way to sell crime news.

April, 2008

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Chapter 1</i>	
Introduction.....	1
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
Social Constructionism, Crime Reporting and Underlying Hypotheses .....	7
Theoretical Orientation .....	8
Selection .....	13
Sources.....	18
News Prominence and Newsworthiness.....	21
Social Construction of Gender.....	25
Age, Victims and Defendants in the News.....	30
Crime Myths and Stereotypes.....	31
Predator Criminals and Random Violence.....	36
Discourse.....	40
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
Methodology.....	45
Content Analysis.....	45
Sampling Strategy.....	53
Statistical Procedures.....	56
<i>Chapter 4</i>	
Research Findings and Data Analysis.....	65
Descriptive Tables .....	66
News Production and the Locality of Crime.....	77
Newsmakers.....	78
Story Newsworthiness.....	80
The Gendering of Crime.....	81
Demographics and its Effect on Crime.....	82
Ethnicity, Social Class and the Reporting of Crime.....	83
Predatory Criminals and the Random Nature of Crime.....	86
The Power of Talk.....	87
Data Analysis.....	89
(a) News Producers and the Specificity of Crime Reporting.....	90
(b) Crime Definers.....	92
(c) Standards of Newsworthiness .....	95
(d) Images of Gender in the News.....	95
(e) Age and Criminality.....	97
(f) News Reporting and the Creation of Criminals.....	97
(g) The Image and the Reality of Stranger Violence.....	103
(h) Media Discourse and Managing Crime News Reports.....	109
<i>Chapter 5</i>	
Conclusion and Recommendations .....	118
Conclusion .....	118
Recommendations .....	121
<i>References</i> .....	127

## List of Tables

Table 1	Frequency of Sample Keywords by Year	62
Table 2	Elements of and Affecting Newspaper Production	66
Table 3	Demographics	70
Table 4	Victim/Offender Relationship and Violence Against Women	72
Table 5	Characteristics of Rape Myths	74
Table 6	Discourse Structures	75
Table 7	Overtones/Tonality	77
Table 8	Linguistic Devices (Voice)	77
Table 9	Quotation Marks	77
Table 10	News Production by Locality	78
Table 11	News Sources by Type of Coverage	79
Table 12	Type of Coverage by Unusualness	81
Table 13	Newspaper Coverage by Victim's Sex	82
Table 14	Type of Crime by Male Defendant and Defendant's Sex	83
Table 15	Coverage by Defendant's Race	84
Table 16	Prominence by Defendant's Race	85
Table 17	Prominence by Defendant's Class	86
Table 18	Type of Crime by Victim/Offender Relationship	87
Table 19	Race of Defendants by Discourse Structures	88

*Ch. 1*  
*Introduction*

The news media have the power to reinforce a particular ideology about crime and victimization. A reader's attitudes and opinions about crime are influenced, in large part, by the selected information and views they are exposed to from news agencies. So the information that is impressed upon them, irregardless of the accuracy of the content, often shapes that individual's knowledge about crime and violence. The press affords a tremendous amount of attention to violent crime in the news. Crimes depicted in news reports, particularly dramatic crimes, are vastly overrepresented by reporters, and they have a residual effect on the public because of the imagery they project. Details in these types of stories beguile readers with lurid facts about the crime, the victim and the defendant, and typically spin a story that is more representative of a fictional novel than reality.

This thesis addresses the role of the news media in providing information about violent crime to the public. News agencies play an important part in selecting and monitoring the validity of the content of the information they supply to the public. Readers are presented with crime events that may or may not affect them, but the facts that they receive are believed to be objective. Given that the majority of the population has little direct or even indirect experience with crime, the news media is the vehicle they use to obtain their knowledge on the subject. Clearly, the media play a pivotal role in creating and disseminating beliefs about criminal acts. They have the power to influence perceptions and opinions about crime, victims and defendants by selecting the types of crimes they want emphasized in the news. The power of the media is also evident in its ability to convince readers that society is more violent than it actually is. They can

desensitize readers by persuading them that certain crimes or individuals are aberrant, and portraits of ideal villains and ideal victims are presented to the public to reinforce this dominant ideology. To understand how cultural stereotypes are formed about various groups and individuals in society requires examining the relationship between the news media and crime sources.

Media and news sources promote a constructionist view of crime, victims and defendants. There are groups and individuals in society that control the direction of the news by advancing particular viewpoints, while silencing opposing views. The news media prefer specific news sources over others for crime information, and because of this they have been accused of bias and criticized for their negative coverage of certain stories. The public trusts that the information they are provided is factual; however, sources *conveniently* discover crimes and notify the media, which results in the creation of crime news. People do not usually question the relationship between news and source organizations or how, together, they select the crimes that are presented in the news. The media's use of particular sources is controversial in reporting crime news because it provides readers with a limited view of the crime problem and where it is located in the social order.

Institutionalized sources and news agencies operate under the same guiding principles about which crimes to advance in the news reporting. They are both constrained by organizational decisions that determine what crimes to select, produce and present to readers; therefore, they must decide how best to treat the information, control which stories are released to the public and limit the content of that information. Crime news is shaped by business decisions, as news agencies seek the most effective way to market their product by locating the most newsworthy events to pursue. This explains

why news agencies often rely on violence to captivate audiences and why the crimes that are assigned prominent news coverage are the stories that are the most likely to influence public perceptions and curiosity, compared to crimes that are given little news space or prominence in the news reporting.

This thesis will explore how crime news stories are selected by news personnel using criteria that have been developed by the media industry to establish newsworthiness. Are the stories presented in the news the more prevalent types of crimes in society or are they the kinds of crimes that generate more interest than the typical variety crimes? The thesis contributes to the growing body of research in Canada that examines crime in the news media. Its aim is to investigate the processes involved in the presentation of crime in the news to see how crime is converted into a product intended to increase the marketability of the newspaper by using victims and defendants to sell crime news. It examines the newsmaking process and media practices involved in crime news production, including how crimes are shaped into news for public consumption. It should be recognized that the news media have business objectives to fulfill. They are not neutral players in the crime news reporting because newspapers must produce crime stories on a daily basis for newspapers. Crime news, therefore, not only serves a useful purpose for the newspaper, it is also a vital component in the media's ability to remain a viable business.

This area of study is important because it contributes to the way crime is presented in the news. The image that news agencies present to readers about violence may be a distortion of the reality of crime; stories may be manipulated to the point where only lurid details remain so that crime incidents are more appealing to readers. Depending upon the 'quality' of stories, some crimes may be thrust into the limelight, lasting weeks or months

as public interest stories, while others may be delegated to the ranks of filling "news holes" in the paper. It is the news construction process which allows for the disproportionate reporting of specific types of crimes that not only inflate the frequency of these occurrences, but convince the public that they are more representative of the crime problem generally. Unintended consequences of promoting these constructed realities are that the levels of fear that people experience increase and myths about crime are reinforced.

This thesis builds upon existing empirical studies in the area of news construction and examines how representations of particular groups in the context of race, class and gender affect crime news content. Because it is often suggested that powerless groups are discriminated against in the news reporting, I investigated to see if the media produced, reproduced or distributed certain ideologies regarding these groups. It would appear that the social status of crime victims and defendants can increase the odds that specific images of crime and criminals are presented in the news. Because of the importance of language in emphasizing particular views and perceptions about crime and victimization, media discourses were examined to evaluate their effect on the news reporting, and surprising results emerged about discourse structures in that the news reporting may not be as one dimensional as many studies suggest. This study enhances our understanding of how issues such as race, class and gender affect the image of crime and story importance. Does the news media, for example, contribute to negative depictions of less powerful groups in the news reporting through the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes? Is the social reality of crime accurately reflected in the news reporting, or is the image a misrepresentation?

This research will assist readers to better understand the newsmaking process in relation to violent crimes and challenge them to adopt a more analytical approach to understanding the news. It alerts the public about media strategies that are intended to persuade the public to espouse their viewpoints about victimization and criminalization. If individuals can acquire the tools they need to decipher media discourses, they will be able to better sift through the maze of constructed knowledge to determine the accuracy of the information they receive about crime.

One of the limits of this thesis, however, is that crime news was analyzed through newspapers alone. It was impossible to know whether or not news formats of other mediums such as television would have affected the final analysis. Because newspapers have greater flexibility in regards to timelines, they can make use of numerous sources that other mediums do not, so this may have influenced the slant of the sampled news articles. For instance, Chermak (1998) found that television frequently uses victims as news sources to provide personalized accounts about how they have been affected by crime, whereas newspapers have a tendency to seek more authoritative news sources for crime information. So although different news mediums may express a range of viewpoints (based on the news sources) about crime, the *reasons* for making use of violent crimes to sell the news and the *news-production process* itself would not have varied across mediums.

The thesis is organized into five chapters, including this introduction, which provides an overview of the research problem as well as its importance to the growing body of research into crime news construction. Chapter 2 is my theoretical orientation, which has been coupled with the literature review. The collection of studies included in the literature review use the tenets of the social constructionist perspective to illustrate

how crime news is represented to the public. In this section I put forth the theoretical foundation for my research, which looks at the active role of news producers and sources in presenting the crime problem and how they influence the social reality of crime. Each subsection in the literature review concludes with hypotheses used to test my suppositions. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology I employed to carry out this study. It is a content analytic investigation of crime news, using the *Chronicle Herald* as my sample base. The rationale for choosing this particular methodology over other methods is provided in the chapter. It also discusses the sampling strategy I used in the selection of the data, including how the definitions were operationalized. My findings and data analysis have been integrated into one argument. In Chapter 4, I discuss my findings and show how the results compare with the research outlined in the literature review. Explanations are presented as to why disparities surfaced between my results and the findings of other researchers in the discipline. In the final chapter, I tie together my findings relative to the broader field of criminology and offer suggestions about ways to further strengthen and develop this area of study.

*Ch. 2*  
*Social Constructionism, Crime Reporting and Underlying Hypotheses*

This chapter has been divided into nine subsections. The first discusses my theoretical orientation. The next discusses how organizational decisions determine what types of crime actually becomes news. In the third subsection, I examine how organizational decisions of the print media lead to the reporting of crime news by selecting particular sources to define crime. The fourth addresses how newspapers determine the value and importance of certain types of crime by assigning varying levels of importance, based on the position and length of news articles within the newspaper. In the fifth subsection I discuss the gendered nature of crime news and how gender determines the volume of news coverage assigned to male and female crime victims. The sixth discusses the type of information provided in news reports regarding victims and defendants in the news, including the importance of age in the reporting of crime. The seventh addresses how crime myths and stereotypes are created in the news about minorities and the underprivileged, while underplaying the involvement of Caucasians and the wealthy in criminal activity. The eighth subsection expands on the previous subsection by showing the media's fascination with rarely experienced types of crimes and attributing them to stereotypes about minority defendants and poor defendants as predator criminals. In the last subsection, I discuss and test for reporters' use of discourse structures in reporting the crimes of the less privileged.

### *Theoretical Orientation*

The perspective used in my research is social constructionism. The social constructionist perspective helps us understand that people create reality based on individual knowledge and knowledge attained through interactions with others (Surette, 1998). Surette (Ibid) maintains that knowledge “is not something possessed, but rather something done.” It is not an autonomously occurring event, but something that is actively created and determined by subjective interpretations. Social constructionism does not question the reality of the world; instead it examines the relationship between humans that function within the world and the way that those personal relationships affect an individual’s perceived reality. The prevailing constructed reality revolves around collectively shared meanings that are influenced by changing interactions where a social problem or condition can dissipate just as quickly as it appears, without any outside intervention because “many social problems are short lived,” since they are cyclical in nature (Best, 1989:2; Surette, 1998). For instance, the discovery of a social problem may result in intense media coverage from major newspapers and television stations, but after a few weeks, the reporting abruptly stops (its life cycle), and the media turn their attention to other “pressing’ news stories (Best, 1989).

It was the dissatisfaction of some sociologists with the dominant objectivist position regarding social problems that gave birth to social constructionism. Constructionists saw two primary flaws with defining social problems in terms of objective conditions. First, “it ignored the fact that identifying a social condition as a social problem required subjective judgment,” and second, by calling conditions social problems, when little evidence existed to support this, “objectivism could not serve as a foundation for more general theories of social problems” (Best, 1989:243). So, social

problems, according to Best (Ibid), are best defined “in terms of claims-making,” and constructionists concentrate on the subjective judgments that they claim have been ignored in research.

The constructionist approach has been and continues to be controversial. Numerous criticisms have been launched against it, the harshest from Woolgar and Pawluch (cited in Best, 1989). They accused constructionists of being “internally inconsistent” (Best, 1989:245). Woolgar and Pawluch (Ibid:245) argued that constructionists focused on subjective judgments, and their analysis contained hidden “objective social conditions.” They stated that constructionists contradict themselves by identifying claims about reputed conditions as suitable subjects for social problems analysis, while simultaneously implying that the essence of the “social condition is irrelevant (and perhaps unknowable)” - all the while, presuming to “know about the actual status of the social condition” (cited in Best, 1989:245).

While some sociologists defended objectivism, other sociologists argued that disputes between objectivism and constructionism could be resolved (Best, 1989:243). Still, other sociologists argued that the theoretical assumptions of constructionism were contradictory (Ibid). There has even been disagreement amongst sociologists working within the constructionist tradition about what analysis should be considered constructionist (Best, 1989:243). Eventually, this resulted in the creation of two separate branches within constructionism - *strict constructionists* and *contextual constructionists*. Strict constructionists believe that the perspectives of claims-makers, policymakers and other members of society should be examined. They are not interested in actual social conditions, only in what members have to say about those conditions. Strict constructionists are limited about the types of questions they can ask. Their interests fall

within the realms of claims-making, not the accuracy of the members' claims (Best, 1989:246). Contextual constructionists, although focused on the claims-making process, admit that assumptions are made about social conditions (exactly what Woolgar and Pawluch stated), but they argue that "such assumptions locate claims-making within its social context" (Ibid:246-47). It is not the "accuracy of claims or the actual nature of the social conditions" that make the *context* important; it is having knowledge about social conditions to explain the *timing* of the appearance of specific crimes (Best, 1989:247 – emphasis added). For example, consider how strict constructionists and contextual constructionists differ when analyzing the same claim, in this case, "increasing crime." A strict constructionist will notice "claims-makers" references to higher crime rates," but they will not make assumptions about an increase in crime (Ibid). A contextual constructionist might examine official crime statistics to see whether or not an increase has actually taken place, even if there has been no reference made about official crime statistics. Suppose claims-makers lobbied against an increase in crime, when, in fact, the crime rate had not risen. A contextual constructionist would investigate the disparity between "the claims and other information about social conditions" (Best, 1989:247). They are aware that crime rates are socially constructed, but they assume that such information can be used, perhaps imperfectly "to describe the context within which claims-making occurs" (Ibid). Contextual constructionists will turn their attention to why the official statistics were ignored when the crime rate (i.e. UCR - Uniform Crime Reports) had remained relatively stable. Contextual constructionists will use social conditions to explain how claims are advanced, including how some claims receive public attention or shape social policy. They may also show that "dramatic, atypical examples

or inflated statistics” have been used by claims-makers to advance their cause (Best, 1989:248).

My theoretical orientation is based on the tenets of contextual constructionists, since they are primarily interested in the wider processes involved in the construction of reality (Surette, 1998:8). Surette (1998:6) identifies four ways that people obtain the knowledge on which they construct their social realities: *personal experience* (direct experience), *significant others* (peers, family, friends - input is sometimes referred to as conversational knowledge), *other social groups and institutions* (schools, unions, churches, government agencies) and the *mass media*. The last three sources of knowledge “are shared symbolically and collectively to form one’s *symbolic reality*” (Ibid). Indeed, it is through the use of language that we are able to share the experienced realities of other people. For example, our symbolic reality is made up of events that we are unable to personally experience, yet readily accept as truths; facts about the world that we do not experience, yet believe to be true; and things that we believe exist, but are unable to see. A person constructs the social world by combining his/her personal knowledge with these three sources of socially acquired symbolic reality. For Surette (1998:7), it is composed of:

“events individuals experience or believe to be happening; facts they observe or believe to be operating; and values, attitudes and opinions they hold or believe are valid and should be upheld.”

Symbolic reality knowledge that is obtained from significant others may carry more weight than knowledge obtained from social institutions or the mass media, yet in spite of this, the mass media affect the social construction of reality because society’s dependence upon them for the dissemination of much information. Ultimately, the media

“dominate the distribution of shared social knowledge” in four ways: (1) the way history (in terms of what the media define as significant) is recorded and analyzed; (2) the way people of possible historical importance depend on media exposure to secure their place in history; (3) the way the media gain influence and acceptance in determining what is believed to be significant; and (4) the way institutions need to “present their own message and images within the accepted respectability and familiarity of media-determined formats” (Surette, 1998:7-8).

To understand the media’s role in the social constructionist process, four concepts have to be examined: claims; claims-makers; ownership; and linkage. *Claims* are the “descriptions, typifications and assertions regarding the extent and nature of phenomena in the physical world” (Surette, 1998:8). *Claims-makers* are the promoters, activists, professional experts and spokespersons responsible for advancing claims about a specific phenomenon. These people are responsible for shaping the social problem. They have a vested interest in bringing the problem to the public’s attention. *Ownership* refers to claims-makers who are identified with a particular phenomenon, and the media seek this group of claims-makers for comments. *Linkage* refers to associating one issue with other issues such as drugs to crime, heightening public concerns.

Claims-makers compete for media attention, and the media tend to subscribe to the dramatic claims of powerful groups, particularly those relating to “established cultural themes” (Surette, 1998:11). The media may also block claims-makers from getting media attention if they do not belong to the cultural mainstream. Being distributors of social knowledge, “the media also legitimize people, social issues and social policies for the general public” (Ibid:11). Those who are able to advance their cause will become part of the dominant constructed reality, and whoever is in this position, controls public policy.

Moral crusades and panics are initiated by claims-makers rallying for the formation of social policy and solutions after social problems have been found.

At the individual level, a person's dominant constructed reality is created by combining the knowledge of that person's experienced and symbolic realities. Each individual believes it to be the "real" world as they see it. Due to subjective interpretations, each person sees the real world differently because experiences differ from one individual to the next. People with similar backgrounds and experiences will view "the world more alike than different because of the same symbolic reality and much of the same experienced reality" (Surette, 1998:11-12). Once a dominant construction of the world has been created, it is difficult to change, explaining why people continue to believe that crime is on the rise, when, in fact, the crime rate has declined (Ibid:12).

Research into the construction of social problems has taught us to question the accuracy and the validity of the claims of claims-makers, including those who benefit most by the discoveries of these phenomena. The life cycle of a social problem ceases once the novelty of that condition wears off or interest fades, so claims-makers are left to refocus their activities by either redefining the issue, resurrecting an "old threat," or discovering a "new threat" to pursue (Best, 1989:140). These skilled claims-makers not only advance their causes by becoming part of the dominant constructed reality, they unmistakably control public policy.

### *Selection*

To better understand crime news, it is essential to examine how crime is presented to readers. There are four different models to explain crime news: the 'market' model, the 'propaganda' model, the 'hegemonic' model and the 'organizational' model

(Surette,1998:60). In the *market* model, news is presented as objective fact, “a true image” of society. This model claims to be reactive in reporting the news (Ibid:61). Journalists are seen as providing a product that the public wants, and the journalist’s “news sense” (which supposedly grows with experience), allows him/her to make those determinations. News is a commodity that is driven by market demands, and as a way to fulfill those demands, events have to be chosen that are in the public’s interest, yet still present social reality objectively (Cohen and Young, 1981:17). Although this model simplifies reality, it should not be viewed as a calculated distortion of the real world, or an accurate depiction of actual events (Ibid).

The *propaganda* model (also known as the manipulative model) is the opposite of the market model in that journalists and media are believed to be serving the interests of their owners. It claims that news is selected on the grounds that it serves the interests of its owners, not the public. Reality is distorted so that it fulfills the owner’s requirements, which, in turn, misleads the public. Cohen and Young (1981:18) maintain that while market journalism is the genre of *expose*, the propaganda model is that of *cover-up*. Issues or events of grave public concern arise, but the media cover-up the details or accentuate or diminish the gravity of incidents. The most poignant Canadian example that demonstrates how the propaganda model operates is the early news coverage of the Westray mine explosion. Here, company owners (Curragh Resources) used their power and money to cover-up their culpability in the explosion by shifting responsibility away from them. Within hours of the explosion, Curragh Resources performed damage control by hiring a public relations firm to “manufacture images and manage impressions surrounding the explosion” (McMullan 2001:137). In spite of the numerous warnings and threats of closure that the company received from government prior to the explosion,

no actions were taken. The company had the illegal and culpable actions and inactions hidden from the public, initially at least. They impressed their message upon the public via news filtering by marginalizing other stories, and by convincing news workers that they had interpreted the news objectively (Ibid).

In the *hegemonic* model, the mass media are viewed as ideological apparatuses that maintain social order by reproducing ideology (based on the collective belief system of the dominant class) and sustaining hegemony over time (Hall et al. 1997:332). Those being dominated are encouraged to see the world through the eyes of the powerful, and the media are indispensable mechanisms in achieving those goals. The dominated are unable to realize that their values are not their own, and through subliminal messages of the powerful (disseminated through the media), the public becomes conditioned to accept the dominant ideology. Consensus is disguised as commonsense, as the way things have always been done and not as the product of ideology. Consensus is linked to the concept of hegemony, which, in turn, is a mixture of coercion and consent. But hegemony is best achieved without the use of coercive measures; so if the governed can be convinced to accept ideology, the ruling class retains its position without question. In this model, crime news is both commodified for public consumption and framed by dominant ideology. The media and the state use elements of ideology to distort *images* of crime, and ideology shapes misleading images of crime at every stage of the social construction process (Welch, Fenwick and Roberts, 1998).

In the *organizational* model, crime news exhibits some of the characteristics that are also found in both the market and the propaganda model. Surette (1998:60) maintains that both models are inadequate because they fail to address the “organizational realities of news production” in the creation of news (Ibid: 60, 62). The organizational model

proposes that it is a news agency's organizational needs that guide the news construction process. Every organization within the media industry operates with a list of criteria as a way of selecting news stories such as the *source* used, the story's *newsworthiness* ["the value of any particular item to a news organization"] and the story's *prominence* [length and placement] given to a crime story (Surette, 1998:61).<sup>1</sup> Editors select and produce stories that they believe will attract the largest volume of readers, so in the initial stages, that is, when a story reaches the newsroom, it must compete with other potential stories for publication. The story that satisfies the greatest number of criterion is the one selected for print. Thus, journalists do not passively collect information; they play an active role in selecting crime stories. The version the public receives about crime has been reworked so that it absolves the news agency from any liability, while at the same time retaining the newsworthiness standard of that particular agency. The facts or events presented to the public reflect the views that particular sources hold about the world. News organizations socially construct reality because the majority of news content the public receives about crime has already been filtered and manipulated (Surette, 1994). Hence, it is the organizational model that best explains the processes involved in creating the news, and it will be this particular model emphasized in this thesis.

It is important to note that reporters are assigned to cover specific beats (i.e. court beat and police beat), and the number of sources and perspectives they are exposed to are limited (Surette, 1998:60). In the beat system, reporters have direct access to law enforcement sources and this enables them to receive a constant supply of fresh crime events. Whether it is the court reporter going through daily court hearings, or the police beat reporter scanning the police wire, or the editor choosing a story to run for an editorial

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<sup>1</sup> Source, newsworthiness and prominence will be discussed in more detail in future subsections.

- all are involved in *producing* the news (Cohen, Young, 1981:23). These stories become either “front-page leads” or “back-page fillers” (Graber, 1980:42). Chermak (1994a) claims that all types of news media willingly report about local (violent) crime when it is available, but when none exists, they search elsewhere. So, in addition to local crimes, regional and national crimes are taken from the *Associated Press* (for example) and resituated in a local context, constructing an image that crime is both a problem and a local phenomenon (Potter and Kappeler, 1998:334). Chermak’s (1995:139, 145) study of 6 print (newspapers from 2 medium, 2 large and 2 extra-large cities) and 3 broadcast media (television stations in 1 medium, 1 large and 1 extra-large city) found that with the exception of one of the large dailies, newspapers were more likely to use their own reporters when covering local crime.<sup>2</sup>

While it may be obvious that most crimes stories are constructed from local events, my investigation into the role of reporters and the locality of crime was hampered by the lack of empirical studies. Interestingly, the studies that I did find (Heath, 1984; Liska and Baccaglioni, 1990; and Weitzer and Kubrin, 2004), which were somewhat connected to my investigation, could not be used, as they focused on the link between local crime and the level of fear readers experienced. Chermak (1994b:117) explains that reporters “satisfy organizational needs” by allocating a certain amount of news space to cover “local briefs.” He also states that the purpose of doing so is to “attract a local audience by concentrating on the most serious crimes that occur in their immediate area” (1998b:88). In the absence of studies into the locality of crime, and without particular guidance from the literature, I am going to test the following hypothesis:

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<sup>2</sup> See the following subsection, *Sources*, for details about his study.

Hypothesis 1: I propose that reporters will use crimes culled primarily from local incidents rather than non local incidents to produce crime news.

### *Sources*

Crime sources are probably the single most driving force behind constructing reality. They act as “claims-makers by producing their own idealized version of reality” (Surette, 1998:60). These sources, with their own agendas, are typically powerful individuals or groups that have the ability to affect policy and social change by drawing attention to particular issues or social problems. Once an organizational source submits a crime story to a news agency, the rendition the public receives has already been filtered by the source as well as by the news agency so that it is absolved from any liability, but still maintains the newsworthiness standard of that particular organization (Chermak, 1994b:99). So, the picture the public receives is a limited one because organizational decisions, that affect the newsmaking process, have determined what shape that portrait will take (Chermak, 1994b; McMullan, 2001; McCormick, 1995). Surette (1998) argues that because of the way organizational processes convert social events into news, it is impossible for social reality to be reflected objectively.

Surette (1998) insists that minimal sources are used in crime news, but Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1991) maintain that many sources are relied upon for information. Whatever their opinions may be, all researchers agree that the police are the primary source of crime news, and because they control news accounts, the police are the primary definers of crime. According to Goldsmith Kasinsky (1994) ideological processes are activated as soon as the police begin filtering crime incidents for interesting or unusual crime stories for the media. The police select the crimes that they believe correspond with the media’s notion of “newsworthiness.” Experts in law enforcement are then

typically sought because they are culturally accepted and they have a certain level of authority, making them legitimate, reliable and credible crime sources (Chermak, 1994b:110). Their presumably unbiased opinions provide the media with quotes for publications and foster organizational cooperation that enables each agency to fulfill its own organizational agenda as well as create a symbiotic relationship in the process (Chermak, 1994a; 1994b; Meyers, 1997). The police benefit by this marriage in a number of ways: law enforcement officials are presented as experts on crime, reaffirming “police ownership of the crime problem;” and being gatekeepers, they ensure that crime news reflects police perspectives (Surette, 1998:64). By maintaining a close relationship with media personnel, the police are able to monitor and control what information the media receives about official knowledge (Chermak, 1994a). The organization itself benefits because if the streets are perceived as dangerous, budgetary increases may be justified. The media are advantaged by this interdependent relationship because their role as the “primary public institution responsible for fighting crime” is also legitimated (Chermak, 1994a:570), thereby helping them meet their own business objectives of selling newspapers. Using the police as sources of crime ensures reporters will always have a reliable and steady supply of news.

Chermak (1994a; 1995) conducted an empirical study using content analysis of print and broadcast news media to investigate how crime is conveyed to the public. Newspaper content was examined from one news organization in each of six cities (2 medium, 2 large and 2 extra-large from each city), and three cities were selected for the interviews (one medium, one large, one extra-large city). Chermak (1994a:573) found that nearly half the sources used in print and electronic crime stories derived from the police, prosecuting attorneys and/or judges. He published a second article using data

taken from his project to study the “newsworthiness” component of news production (i.e. who news agencies sourced for crime news). Again, Chermak (1994b) observed that the police and the courts were the primary news sources (police 29 percent: courts 25 percent respectively). He discovered that defendants were used as sources only 9 percent of the time, compared with victims 4 percent (Ibid:125).

Chermak (1998a:171-72) also examined the sources used to construct drugs as a socio-legal problem. He found that the police and court officials accounted for more than 50 percent of source attributions for all types of crime [police 28 percent; courts 23 percent] (Ibid:172). In assault stories, the police were overwhelmingly used as sources [55 percent], followed by criminal justice officials [14 percent]; and in cases of rape, the police were the most frequently used source [36 percent], followed by court officials [26 percent] (Chermak, 1998a:172). Similarly, McCormick (1995:30) found that in sex crime reporting, the police were the most frequently used news source (59 percent), and he also found that in ‘primary’ stories about rape the police were also the most frequently used source (65 percent).

Sherizen’s (1978:219-20) <sup>3</sup> findings about news sources were also comparable to Chermak’s (1998a); he discovered that the police were the primary sources of crime news (34 percent), compared to prosecutors (8 percent). Victims, witnesses, attorneys and relatives were rarely used as sources of information. Ironically, the most intimately involved parties (victims and defendants) were the least reported sources of the news (Ibid: 200). Schlesinger et al.’s (1991:413) findings on news sources for *mid-market* newspapers found that ‘victims, suspects’ relatives and criminals’ were the most frequently used news source (23 percent), followed by ‘judges, lawyers and court

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<sup>3</sup> See subsection *Crime Myths and Stereotypes* for more information on his study.

officials' (18 percent) and 'elites and members of lobby and pressure groups' (17 percent). While most empirical studies show that victims and defendants are rarely used in crime stories, Schlesinger et al.'s (1991:443) results revealed the opposite. As for the frequency in which the police were used, they ranked fourth (15 percent) in their study (Ibid).

While news workers are dependent upon crime stories for their success, this reliance on law enforcement sources tends to reproduce police views (Chermak, 1994a; 1994b; 1998a; Lofquist, 1998; Surette, 1998). What becomes troubling is that by predominantly focusing on criminal justice sources, news content may become biased because other views are disregarded or silenced. It should not be forgotten that many crimes reported to the media are incidents that the police have deemed newsworthy, and in spite of the fact that news organizations and law enforcement sources have different objectives, they both hold similar views about 'newsworthiness' (Chermak, 1994a). The funneling of information to news organizations by the police not only influences what is released, it also serves as a conduit to seek the assistance as well as the support (approval) of the public. Given that most researchers agree that criminal justice officials are the most frequently used sources of information in crime news, I expect that trend to continue in my own study.

*Hypothesis 2:* I hypothesize that criminal justice officials will be the most frequently used source for crime news coverage in primary, secondary and tertiary news stories.

#### *News Prominence and Newsworthiness*

According to Schlesinger et al. (1991:407), crime is one of the "biggest and most competitive areas in journalism." It drives the newspaper industry, and reporters and

editors alike believe it is a fundamental ingredient needed to entice readers. Since violent crime is more lucrative and plentiful than regular crime news, journalists are never deprived of finding a crime story to write about; however, it displaces other news content because it promotes some crimes at the expense of others (Chermak, 1994a).

Numerous researchers have found that news organizations employ a variety of criteria in selecting news stories, but “newsworthiness” is *the* essential component. Generally, for a story to be considered newsworthy, sensational elements are required, or a celebrity is involved. According to Chermak (1994b:99), elements of “newsworthiness” include: unusual, novel, dramatic, exceptional and violent crimes. Roshier (1981:34) insists that two processes are involved in ascertaining newsworthiness: (1) the extent to which crime is actually selected because crime stories have to compete with all other news; and (2) selecting the type of crime from the aggregate of potential crime news. Although each category can include multiple stories, it is the story with the most newsworthy elements that is chosen (Ibid). Roshier (1981:34) found that both processes must include one or more of the following sets of factors:

- (1) seriousness of the offence - generally only applies to murder cases
- (2) whimsical circumstances – unusual, humourous or ironic
- (3) sentimental or dramatic circumstances - could be associated with either a victim or offender by generating sympathy or outrage
- (4) involvement of a famous or high status person - either as victim or offender

Galtung and Ruge (1973:70) claim that once a story is chosen, the newsworthy factor (with one or more of the sets of factors listed above) is *distorted* and the distortion process continues, as the story works its way up from the event to the reader (*replication*).

News *prominence* (amount of media attention), according to Chermak (1994b) and Garofalo (1981), is measured in a number of ways including: story placement/prominence (i.e., front page, etc.); type of story (primary, secondary or

tertiary); and as noted sources used in the story (i.e., police, lawyer, relative, etc.). The majority of crime news appears in the first two sections of a newspaper as routine crime and feature stories, but they can also be found in any section - opinion sections, sports sections [if a sports figure is involved], the business section [if financiers are involved], and the entertainment section [if an entertainer is involved] (Chermak, 1994b:118).

Chermak (1994b:118; 1995:32-40) states that newspapers have four different levels of "news space:" *tertiary*, *secondary*, *primary* and *super primary*. Tertiary stories are space fillers - they run on a daily basis and use approximately 3-7 story inches of news space. They cover basic demographics about the victim and the offender, and are verified by using one or two sources. Secondary stories also appear daily, range between 7-14 story inches in length, have numerous sources, but are viewed as "back page news" (Chermak, 1994b:120). Primary crime stories appear less frequently and they take up approximately 14+ inches of space. In these stories, criminal justice sources, or the individuals directly/indirectly involved in the crime are often used as sources. Super primary stories are sensational crime stories involving well-known celebrities or public figures. These stories receive the same amount of space as primary crime stories, except they are stretched over days, weeks or months, with additional coverage on anniversary dates (Ibid:118).<sup>4</sup>

Chermak (1995:137) found that news agencies in small cities were the least likely to present 'primary' news stories (24 percent).<sup>5</sup> Sherizen (1978:221) found that about 50 percent of crime news was placed on the first three pages of the newspaper, and 13

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<sup>4</sup> Super primary stories were coded as primary stories because the most important criterion was missing - defendants were not well-known celebrities or public figures (except Gerald Regan - former Nova Scotia premier charged with sexual assault).

<sup>5</sup> Halifax's current population of 360,000 was comparable to a "small" city such as Buffalo (population 328,123 at the time of Chermak's study).

percent appeared on the front page. Thirty-five percent of the articles ranged between 8 - 13 column inches in length (secondary story); and ten percent measured 13 column inches or longer [primary story] (Ibid). Schlesinger et al. (1991) studied how the news media in England reported crime. They found variations in the prominence given to different types of crimes. They divided the newspapers into three different levels: *Quality*, *Tabloid* and *Mid-market*. In the mid-market paper,<sup>6</sup> 45 percent of non-sexual violent crimes made front-page news, while sex crime coverage received 20 percent front-page prominence (Ibid:414).

In sum, crime stories are selected based on ideological factors such as what crime is supposed to look like (strangers lying in wait in bushes; drug transactions taking place in seclusion; etc.), so it is not an accurate reflection of the reality of crime. Violent and unusual crimes are chosen by sources and reporters based on their belief that these crimes have the “newsworthy” elements that news agencies and the public find interesting. Given that Chermak’s study was the only empirical research that I found regarding ‘primary’ news coverage, I surmised that although Halifax was a *small* city by Chermak’s definition, it was Atlantic Canada’s *largest* metropolitan city; therefore, reporters in this urban center would present ‘primary’ news stories more frequently and underscore the unusualness aspect of the crime. There were no studies found (including Chermak) that directly tested ‘unusual’ crimes by primary news coverage, but it is *a priori* that primary news stories *would be* crimes that were unusual or out of the ordinary; otherwise, newsmakers would have disregarded them during the selection phase. Based on this reasoning, I offer the following hypothesis.

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<sup>6</sup> I selected statistics for the *Mid-market* newspaper, since this type of newspaper is comparable to stories found in the *Chronicle Herald* (somewhere between the other two levels).

Hypothesis 3: I hypothesize that unusual crimes will be given “primary” news coverage compared to usual crimes.

### *The Social Construction of Gender*

To better understand how gender is constructed requires examining the social practices involved in producing gender. Gender is not something one *has*, but is something one *does*, so it may be more precise to say we are “*doing* gender” as opposed to “*having* a gender” (Cosgrove, 2000:250-51). Prager (2001:3) asserts that gender is a set of ideas that guide behaviour, and “cognitive and cultural forces *actively* maintain gender distinctions.” The countless messages we receive in our day-to-day lives about appropriate masculine and feminine identities (identities we have [ourselves] constructed and reconstructed) shape our views and opinions. From birth we are informed about what is appropriate for a male and appropriate for a female. “Toys, clothing, advertising and the media disseminate notions about what is ‘right’ for girls and women; and what is ‘desirable’ for boys and men” (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2002:1). Stoltenberg (cited in Capraro, 2001:7) states that constructed gender identities proclaim that “some things are wrong for a woman to do, while right for a man” and vice versa, explaining why “rapist ethics” can ascribe ‘good and bad’ and ‘right and wrong’ behaviours according to gender identity.

With the political divisions that have occurred within feminism over the past several decades, feminism is no longer easily defined, and although gender and power relations are still central themes within the collective definition of feminism, they vary depending upon which strand of feminism is followed (van Zoonen, 1994). Nevertheless, they do share commonalities such as the overlapping of gender with “ethnicity, sexuality, class and a range of other discourses” (Ibid:3). *Power* is another crucial element of

feminist thought, whether it is the power "that some groups have over others" or the power that White women have over Black women (van Zoonen, 1994:4). Van Zoonen (Ibid) acknowledges that while 'power' is a crucial component in feminist theory, feminism is *not* necessarily concerned with who is "in power," per se, but more with theorizing about the diverse relations of power as well as analyzing how they are constituted at the individual and collective level.

Smart (1990) shows how postmodern feminism furthers our understanding about the way the media construct images of crime and gender. Like the law, the media is a powerful discourse because of its claim to truth, and its ability to silence women by blaming them for their victimization (Smart, 1990:195). In the case of rape, the law as well as the media project patriarchal images of female sexuality by promoting stereotypes about 'proper' and 'improper' female behaviour, something that is ingrained in our culture. Because powerful institutions like the media claim to present certain truths and because our society "values this notion of truth," they play a pivotal role in reinforcing inequalities by defining thought processes and perceptions (Ibid:196). As a result, readers buy newspapers to acquire information, never quite knowing whether or not the knowledge they seek is correct.

When news agencies categorize rape victims as either innocents or women who are the architects of their own misfortune, they often invoke the Madonna/whore dichotomy (Benedict, 1992; Voumvakis and Ericson, 1984). For example, if a woman refuses to conform to societal norms or expectations by walking alone at night and she is raped, she is labeled a 'whore' or 'loose,' and she is criticized for defying cultural restrictions that limit freedom of movement. Feminists claim that the media do not attempt to understand the history and prevalence of violence against women (herein

called VAW), and while the media entertain various explanations about why rape occurs, they overlook the most compelling explanation from a feminist perspective - society's attitude toward women.

Like women, most men who are victims of violent assault know their attackers; they are not strangers. However, unlike men, women are usually blamed for their sexual violence and/or any other physical aggressions they experience. Reporters tend to shy away from reporting woman abuse because they are commonplace occurrences that (typically) lack the necessary "unusual" or "dramatic" elements that make stories newsworthy (Roshier, 1981:34; Meyers, 1997). Marital rape is underreported in the news; however, when it is presented, the coverage is often distorted because only brutal or unusual acts or circumstances are emphasized (Meyers, 1997; Surette, 1998). Elias (1986:166) contends that our society has a "startlingly ambivalent attitude toward sexual assault and toward women as victims," and the media often exaggerate the amount of crime attributed to a victim's actions. For example, when a woman is raped, it implies that she either acted irresponsibly by failing to take the necessary precautions to protect herself, or had she not acted provocatively, the crime would not have occurred (Elias, 1986; Meyers, 1997; Benedict, 1992; Voumvakis and Ericson, 1984). Either way, she is at fault.

Voumvakis and Ericson (1984:3-5) studied how three Toronto newspapers (*Globe and Mail*; *Toronto Sun*; *Toronto Star*) began and sustained a moral panic for several months, following a string of rapes (and murders) that took place in Toronto during the summer of 1982, thus perpetuating a sudden upsurge of VAW. Their findings showed that all three newspapers overwhelmingly blamed women as the cause of the problem (*Globe and Mail* 39 percent; *Toronto Sun* 45 percent; *Toronto Star* 51 percent) and that

sexual violence was rooted in social control, with the mass media playing an integral part in exercising control over women (Voumvakis and Ericson, 1984:46). By focusing on the victims' actions, the media shifted attention away from male abusers and the patriarchal system that sustains VAW (Soothill and Walby, 1991).

Fishman and Weimann (1985) found that sex-based biases were most pronounced in crimes linked to gender. Researchers debate the amount of coverage given to women and men in crime stories. For instance, Barak (1995); Chermak (1995); and Bennett et al, (1998) argue that women are overrepresented in the news, while Surette (1998:69) claims that news coverage about violence against women is reported differently than violence against men - male victimization is reported as the result of violent interpersonal crime, whereas female victimization is usually the result of intrapersonal violence.

Chermak (1995:1-2) investigated the extent that victims participate in the newsmaking process. He found that the victimization of males exceeded the amount of reported female victimization in the news [males 45 percent; females 33 percent]; however, he claimed that compared to official crime statistics, female victims were overrepresented (Ibid:58-60). Chermak (1995:64) also found that male victims appeared more frequently in primary, secondary and tertiary news stories than female victims (50 percent and 45 percent; 44 percent and 32 percent; 34 percent and 31 percent respectively). In another study (previously mentioned), he found that serious personal crimes such as robbery, shootings and assault made up 16 percent of crime stories; however, special interest groups (rape, children and the elderly) accounted for approximately 10 percent of crime stories (1994a:569, 571).

Bennett et al. (1998:145) analyzed news articles taken from a newspaper in the largest city in the Southern United States (no city name provided) to investigate the

amount of reintegrative shaming or disintegrative stigmatization in news reports, using 'manifest' content ('visible surface content') and 'latent' content analysis ('underlying meaning of a communication'). They found that the media overrepresented the amount of female victimization (45 percent) compared to male victimization (55 percent); and violent crime totaled 47 percent of total news reporting, compared with 10 percent for rape and other sex crimes (Ibid:148,150). The researchers also noted that news coverage "may be biased toward the presentation of rape and sex crimes," which is why female victims appeared to be overreported in the news (Bennett et al., 1998:156).

Sheley and Ashkins (1981:495, 502) collected data about crime from a major local newspaper in New Orleans as well as data from three major television stations over a three-month period to determine whether or not the reporting of crime affected the reality of crime. They determined that rape accounted for 6 percent of news stories, while 17 percent dealt with assault (Ibid:499). McCormick (1995:27-8) compared rape incidences from Statistics Canada with those from the Canadian News Index and found that only 1 story per 140 reported cases of rape became news, demonstrating that sex crimes were not overemphasized in the news - they were "virtually invisible" (McCormick, 1995:28).

Barak (1995) claims that women and minorities are negatively portrayed in the news because this makes crime stories appear more newsworthy. He and Soothill and Walby (1991) maintain that sex crimes are overplayed in the news, and the amount of media coverage assigned to rape and other sex crimes have increased in recent years. Meyers (1997) and Surette (1998), on the other hand, claim that rape is downplayed in the news because it is underreported. Sherizen (cited in Meyers, 1997:22-23) found that only 5 percent of rapes and less than 1 percent of all other crimes became news.

The majority of the literature states that although the *rate* of victimization is higher for men, women are overrepresented in the news. Although it appears that Chermak is the only researcher to study the relationship between the amount of male/female victimization and the 'type of news coverage' (primary, secondary and tertiary) victims receive,<sup>7</sup> I submit the following hypothesis to be tested:

*Hypothesis 4:* I hypothesize that female victims will be overemphasized in primary news stories compared to male victims.

#### *Age, Victims and Defendants in the News*

It is well documented that victims and defendants are ignored in the newsmaking process. Newsmakers are usually not interested in the pain and suffering of victims, nor the excuses of defendants - they only want the *details* of the crime and depending upon what those details are, a story either becomes a "front-page lead" or a "back-page filler" (Graber, 1980:42). Chermak (1995:62-3) states that since victim and defendant demographics are generally absent in crime stories, the public conjures up images about them based on the stereotypes they hold.

Most research suggests that the function of victims and defendants in the reporting of the news is primarily to furnish basic information such as name, age, sex and occupation (Chermak, 1995:25; Sherizen, 1978:217). Chermak (1995) maintains that certain characteristics influence story newsworthiness such as a victim's age, especially when victims are either children or the elderly. He found that victims aged 17 – 25 and 26 – 35 represented the highest percentages of victimization (each 10.8 percent), followed by age 1 – 12 (9 percent), and 65 + with the smallest percentage [3 percent] (1995:127).

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<sup>7</sup> I am specifically discussing 'primary' news stories because (1) Chermak states primary stories are the most important types of stories and (2) the study contained the highest percentage of male victims.

Chermak (1995:74) claims that defendants play an important role in the news construction process because they “provide an element of evil.” He discovered that when defendant demographics were supplied, they were male, white, young and married (Ibid:59). Chermak (1995:127) found that defendants aged 17 – 25 had the highest percentage of news coverage in the reporting of crime (17.2 percent), followed by 36 – 50 year-old defendants (16.5 percent).

Bennett et al. (1998:148) found that in addition to gender, age was ordinarily identified. They found that the mean age for offenders was 35 [they combined both sexes - ages ranged between 14 - 66], and the mean age for victims was 22 [again, both sexes were combined – ages ranged between 1 - 74] (Ibid:149). While it is expected that defendants will be predominantly young, I found a lack of empirical studies about the reported ages of defendants in the news. Given Chermak’s well-documented findings about demographic characteristics, I will follow his lead by proposing the following hypothesis to be examined:

*Hypothesis 5:* I hypothesize that 17 – 25 year-old-males will commit more violent crimes and more sex crimes in the news compared to other age groups.

### *Crime Myths and Stereotypes*

The literature suggests that social problems are often constructed from collective definitions, which are best described as ‘myths.’ These myths are powerful constructs because they provide conceptual frameworks that identify social issues as crime-related, and they frame cultural opinions about justice as well as create stereotypes about law-abiding citizens, victims and criminals (Kappeler et al., 1993). Once a crime myth has been created, it likely conceals its own biases and distorts the truth (i.e. media perpetuate rape myths by emphasizing stranger rapes), but if it is to generate public support, deviant

populations (i.e. ethnic minorities) have to be identified and targeted, and they have to pose a substantial threat to established norms, values or traditional lifestyles (Ibid:10). Generally, recipients of crime myths are unpopular groups that are easily distinguishable from the dominant social group by their race, age or ethnicity; or because of their religious beliefs or their political views; or their sexual orientation (Kappeler, et al., 1993:11). Deviants are portrayed as those who “*pose a threat to our established norms, values and lifestyles*; they prey on “innocents;” and they endanger tradition” (Ibid:12 - emphasis in original).

One particularly harmful and enduring myth is that of the ‘black rapist.’ This particular myth has survived since the time of lynchings, and continues to flourish despite empirical studies that show that most rapes are intraracial and most gang rapists are White (Benedict, 1992: 210). The media cover Black-against-White rapes with “exaggerated frequency, class prejudice and racist stereotypes” (Meyers, 1997: 32). If a victim is White, a story is more likely to be covered than if a victim is Black. Benedict (1992) investigated the reporting of four highly publicized rape cases in the United States, one of which dealt with the rape of the Central Park jogger (raped and beaten to near death). She was a wealthy, well-educated White woman - her assailants, a group of Black youths.<sup>8</sup> In spite of the fact that interracial crimes are the exception, this story was news for a couple of months. It raised racial tensions in New York City by pitting Whites against Blacks. Black citizens protested the number of police officers assigned to solve this vicious rape because during the same time period, two Black girls were raped, yet their cases were ignored by the police as well as the media. Rape myths like the case of the Central Park

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<sup>8</sup> In 2003, the young assailants were exonerated of this crime through DNA testing.

jogger thrive because of the media's fascination with high profile or brutal rape cases that perpetuate stereotypical rape.

Much research has been conducted on how rape is influenced by cultural stereotypes and myths like rape is sex, strangers rape, rape occurs in dark/secluded areas, rapists are mentally disturbed and women provoke rape. But the most frequently used and distorted term to depict VAW and reinforce rape mythology, is the substitution of the word *sex* for *rape* (Lonsway, 2001; Parriag and Renner, 1998; McCormick, 1995; Benedict, 1992; Voumvakis and Ericson, 1984). Rape has traditionally been viewed as a sexual act, rather than an act of violence (Elias, 1986), which is why news reports frequently sexualize the crime and downplay the violent act (Benedict, 1992; McCormick, 1995). Elias (1986:160) contends that representing “sex, crime and rape, both in myth and in news media construction serve to reinforce negative images of women and of social justice.”

Barak (1995:150) states that the media distort issues about “race, ethnicity, gender and class.” He claimed that minority groups were underrepresented in the news, but when the news was negative, they were overrepresented, regardless of whether they were the victims or not (Ibid). According to Barak (1995:150), the “poor and the powerless” were blamed for the crime problem, clearly ignoring the crimes of the “rich and powerful.” He also maintained that while the media have made attempts at political correctness by curbing racist and sexist reporting, this has caused more “ambivalence, tolerance and even solidarity with minorities and other ‘deviant’ groups like single parents, homosexuals, the mentally ill and the homeless” (Ibid:152).

Chermak (1995:79) claims that race is generally not provided for victims and defendants in news reports. When it is mentioned, it generally occurs in primary news

stories, where they are typically accompanied by photographs so that a person's race is easily identifiable. He states that White victims and defendants generally receive primary news coverage in newspapers because their involvement is viewed as atypical (Ibid:80). Chermak (1995:79) found that in primary news stories, 8 percent of the victims were White, compared with 6 percent for Black victims, and 18 percent of defendants were White, compared with 11 percent for Black defendants. He also discovered that there is an assumption that crime is 'normal' (i.e. Black-on-Black murders) in certain parts of the city and this desensitizes the public and the media alike (Ibid).

Sherizen (1978:217-19) sampled more than one thousand articles from four Chicago newspapers (three main city papers and a Black community paper) to examine how crime news is presented to the public. He observed that "race" was indirectly mentioned through racial codes such as mentioning particular areas of the city that were known to have large Black populations (for both victims and defendants). He found that the race of Black defendants was stated in 114 cases, but through racial coding, an additional 434 Blacks were identified (Ibid:219). Readers were able to discern the perpetrator's race through identifiers (i.e. the defendant's address belonged to Chicago's west side), which provided addresses in known Black neighbourhoods. Sherizen (1978:219) noted that crimes committed in Black neighbourhoods were written with a different slant, intimating that crime in those areas was commonplace. He also found that references such as "Gold Coast," "exclusive suburb" and "friend of the mayor" in news articles was another means of informing readers about a person's social class (Ibid). This occurred whether the person was a prominent defendant or a victim, and the purpose of doing so was to draw attention to the individual's economic position to illustrate that it was an "unusual" or "unexpected" event (Sherizen, 1978:219). These stories differed

from the way “racial area” stories were reported in that the “unusualness” element of the crime or the situation was emphasized.

Grover and Soothill (1996:398) investigated how the “underclass” (social groups below the working class) was blamed for the multitude of social problems in England, especially violent crimes and sexually-motivated murders. Although the perpetrator’s social status was reported in only a few of the sexually-motivated murders, the crimes were often attributed to the underclass (Ibid:404). While the press did not use the term “underclass” to describe socially and economically-marginalized men, they routinely focused on the group’s social status as a “causative factor in sex murders” (Grover and Soothill, 1996:401, 411). The media employed a particular type of discourse to describe the sex murderers as “loners,” “weirdos” or “misfits,” suggesting that “normal” men do not rape (Ibid:407-08). These condemning descriptions constructed an image of the “underclass” as perpetrators of sexual violence. By using this type of discourse, the press was able to discuss the perpetrators as disturbed individuals, rather than normal men who commit sexually violent crimes (Grover and Soothill, 1996:408). It was reported that 41 percent (nine cases) of all the sex murderers were identified as “unemployed,” and in two cases, the alleged perpetrators were described as of “no fixed abode” (1996:405). By focusing on the “underclass,” the press implied that it is only men from this social class who are capable of committing such heinous acts. This is a finding echoed by Voumvakis and Ericson (1984) in their study who also found that the media blamed VAW on individual pathology, rather than structures of gender inequality or patriarchal ideology. Indeed, Soothill and Walby (1991) and Voumvakis and Ericson (1984) also discovered that the media preferred individualistic explanations for sexual violence rather than contextualize the impact of violence and wider social structural forces.

According to the literature, when the wealthy are victimized, they receive more media attention than minority victims, and when the wealthy are defendants, their crimes are either ignored or explained away as anomalies. Conversely, when crimes are attributed to minorities or the less privileged, they are portrayed as more violent and dangerous than their White counterparts. Based on the findings of previous researchers, I proffer the following:

Hypothesis 6: I hypothesize that White defendants will receive more 'primary' news coverage than minority defendants.

Hypothesis 7: I hypothesize that crimes of minority defendants and poor defendants will receive more 'front-page' news prominence than White defendants and not poor defendants.

#### *Predator Criminals and Random Violence*

Much research has been carried out on the mythological 'predator criminal.' According to Websdale (1999:97), the term 'predator' was first coined in 1989 by the Governor's Task Force to address community protection against "strangers." Since descriptions about predators are usually absent in news reports, the public is encouraged to fill in the blank image of the 'faceless' predator with media constructions that stress animalistic, violent and sensational images, when compared to other types of crimes (Surette, 1994:135). These images, however, have "little to do with the realities or complexities of crime" (Chermak, 1994b:97). The media have taken one of the rarest types of criminals and mobilized them to dominate both public consciousness and policy debates (Barak, 1994a).

One particularly important aspect of predatory crimes that must be addressed is its apparent "randomness." Random violence means crimes committed by strangers and these types of crimes are particularly disturbing because they suggest that no one is safe.

Of course, crimes committed by strangers are disturbing and frightening; however, news agencies prefer to report on “stranger danger” because this theme generates much public interest and concern. It also permits them to dramatize the extent of criminal violence, despite a large body of empirical evidence to show that most victims know their attackers (Heath, 1984).

Both Surette’s (1994) and Best’s (1999) work on predators and the random nature of crime are exemplary studies that reveal the media’s direct role in distorting images of criminals by perpetuating myths and stereotypes. According to Best (1999), the term “random violence” is typically used to describe serious crime. For example, although murders have always occurred, using the term “random violence” allowed the media to report serial murders as a distinct type of crime. Best (Ibid:22) claimed this term has become politically useful because it glosses over the “awkward or embarrassing issues of class and race.” He identified three themes pertaining to random violence. The first is that these crimes are *patternless*. Everyone has an equal chance of victimization. The second theme is *pointlessness*. People will be attacked without good reason. The third theme is that these crimes evince *deterioration*. Believe violence in society has become progressively worse. The combination of these three elements convince the public that random violence is constant and considerable, when, in actuality, ample evidence shows that violence is much more patterned and not random at all (Best, 1999:9-11).

Janhevich (1999:152-53) examined crimes committed by strangers and compared them with non-stranger offenders. Using statistics from the Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR II), the 1993 General Social Survey (GSS), the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS), the 1996 International Crime Victimization Survey and the Homicide Survey, he found that *male on male* violence was the most likely to involve

strangers (39 percent). Janhevich (1999:151) also discovered that *male against female* violence dominated “overall violence, and was the least likely to involve strangers.” In the vast majority of cases, 87 percent of victims knew their assailants, and nearly half were spouses (46 percent). When we examine his statistics for “sexual assault – level 2” (both genders), 53 percent were *non-strangers* [acquaintances 30 percent; close friends 9 percent; spouse/ex-spouses 9 percent; and other family members 5 percent], compared to 41 percent who were *strangers* (Janhevich, 1999:154).<sup>9</sup>

It is well recognized that women sometimes conceal the criminal violence of loved ones, so official statistics may not accurately reflect the reality of sexual violence. Fishman (1998:65) claims that by ascribing VAW to strangers and not to the husbands and the boyfriends who brutalize these women, the real nature of sexual violence becomes obscured because media portrayals convince women that it is the “stranger” who they should fear, when the opposite is true. By emphasizing unusual and/or highly publicized crimes, not only is the public misinformed about criminality, but the true nature of crime is concealed (Surette, 1994:136). Websdale and Alvarez (1998:128) did a content analysis of the *Arizona Republic* newspaper (153 stories) on homicide-suicide from 1987 to 1994 and found that intimate relationships (marriage, common-law partners, ex-husbands, boyfriends and girlfriends) made up the largest group of “perpetrator-victim dyads” (63 percent). The researchers also noted that 87 percent of all intrafamilial (male, female, child) perpetrators were adult males” (Ibid:128-29).

By typifying crime and offenders, stranger-based crimes become the dominant type of crime presented to the public, and the frequency with which this occurs is

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<sup>9</sup> My study included sex crime categories: sexual assault causing bodily harm; sexual assault with a weapon; aggravated sexual assault. Aggravated sexual assault is a Level 3; the remaining two are Level 2.

exaggerated by the media (Lofquist, 1998). The image that the media convey to the public about rape is that it is committed by strangers in a dark alley, a secluded park, an underground garage (Voumvakis and Ericson, 1984), but as statistics reveal, a woman is more likely to be raped by someone that she knows than by a stranger (Barak, 1994b; Surette, 1994; McCormick, 1995; Chermak, 1994b; Voumvakis and Ericson, 1984; Carringella-MacDonald, 1998).

News agencies exaggerate the volume and the frequency of the crimes of strangers because they make 'ideal' villains. This overly simplified personification of the ideal offender allows the rest of us to go about our daily lives without the "bad" acts of these monsters impacting upon our own morality (Christie, 1986:29). By focusing on the deviant nature of predator criminals, other less serious acts of violence in society are overlooked. When the mass media combine real and imaginary criminals, they convince the public that our societies are unsafe places to live because dangerous criminals lurk everywhere, and they are strangers. It does not go unnoticed that newspaper sales increase when predatory crimes are highlighted. It is unfortunate that the conception people have about crime and victimization appear to reflect ideas conveyed by the mass media because, the truth is, there are too few monsters in society and the majority of offenders that do exist are normal, average individuals (Rock, 1986). Based on the literature, I offer the following:

*Hypothesis 8:* I hypothesize that the crimes of strangers (both violent crimes and sex crimes) will be reported more frequently in the news than crimes involving offenders that are known to the victim.

### *Discourse Analysis*

Discourse, according to van Dijk (1997:35) and Reah (2002:54-5), is shaped by the context and the structures of text and talk, where language is used to convey specific ideas about groups and their character. Van Dijk (1998:2) maintains that discourse structures are the words used to discuss crimes involving minority and/or low-income defendants, and that it is important to study discourse structures because they “enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge relations of power and dominance in society.” So, in order to understand how “us” (Whites, the wealthy - in-groups) and “them” (minorities and the poor – out groups) attitudes are represented by the media, we should examine which discourse structures are prone to such processes (van Dijk, 1993:264). The most obvious cases, he says, involve “semantic content” statements, which are negative evaluations of ‘them’ or positive evaluations about ‘us’ (Ibid:264). Van Dijk (1993:264; 1998:8) lists six ways in which these statements are made credible in press reporting:

- (1) *Argumentation*:  
the negative evaluation follows from the “facts.” Argumentative strategies such as “playing on the sentiments of readers; making false analogies; overgeneralizing; used to support an ethnic opinion”
- (2) *Rhetorical figures*:  
hyperbolic enhancement of “their” negative actions and “our” positive actions through use of euphemisms, metaphors, similes, hyperboles, denials, and understatements of “our” negative actions
- (3) *Lexical style*:  
choice of words that imply negative (or positive) evaluations
- (4) *Storytelling*:  
subtle or blatant stereotypes or prejudices; telling about negative events as personally experienced; giving plausible details about negative features of the events
- (5) *Structural emphasis*:  
of “their” negative actions (i.e. in headlines, leads, summaries or other properties of text schemata of news reports), transactivity structures of

sentence syntax (i.e. mentioning negative agents in prominent, topical positions)

(6) *Quoting*

credible witnesses, sources or experts (i.e. in news reports)

According to van Dijk (1996:17), distinctions between in-groups and out-groups are based on the socially constructed concepts of "difference, deviance and threat (or Unequal Competition)." These three concepts work in league with one another to the detriment of non-whites and foreigners by legitimizing "oppression, marginalization or exclusion" (Ibid). *Differences*, van Dijk argues, are based on attributions assigned to opposing groups. The greater the amount of differences, the greater the social distancing of the other group. *Deviance* refers to "unacceptable differences," where "OUR norms, rules and laws" are broken. *Threat* is an extension of deviance, in that it "legitimizes the exclusion, limited access, marginalization and ultimately physical attack and destruction" of members of out-groups (van Dijk, 1996:18). Minorities, according to van Dijk (Ibid:52), are usually ascribed different 'innate' personality traits like "aggression and criminality," or cultural characteristics like "(obviously backward) vendettas and feuds" that are then used to explain intragroup minority crime. He found that there is an unwritten rule in the representation of the "others" in the news (Van Dijk, 1998:11). 'Others' become associated with deviance [illegitimacy] and threat [violence] in a subtle process where "everyday forms of racism" like those found in the media are "seldom called 'racist' in mainstream discourse" (van Dijk, 1996:17, 25-26).

Reah (2002:70) maintains that when race is specified in the news, it is the race of the minority offender that is identified, rather than the White offender, and that the term "White" is only used when there is confusion about a person's involvement in the crime. Henry and Tator (2002:4) conducted an expansive study about the racist reporting of the

Canadian press and how they “marginalized, denigrated and silenced ethnoracial minorities” within society. They studied several high-profile cases: the Avery Haines Controversy; employment equity policies; racialization of immigrants and refugees; moral panic surrounding the appearance of 600 Chinese migrants in British Columbia; and the Just Desserts incident in Toronto to expose the racist news reporting practices of the press (Ibid:14-5). In the Haines case, the accidental airing (rather than the retake) of a reporter’s offensive comments about minorities, lesbians and the disabled stirred controversy; however, she received tremendous support from media organizations. Henry and Tator (2002:92) maintain that the “dominant discourses” of journalists and editors dismissed claims from minority organizations and communities about the severity of the problem with the language Haines used. The employment equity debate targeted primary readers (the “social, economic and political elites”), intimating that everyone begins from the same starting point; therefore, government assistance programs were unnecessary. Henry and Tator (Ibid:106-07) found that editors resorted to “hyperbole, exaggeration, mitigation, oversimplification, trivialization and ridicule” to drive their message. The entry of 600 immigrants into British Columbia triggered a public debate and a moral panic about “national security and state sovereignty,” after an influx (problematization) of the illegal migration of foreigners into Canada (Henry and Tator, 2002:138-39). The researchers claimed that media discourses reported this as a threat to national security and evidence of a flawed immigration and refugee system. In their words, media discourses have the ability to actively “recruit and mobilize” readers in the “social construction of moral panic” (Ibid:139). The Just Desserts case showed the power of the media to influence specific discourses such as the issue of deportation and the failure of the immigration system to police immigrant populations by impressing upon Canadians that

violent crime is imported by foreigners and that “crime prevention becomes synonymous with immigration controls” (Henry and Tator, 2002:195).

Discourse analysts insist that power holders influence those being controlled through “persuasion, dissimulation or manipulation.” Dominance is accomplished in daily forms of text and talk that appear to be “natural and acceptable,” and which are “supported or condoned by other group members; sanctioned by the courts; legitimated by laws; enforced by the police; and ideologically sustained and reproduced by the media or text books” (van Dijk, 1993:260). Through the use of discourse structures, the press create “communicative discrimination,” the constant of which not only denies or restricts the discourse rights of other participants in the reporting of the news, but silences the voices and opinions of women, minority groups and the poor, and banishes them to the role of “hearers” of power (Ibid). When the “discourse rights” of other participants are denied, it stands to reason that the less powerful will be quoted less often and spoken about less often in the press reporting process (van Dijk, 1993:261; Kress, 1985:27). Based on the literature, I tested for discourse analysis using the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 9:* I hypothesize that news coverage involving minority defendants will contain more discourse structures (argumentative, rhetorical figures, etc.) than stories not involving minority defendants.

This chapter revealed the media’s involvement in constructing particular images about crime, victims and defendants in the news; and how criminal justice officials also participate in the newsmaking process, wherein specific groups are targeted by both organizations because they fit the dominant ideology of criminality. The media and news sources alike perpetuate cultural stereotypes and myths about violence and sexually-motivated crimes against women by overemphasizing stranger-related offences in the

news. Through media discourses, power holders manipulate the public by identifying less powerful groups in society for episodic violence; and the stigmatized are unable to defend themselves against the labeling process. The upcoming chapter is an examination of content analysis as the methodological technique I employed in this study, and the sampling strategy I implemented as a way to collect the data on the construction of crime.

### Ch. 3 *Methodology*

For ease of reading, the methodology section has been divided into three sections: *Content Analysis; Sampling Strategy; and Statistical Procedures*. The rationale for selecting content analysis as my preferred methodology is provided in the Content Analysis section. The Sampling Strategy section explains why the *Chronicle Herald* was exclusively used for this study. The Statistical Procedures section addresses how articles were selected and content coded, including the rules I followed to eliminate unrelated news articles.

#### *Content Analysis*

Content analysis is a well-established research method in the social sciences. It provides the researcher with the means of addressing specific questions that enable the researcher to learn about underlying attitudes, biases or recurring themes in news stories (Rubin, et al., 1986:63). It focuses on ways that inferences are affected by the various stages of analysis, and it attempts to “improve the quality of inferences made by analysis of communication” (Carney, 1972:26). This methodological technique compels the researcher to be conscious about “what” and “why” she/he is looking. Carney (1972:26) puts it well:

*“Content analysis, then, is a general-purpose analytical infrastructure, elaborated for a wide range of uses. It is intended for anyone who wishes to put questions to communications (pictorial and musical, as well as oral and written) to get data that will enable her/him to reach certain conclusions.”*

Content analysis forces a researcher to be precise about the criteria as well as the rules she/he applies in devising categories. Hence, if another researcher wanted to replicate the same study, that person should reach the same conclusions, assuming that

he/she did not stray from the previous researcher's stated rules and criteria (Jones, 1985). The key to this research technique is specifying the characteristics that will be analyzed. Holsti (in Jones, 1985:133) identified five general guidelines in constructing content analysis categories. They must reflect the purpose of the research and be independent; exhaustive; mutually exclusive; and derived from a single classification system.

*Purpose* means directly connected to the research objective, but it also means that subcategories are sometimes required for added clarification, and this is accomplished by having the researcher refine her/his hypotheses. *Independence* of categories refers to assigning a particular item to one category, which has no bearing on the other categories. For example, placing male and female television characters into gender-neutral occupations, this after the researcher postulates that females will be less likely to hold prestigious occupations on television. *Exhaustive* means that categories have to exist for each relevant item. This may include extending existing categories by adding supplementary categories such as "other" or "unclassified" to ensure that nothing is omitted. The researcher, however, must be cautious not to place too many items into these supplemental categories because it may indicate that the category system was not exhausted from the start. The fourth guideline, *mutually exclusive*, means that coded items can only be placed into a lone category. Finally, *a single classification principle* means that different levels of analysis of categories cannot be combined; categories and subcategories must remain separate (Holsti in Jones, 1985:125).

If a researcher is fortunate, he/she will have a classification system previously constructed by another researcher to either use or further develop, as was my case. For example, Chermak's (1995) research into the way the criminal justice system is affected by the media provided me with many categories pertinent to my own investigation such

as the various news sources (judges, police, etc.); news report producers (reporters, wire services, editors, etc.); newsworthiness (primary, secondary, tertiary); victim and defendant demographics (sex, age, etc.); and the victim/offender relationship (intimate, stranger, etc.). By incorporating his categories as well as Surette's (1998)<sup>10</sup> contribution of story prominence (front page, section A, other inside page) into my own study, I was able to design a coherent coding system for my project.

Before the actual sampling strategy began, I selected samples indiscriminately as a way to familiarize myself with the data to determine what categories would be needed. Categories were designed to address the following topics: how crime stories were selected; the sources used in crime news; how newsworthiness was determined; the importance of specific types of crime; which gender received the most media attention (determined through prominence and coverage); the creation of criminal stereotypes in the news; and media discourses (power, dominance and inequality) found within crime news.

The variables *locality* (local and non-local crimes) and news report *producers* (reporters, wire services, editors, etc.) were used to code how news stories were selected for print. It indexed if stories were produced using local crimes or created using crime stories from wire reports. Stories produced from wire reports were crime incidents that occurred nationally or internationally and were reprinted in the local newspaper. Data which did not list *who* was the *producer* of the news report was quoted as reporters because these articles were typically submitted by either police beat reporters or court beat reporters to fill space in the newspaper (see Chermak, 1994b).

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<sup>10</sup> The work of academics such as van Dijk (1996; 1997) and Henry and Tator (2002) were also used in the design of my categories with their contributions of "discourse structures" (to be discussed) for my classification system.

*Primary* stories contained more than 14 inches of news space and considered of high importance in the newsmaking process (super primary stories [sensational crimes] were coded as primary news stories); *Secondary* stories ranged between 7-14 story inches in length and were still important, but not as much so as primary news; *Tertiary* stories were space fillers, ranging from 3-7 story inches in length. Story 'importance' (including seriousness) was measured in several ways: story *prominence* (front page, Section A or other inside page); type of news *coverage* (primary, secondary or tertiary); *sources*<sup>11</sup> used in the story (judges; police; crown; lawyers; victims;<sup>12</sup> defendants; others; government officials/workers; court (court officials say; court documents/jurors/witnesses); *type of crime* (see the 7 keywords in the *Sampling Strategy*); *super primary name* (high-profile cases: Bernardo, Shruballs, Regan, Cop's Daughter and Watts); *photos* that accompanied the article, and *unusualness*, (crimes that involved atypical criminals and/or events; bizarre crimes; or infrequently occurring types of crimes). For example, an 'unusual' story is Gerald Regan (former Nova Scotia premier) charged with multiple sex-related charges; a 'bizarre' story is where a woman bit off a portion of her husband's tongue; and an infrequently occurring type of crime is 'stranger' rapist and killer Paul Bernardo (one of the five high-profile cases tracked under the variable *super primary name*).

Common demographics such as age and sex were also collected to compare my results with the findings of other researchers. The variable *sex* (for victims and defendants) was used in conjunction with prominence, coverage and type of crime to

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that many articles contained numerous sources; however, only the first source was collected, as this represents the important voices on the subject (Chermak, 1998:189).

<sup>12</sup> There were two variables identifying victims and defendants as sources (1) "news sources" – when either one appeared as the *1<sup>st</sup>* source of crime information, and (2) "victim/defendant as sources" – when one or the other appeared as a source anywhere in the news article.

determine which sex was represented more frequently in the news. Several variables were used to determine violence against women in the reporting: *victim/offender relationship* along with *mutuality* [mutual combat between intimates] and *violence against women* (to determine whether VAW was discussed in a broader social context). The data was examined for *rape myths* such as rape is sex; rape is stranger-based; rapists are sick; rape involves violence or injury; rape occurs outdoors; women are blamed for rape; and rape is fabricated. The variables that I used to code the data for criminal stereotypes were: *race* (White or minority); *racial identifier* (codes/cues to identify minorities or Whites); *class* (poor / not poor); and *class identifier* (codes/cues to identify poor / not poor).

How did I operationalize my definitions in the news reports? A *victim* was someone who suffered directly or indirectly as a result of crime. A *defendant* was someone who perpetrated the crime. At times, the distinction between victim and defendant was blurred such as when an abused woman retaliated against her abuser. To address this problem, women in these types of stories were coded as defendants only, as reporters either wrote the articles because the abused women were defendants, or because they fought back, intimating to the public that perhaps these women were not victims at all, but equal combatants. The term *minority/race* was used whenever a person's ethnicity or ethnic group was stated (i.e. Native; Native community; Black; Black community), or it was established during earlier news reports where race was previously identified. The term *White/race* was used whenever a person's ethnicity was stated, or it was established during earlier news reports where race was previously identified. A person's *social status/class* was determined through references such as unemployed, labourer, student, doctor, etc. Sex was coded as *victim's sex* or *defendant's sex*. The

words *disproportionate* amount of media attention, *overreporting* of crimes, *overrepresented* in the news and *overemphasized* crimes were terms that I used to discuss the imbalance of the news reporting for women, minorities and the poor because these groups are more frequently and often negatively reported in crime news, compared to the way that men, Whites and/or the wealthy are reported.

Sampled news articles were used to complement my investigation.<sup>13</sup> They provided an opportunity for the reader to peruse the data firsthand to observe the richness of the information found in media discourses. Discourse structure variables included: *argumentation* (negative evaluations and overgeneralizations – i.e. “In this day and age, you’ve got people packing guns.”); *rhetorical figures* (hyperbolic enhancements of ‘their’ negative acts – i.e. “A pimp who pleaded guilty Friday to whacking his prostitute with a tire iron didn’t get the deal he was hoping for from a provincial court judge.”); *lexical style* (choosing words that imply negative [positive for “Us”] evaluations (i.e. “You are a low-down, mean, despicable, evil manifestation of a human being that preys on little children”); *storytelling* (talking about negative events as personally experienced – i.e. “Sources said the shooting is part of an ongoing dispute between some Jamaicans who recently arrived in metro and some residents of North Preston.”); *structural emphasis* (negative actions in prominent/topical positions – i.e. “Man Sentenced in Sitcom Slashing”); and *quoting credible sources* (credible sources/experts – i.e. using judges, the police or lawyers).<sup>14</sup>

Other variables used in the coding of the data included four specific forms of language: *moralistic overtones* (writing with a moral point of view – i.e. “Mr. Burke

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<sup>13</sup> These were recorded as Samples 1 through 9.

<sup>14</sup> See *Discourse* in the Literature Chapter for a comprehensive explanation of each discourse structure.

argued the girl had no modesty and would perform sexual acts when asked with casualness of asking for a bag of chips.”); *sexist/masculinist overtones* (chauvinistic – i.e. “... the alleged victim struck up a conversation with a stranger, gave him her phone number, when she didn’t know his last name or marital status, and got in a car with him and stayed there after dark”); *classicist overtones* (superior/condescending – i.e. “The two began walking home to Sullivan House, a government-funded facility where they were living.”); and *racist overtones* (bigoted – i.e. “During the melee last September between provincial police and *rebels* from the Kettle and Stony Point band ...” – emphasis added). These variables were used to investigate and collect information on whether or not the sample contained these connotations in news reports about crimes committed by minority groups; crimes committed by low-income individuals; and sex crimes. Another variable I used to code the data was *voice: active* (active verb form – i.e. Mr. Jones beat the victim ...), *passive voice* (many woman abuse stories are written in this verb form – i.e. Mrs. Jones was subjected to beatings ...) and *diffused responsibility* (neutrality – detracts from male abuser – i.e. the abusive relationship). I created two variables to code quotation marks (1<sup>st</sup> called *quotations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> called *quotation marks*). Quotation marks are used as a ‘linguistic strategy,’ that is, they make the news more stimulating, and they are also used to malign the speech of the marginalized in society, or to vilify women who do not behave in the ascribed ideological manner. The variable *quotations* was used when reporters quoted the speech of victims and defendants in news reports, and the variable *quotation marks* was used to code when reporters either inserted subjective opinions into news articles, or they were used to validate statements of the powerful (judges and policymakers).

Once all the variables were chosen and the value labels determined, I designed a coding sheet (one sheet contained 27 articles and 7 variables per page) in MS Word to collect the coded data. The variable names were placed horizontally at the top of the sheet, and the sample numbers were placed vertically to the left side of the page. The sampled news articles were numbered to correspond with the number assigned on the coding sheet for each article. In total, 50 variables were used in the study, all of which were assigned values (ranging from 1 to 12, depending upon the variable) and labels. Subsequently, a codebook was created to content code the data.

The codebook was amended several times during the course of the study by adding or modifying variables and values to accommodate the data. The “victim/offender relationship” variable was modified to include new categories (values) as they emerged in the sample, but they were later collapsed into fewer values to run SPSS statistics. Although I created a list of obvious types of relationships prior to coding the data, it was impossible to know in advance what *all* the various values would be. I could only code what was found in the data, and not what I wanted or expected to be there, explaining why some modifications were necessary after the coding was underway. Once I finished the coding, the numerical data was entered into SPSS for statistical analysis. Value labels were suppressed when SPSS frequencies and cross tabulations were conducted: “unknown” values (assigned the value “9”) were suppressed; and “doesn’t apply (assigned the value “10” – when businesses were the victim). “Mixed” sexes (given the value “3”) were articles that contained multiple victims or defendants of both sexes, so for the purposes of running crosstabulations in SPSS, those particular articles were revisited to determine which sex had the greatest number of male/female victims or defendants, and it was then added to the appropriate sex variable.

### *Sampling Strategy*

I have chosen newspapers to analyze how news organizations construct crime. Unlike television, print media have the space and flexibility to tailor sections of their newspapers to appeal to specific groups, whereas, television stations are limited by space and time constraints. Newspapers generally have significantly more resources to produce a wider range of crime stories than television stations (Chermak, 1995:112). Crime stories are covered by reporters in police stations, courthouses and in outlying areas of the city (collected through provincial bureaus). Since newspaper reporters have a large and diverse group of sources to access for crime news (particularly sources in police beats), stories can be quickly assembled. Electronic editing and pagination allow deadlines to be pushed back, freeing reporters to search for additional details to enhance their stories (Chermak, 1995:112). Television reporters, on the other hand, rely on a smaller number of sources, and due to time constraints, deadlines cannot be easily extended. According to Ericson, et al. (1991:28), “the main evening television news show typically contains fewer words than a single page of a broadsheet quality newspaper.” Because of space availability, newspapers are able to discuss more complex story issues in greater detail than television news. Although it could be argued that my research would have benefited by combining both mediums, I believe that the points I have just raised support my decision to use newspapers as the sole medium for analysis.

Choosing the *Chronicle Herald* (commonly known as the *Herald*) as my sole data collection source was based on five specific reasons: (1) its long-standing connection to the community; (2) its regional presence; (3) its circulation size; (4) its organizational practices; and (5) its accessibility. The first reason for selecting the *Chronicle Herald* was its *long-standing connection to the community*. This newspaper has been in

operation since 1875, so it is well-established in the community as well as throughout the province. Readers have relied upon this daily to keep them informed about current events, and in spite of global influences, it continues to reflect community values and attitudes. The second reason for using the *Herald* was because it is a major *regional newspaper*. The city of Halifax is the Maritime's largest urban center, and the *Chronicle Herald* is Atlantic Canada's largest newspaper, which covers regional, national and international events. Until March 1, 2004 this news organization provided a morning and an afternoon edition (*Chronicle Herald* and *Mail Star*, respectively), but the two papers have since combined and are now published under the *Chronicle Herald*. The news agency also publishes a Sunday edition called the *Sunday Herald*. The *Herald* reaches both urban as well as rural residents and provides local coverage by staffing bureaus in Halifax, Amherst, Bridgewater, Kentville, Sydney, Truro, and Yarmouth (<http://www.thechronicleherald.ca/services/aboutus.html>).

The third reason for using this newspaper was its *circulation size*. It is Nova Scotia's most widely-read newspaper, and it has managed to maintain reader loyalty and remain competitive, particularly in a time when market share is constantly being threatened. The *Herald's* daily circulation is in excess of 114,000, and the *Sunday Herald* has a weekly readership of 80,000 (<http://www.thechronicleherald.ca/services/aboutus.html>). The fourth reason for choosing this daily was that it permitted me to zero in on the *organizational practices*<sup>15</sup> at the *Chronicle Herald* that, in turn, guided news producers in their selection of specific

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<sup>15</sup> For example, the court beat and police beat reports and editors scrutinize and select stories that contain the most sensational details or unusual elements from the aggregate of crimes they receive so that the *Herald* can increase newspaper sales. Other organizational practices of the newspaper are extracting stories from wire reports; recycling the paper's own previously written crime stories (or portions of former news stories) by reprinting them as 'new' crime incidences; and using tertiary news stories to fill unexpected news holes.

types of crime stories over others. This level of specificity in regard to story writing, especially about sex crimes, would probably not have surfaced if multiple dailies had been used in the study. Finally, the last reason for using the *Chronicle Herald* was the paper's *accessibility*. Initially, I intended to include newspapers sampled from the three Atlantic Provinces, but that decision was modified upon learning that none of the New Brunswick dailies were available on CD Rom. Publications of the *Herald* and the *Mail Star* (since my collection period occurred prior to the merging of both newspapers), however, were available on CD Rom and stored at the Patrick Power Library at Saint Mary's University. Having this data available on campus provided a quick, reliable and inexpensive means of collecting my sample.

To obtain a broad sample base of crime stories from the *Herald*, I chose a five-year time frame for my data collection - January, 1994 to December, 1998. Seven specific keywords were used to generate the data: aggravated sexual assault; aggravated assault; sexual assault causing bodily harm; assault causing bodily harm; sexual assault with a weapon; assault with a weapon; and rape. The first six terms are some of the most serious offences listed in the Canadian Crime Statistics called "total violations against the person" (Canadian Crime Statistics, 1998), which is why they were selected. Assault and sexual assault have three levels of seriousness: level 1 [*common assault* such as a push or a punch, while level 1 *sexual assault* can be touching a woman's breasts]; level 2 [*assault causing bodily harm or assault with a weapon*, while a level 2 sexual assault is *sexual assault causing bodily harm or sexual assault with a weapon*]; level 3 [*aggravated assault* - causing severe and/or permanent injury or near death, while a level 3 sexual assault, *aggravated sexual assault*, also means causing severe and/or permanent injury or near death during the course of a sexual assault] (Canadian Crime Statistics, 1998). The

remaining category 'rape' was used to capture stories that did not contain the specific sexual offence keywords, but clearly represented a serious crime. The keywords yielded 3208 news articles, all of which were downloaded, saved to disk and later printed.

### *Statistical Procedures*

Although my study concentrated on seven specific types of serious crime (three 'violent' and four 'sex crimes'), my curiosity centered on stories involving assaults causing some form of serious physical injury. While I do not wish to deny, minimize or discount the pain and suffering experienced by victims of common assault (level 1 assault) or common sexual assault (level 1 sexual assault), I wanted the focus of this research to be about crimes of a violent nature. These crimes are not only taken more seriously by the public, the criminal justice system and the media, they are also the types of crimes that generate the most news coverage. The stories I wanted to explore were those possessing the same level of seriousness such as assault (2, 3) and sexual assault (2, 3) to investigate how each was treated in the news.

During my data collection I noticed that the same news stories that contained my seven chosen keywords were found in both the morning and the afternoon editions, oftentimes, verbatim. I also found that on other occasions, the newspaper simply made minimal text changes to the stories. It became evident that these crime stories were unmistakably being "copied and pasted" (recycled) from previously published stories (either from the morning edition or from stories written days earlier) and reinvented into "new" stories. Another way these stories were reformulated was by either rearranging the order of the sentences or the paragraphs within the article, or by substituting information by citing a different news source. I observed that these repeat articles or partially

reconstructed news stories were articles that previously appeared as primary news stories, which had run over the course of days and weeks, and unless a reader paid close attention to the text, they would not have noticed the duplication of these articles or the similarity to previously written articles.

It appeared that whenever a keyword was searched, any article that contained that particular keyword surfaced, regardless of which edition printed it. If the article was published in both newspapers, both came up. By publishing two separate editions, the *Chronicle Herald*, more or less, was assured maximum readership. After all, the primary reason for introducing a second edition (*Mail Star*) was to capture that untapped group of potential readers. Disregarding articles published in the *Mail Star* would have discounted a large proportion of crime stories that the *Chronicle Herald* considered newsworthy enough to reprint in the afternoon edition. Whether a person's preference is reading the morning edition or reading the afternoon edition, it is unlikely that she/he would read both papers in the run of a day. Hence, in spite of the *Chronicle Herald's* practice of publishing *duplicate* articles, they were not being read by the same readers, which is why I chose to retain these duplicate articles and treat them as separate pieces of data. There is no doubt that the *Mail Star* was an extension of the *Chronicle Herald* and that they did not compete for readership.

The *Chronicle Herald* is divided into 4 sections: Section A (front page news and stories appearing on another page in section A such as A2); Section B (editorials, features, letters to the editor - editorials can appear on page B1, while letters to the editor can appear on successive pages); Section C (capsules, entertainment); Section D (classifieds, world news stories - stories of lesser importance). Van Dijk (cited in Henry and Tator, 2002:75) stated that editorials "are probably the widest circulated opinion

discourses of society ... editorials count as the opinion of the newspaper and not just a single columnist or reporter.” According to Henry and Tator (2002:76), some editorials *summarize* events and others *evaluate* people and issues involving those events, while others provide *conclusions* (emphasis in original). The conclusions offered in editorials include “recommendations, advice or warnings,” and events are used as a means of justifying the recommendations and the advice that editors put forth. Lofquist (1998:247-48) claims that front page news and editorials signify stories of greatest importance, followed respectively by stories in Section A, feature articles, sectional front-page (Section C1, for example) and other inside page news coverage such as D4. “Capsules,” typically considered “space fillers,” appear on the first page of section C. News stories that were coded as “ordinary news reports” were articles that were not identified as editorials, letters to the editor or feature stories.

One methodological problem I encountered pertained to “letters to the editor.” When retrieving the CD Rom data, I found that these letters were grouped together, regardless of how many letters contained the keyword(s). I browsed through one sample and counted as many as eight “letters to the editor” that had been placed together, yet only one letter contained the keyword. In another sample, I found as many as three letters in one grouping that contained the keyword(s). It appears that the software program does not distinguish between one or numerous letters containing specific keywords. To rectify this problem, I extracted the first letter that contained the keyword and disregarded successive letters, thereby treating the group of “letters to the editor” as a singular article. The exact same problem occurred with “capsules.” They also contained numerous news articles relating to the keyword, so, once again, the first article was sampled and the remaining capsules were ignored.

Since news articles on CD Rom are not saved as they appear in newspapers (they are saved as regular text on 8 ½" x 11" sheets), actual newspaper clippings of crime stories of varying lengths (14 + column inches; 7 - 14 column inches; and 3 - 7 column inches) were taken from current editions of the *Chronicle Herald* and the exact articles were located 'on-line' on the Virtual News Library (St. Mary's database) so that story length could be determined. Once the newspaper articles were located in the database, they were subsequently typed and printed on standard sheets of paper to ascertain if they were primary, secondary or tertiary stories. I established that a primary story printed from CD Rom onto a standard sheet of paper measured a minimum of 5 1/16" in length; a secondary story measured between 2 ½ - 5" in length; and a tertiary story measured 1 7/8 - 2 ½" in length; however, it should be noted that these are merely approximations and not precise measurements. Based on previous research, stories had to consist of at least three column inches of text to be included in this study; otherwise, there would have been insufficient data to code and analyze (Graber, 1980; Chermak, 1995). News stories that were less than three column inches in length were excluded because they did not contain the elements that reporters and news agencies find important about crime news, crime victims and defendants.

Originally, 3208 crime stories were found using the keywords; however, upon closer examination of the data, that number was greatly reduced once the extraneous articles (i.e., articles under 3" in length) were removed from the sample. Hundreds of articles were less than 3" in length, and it was evident that some of the keywords offered duplicate stories when similar keywords were used. For instance, the keywords "assault causing bodily harm" and "assault with a weapon" produced identical stories when "sexual assault causing bodily harm" and "sexual assault with a weapon" was used. To

ensure that these articles were not sampled twice, the “assault” categories were deleted; however, all “sex crime” articles were retained. The rationale for keeping all the sex-based crimes was because the actual number of sexual assault articles was relatively small for all five years (except for the category “rape”), and it was essential that the entire sample remained in the study; otherwise, it would have resulted in an insufficient number of these types of offences to code and analyze. The category “rape” contained the largest number of articles for every year in comparison to all other types of assault.

Additionally, a large number of unrelated (nearly 800) sample articles were excluded from the study, as they did not satisfy the central part of my research. For example, my keywords uncovered a wide range of stories that had absolutely no bearing of my research - stories relating to “characters” in a soap opera, theater production, television show, movie; a book, or a magazine where the *story line* had the character charged with rape or the paternity of ‘character’s’ child was exposed through DNA testing; songs with ‘gang rape’ lyrics; politics, politicians (and ‘justice’) discussing tougher sentences for serious assaults; advice from Dr. Laura to a sexual assault victim (date rape); pollution, wilderness, history, fishing or forestry stories talking about ‘the “rape” of our resources’; health stories dealing with the fallout of sexual assault (psychological trauma, sexually-transmitted diseases and pregnancies); entertainment stories or celebrities (actors, singers and sports figures) charged with rape (excluded *because* of their *celebrity* status); and cartoons (they did not contain enough content to code and analyze). Additionally, a host of other categories were also excluded because, other than containing one of the keywords, the articles were unrelated to my investigation. They included: travel, art; language; business; calendar, contests; dance; dress code; meetings; UN troops; weekend; accommodation; courtship; recreation;

gossip; and weather. It should be emphasized that the eliminated news articles did not affect the quality of the research or the findings. In fact, it refined the focus of the sample by eliminating irrelevant articles, and even with the decreased sample size, the number was still extensive (1944),<sup>16</sup> so it was further reduced to make the project more manageable. This was accomplished by taking 15% of each year's total figure (i.e. 1994 had 327 stories / 15% = 49.05 [rounded out to 50] stories) to condense the sample into a final count of 295 news articles (see footnote below and Table 1).

As previously stated, all the articles in the *three* sex crime categories (aggravated sexual assault; sexual assault causing bodily harm; and sexual assault with a weapon - excludes rape) from 1994 to 1998 were kept (18 sex crimes; 56 sex crimes; 17 sex crimes; 9 sex crimes; and 31 sex crimes respectively), so the number of sex crimes was deducted from corresponding years to arrive at the required (15%) sample.<sup>17</sup> Since only *four* keywords remained (rape; aggravated assault; assault causing bodily harm; and assault with a weapon), I divided the required sample size for each year by *four*. For example, for 1994 I needed 32 articles (see footnote below and Table 1) for the 15 percent sample ( $32 / 4$  [for the four keywords: rape; aggravated assault; assault causing bodily harm; and assault with a weapon] = 8), so I sampled 8 articles from each of the 4 categories. Selection of the sampled articles was based on a 20 percent sorting strategy, meaning that when I reached the last article in a particular keyword, I returned to the beginning of the category and continued until I arrived at my 15 percent (yearly) sample. Since the category 'rape' contained the largest number of stories, I elected that any surplus articles

<sup>16</sup> 1994 had 327; 1995 had 521; 1996 had 385; 1997 had 242; 1998 had 469.

<sup>17</sup> 1994: 50 stories minus 18 sex crimes = 32 articles; 1995: 79 stories minus 56 sex crimes = 23 articles; 1996: 58 stories minus 17 sex crimes = 41 articles; 1997: 37 stories minus 9 sex crimes = 28 articles; 1998: 71 stories minus 31 sex crimes = 40 articles.

(after dividing the keywords by four) would be placed in this category. For instance 1996 (required 41 articles for the 4 categories) could not be equally divided by 4, so I decided that the “one” extra article would be placed in the ‘rape’ category (see Table 1). You will note that in 1995, the sample number was also an odd number (I needed 23 articles) for violent crimes (includes rape), so I placed “one” article in the first 3 categories.

***TABLE 1 – Frequency of Sampled Keywords by Year:***

<i>Keywords</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>
Aggravated sexual assault	11	24	10	5	28
Sexual assault /bodily harm	6	28	5	2	1
Sexual assault with a weapon	1	4	2	2	2
Rape	8	6	11	7	10
Aggravated assault	8	6	10	7	10
Assault causing bodily harm	8	6	10	7	10
Assault with a weapon	8	5	10	7	10
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>50*</i>	<i>79*</i>	<i>58*</i>	<i>37*</i>	<i>71*</i>

\* These numbers were rounded off to arrive at the 15% figure.

Of course, different sampling strategies, different time periods and larger sample sizes might uncover new content, different connotations and significations. Certainly, an exhaustive sample of the national press might reveal interesting findings, different clusters of connotations and permit comparative analyses. Indeed, combining content

analysis with ethnography and interviewing or using data collected from multiple media outlets (print, television or Internet) would provide additional insight into the newsmaking process. But this would have been a time consuming, cumbersome and costly venture given the absence of research funds, the difficulties in acquiring access to reporters, editors and news agencies, and the fact that I live out of province, away from Halifax where the organization is based. I want to emphasize that content analysis was appropriate for my research objectives, which was to uncover how a newspaper represented violent crime and test the basic tenets of social constructionism. As noted, I familiarized myself with the news coverage and I am convinced that my thesis identifies many of the basic themes of news discourse about violent crime and tests several of the more important hypotheses arising from the social construction perspective.

In sum, content analysis has been employed as a methodology in the majority of empirical studies because it is a way to successfully uncover patterns or trends (including omissions) in the data. It is for this reason that this methodology partners well with the social constructionist perspective. As a research tool, content analysis is especially useful in analyzing newspaper content and linking it with the constructionist view. Content analysis is a pragmatic approach that can be used to address a vast array of inquiries and targets specific lines of investigation. This particular methodology can collect a myriad of information, with an endless amount of variations in the creation of coding categories, as is evidenced by my own classification of variables. Content analysis has consistently shown that the information extracted through this method is informative, pertinent and credible data, and it will withstand any scrutiny as well as the test of time.

Since the bulk of research into the construction of crime news and crime victims has taken place in countries such as the United States, England and Australia, this project

will contribute to the growing number of Canadian studies, particularly research conducted in Atlantic Canada. My study will corroborate the social constructionist position that crime is manufactured by testing the various hypotheses that I put forth in the preceding chapter regarding organizational decisions that determine story selection; the type of news coverage and prominence a story receives; and how minorities, the poor and women are depicted in the news through media discourses. The findings are presented in the upcoming chapter, and have been divided into various sections to address my specific hypotheses. The results will reveal the relationship (or the lack thereof) between certain variables, including the strength or weakness of that association.

## Ch. 4

### *Research Findings and Data Analysis*

In this chapter, the findings have been divided into ten sections to guide the reader through the research findings. In the first section, *Descriptive Tables*, I provided the overall descriptive elements associated with news production in my sample. In the next section, *News Production and the Locality of Crime*, I showed where crime news originates. The third section, *Newsmakers*, focused on the news sources that the *Chronicle Herald* used to inform readers about the crime problem. The fourth section, *Story Newsworthiness*, showed how this newspaper selects stories based on newsworthy elements. The fifth section, *The Gendering of Crime*, investigated the gendered nature of crime news by exploring the connection between the reporting of specific types of stories and the gender of the individuals connected with the crimes. The sixth section, *Demographics and its Effect on Crime*, examined how ‘salient’ elements about a victim and/or defendant’ influenced news workers in their selection of crime news. The seventh section, *Ethnicity, Social Class and the Reporting of News*, examined how a victim’s or a defendant’s ethnicity impacts upon news reports. The eighth section, *Predatory Criminals and the Random Nature of Crime*, addressed the types of individuals that are reported to commit violent acts and whether or not they are known by their victims. The ninth section, *The Power of Talk*, illustrated the extent to which discourse structures were apparent in my sampled crime stories. The final section analyzed the research findings and documented the importance of content analysis in the social construction of crime, crime victims and defendants.

*Descriptive Tables*

As seen in Table 2, among my sample of 295 news articles, 52 percent of crime news originated locally, and 71 percent of the news producers were reporters. The largest percentage of sources of crime information was attributed to the police (21 percent), followed by the Crown and judges (16 percent each), and the least likely used news source was government officials/workers (3 percent). As for the frequency in which victims and defendants were used as news sources, defendants were more frequently sought for information than victims (60 percent compared to 41 percent). In determining story prominence and newsworthiness, I found that the vast majority of news stories (71 percent) in my sample were located in Section A of the newspaper, while more than half of my news articles (52 percent) were designated primary status. Fifty-nine percent of the news stories were about sex crimes, and 56 percent of the sampled crime stories involved 'usual' types of crime news. Only 12 percent of the sample contained photographs, and of the 107 ('super primary') articles involving five sensational cases, 28 percent were attributed to the Bernardo case alone.

***TABLE 2 Elements of and Affecting Newspaper Production:***

<i>Locality</i>	<i>Frequencies</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Local	153	51.9
Non Local	142	48.1
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>News Report Producers</i></b>		
Reporters	210	71.2
Wire Reports	68	23.1
Editors	3	1.0
Affiliated Reporters	10	3.4
Citizens	4	1.4
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0

<b><i>News Report Producers 2 (collapsed)</i></b>		
Reporters	210	71.2
Other News Report Producers	85	28.8
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Type of News Story</i></b>		
Ordinary News Report	287	97.6
Editorial	3	.07
Letters to the Editor	5	1.7
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>News Sources</i></b>		
Judges	47	15.9
Police	61	20.7
Crown	48	16.3
Lawyers	44	14.9
Victims (when in 1 <sup>st</sup> position)	15	5.1
Defendants (when in 1 <sup>st</sup> position)	22	7.5
Other	20	6.8
Government officials/workers	9	3.1
Court sources: court officials say/documents/jurors/witnesses	29	9.8
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>News Sources 2 (collapsed)</i></b>		
Criminal Justice Officials	156	52.9
Lawyers, victims & defendants	81	27.5
Other	58	19.7
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Victim/Defendant as Sources (appeared anywhere in article)</i></b>		
Victim	17	40.5
Defendant	25	59.5
<i>Total</i>	42	100.0
<b><i>Prominence</i></b>		
Front Page	36	12.2
Section A	210	71.2
Other Inside Page	49	16.6
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Coverage</i></b>		
Primary	154	52.2
Secondary	59	20.0
Tertiary	82	27.8
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Type of Crime</i></b>		
Violent	121	41.0
Sexual	174	59.0
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0

<b><i>Unusualness</i></b>		
Unusual	131	44.4
Usual	164	55.6
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Photograph</i></b>		
Yes	6	12.0
No	44	88.0
<i>Total</i>	50	100.0
<b><i>Super Primary Name</i></b>		
Bernardo	30	28.0
Shrubsall	24	22.0
Regan	16	15.0
Cop's Daughter	31	29.0
Watts	6	6.0
<i>Total</i>	107	100.0

Table 3 listed the common demographics found in the sample. When a victim's sex was stated or known in news reports, 75 percent were female, and when the defendant's sex was stated or known in the news reporting, 92 percent were male. The highest percentage of victims reported in the news was the age group 1-16 (68 percent), and the highest percentage of defendants was found in the age category 26-35 (43 percent). Out of 295 cases, 78 articles (26 percent) contained racial designations of the victim; and of these 78 cases, 83 percent were identified as White victims and 17 percent were identified as minority. When race was identified through *racial identifiers* (i.e. 'south-end' Halifax, Gottigen Street, etc.) in news reports, 44 of the 295 cases (15 percent) contained racial cues; and of these 44 cases, 61 percent were identified as White victims and 39 percent were identified as minority victims. Out of 295 cases, 123 articles (42 percent) contained racial designations of the defendant in the news reports; and of these 123 cases, 68 percent were identified as White defendants and 33 percent were identified as minority defendants. Again, when race was identified through *racial identifiers* in news reports, 56 of the 295 cases (19 percent) contained racial cues; and of

these 56 cases, 23 percent were identified as White defendants and 77 percent were identified as minority defendants. Out of 295 cases, 95 articles (32 percent) contained class designations (i.e. unemployed, accountant, etc.) of victims in the news reports; and of these 95 cases, 82 percent were identified as 'not poor' victims and 18 percent were identified as 'poor' victims. When class was identified through *class identifiers* (i.e., posh condominium, 'group home') in the news, 59 of the 295 cases (20 percent) contained class cues for victims; and of these 59 cases, 46 percent were identified as 'not poor' victims and 54 percent were identified as 'poor' victims. Out of 295 cases, 111 articles (38 percent) contained class designations of defendants in the news; and of these 111 cases, 60 percent were identified as 'not poor' defendants and 41 percent were identified as 'poor' defendants. When class was identified through *class identifiers* in the news, 102 of the 295 cases (35 percent) contained identifiers for defendants; and of these 102 cases, 88 percent were identified as 'poor' and 11 percent 'not poor' defendants.

Racial and class identifiers were not combined with race and class variables in any subsequent analysis because the collected data would not have been reliable. To do so would have required making *inferences* about race and class, rather than collecting *actual* racial and class variables. The purpose of retaining the data from the identifier variables was primarily to illustrate that when specific parts of the city such as streets, neighbourhoods or establishments were mentioned in crime news reports, readers would have been able to discern the race and the class of victims and defendants in the news. Data collected through 'identifiers' was valuable because it illustrated that race and class were 'indirectly' discussed in the news reporting, and through subtleties in crime news reports, the public could identify who was victimized and who committed the criminal acts.

**TABLE 3 Demographics:**

<i>Victim's Sex</i>	<i>Frequencies</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Male	64	24.4
Female	196	74.8
Mixed	2	0.8
<i>Total</i>	262	100.0
<i>Victim's Sex 2 (collapsed)</i>		
Male	65	24.8
Female	197	75.2
<i>Total</i>	262	100.0
<i>Defendant's Sex</i>		
Male	260	92.2
Female	20	8.0
Mixed	2	0.8
<i>Total</i>	282	100.0
<i>Defendant's Sex 2 (collapsed)</i>		
Male	262	92.9
Female	20	7.1
<i>Total</i>	282	100.0
<i>Victim's Age</i>		
1 - 16	97	67.8
17 - 25	15	10.5
26 - 35	9	6.3
36 - 50	8	5.6
51 - 64	6	4.2
65 +	8	5.6
<i>Total</i>	143	100.0
<i>Defendant's Age</i>		
1 - 16	43	16.9
17 - 25	46	18.1
26 - 35	108	42.5
36 - 50	26	10.2
51 - 64	15	5.9
65 +	16	6.3
<i>Total</i>	254	100.0
<i>Victim's Race</i>		
Minority	13	16.7
White	65	83.3
<i>Total</i>	78	100.0
<i>Race Identifier (code) victim</i>		
Implied Minority	17	38.6
Implied White	27	61.4
<i>Total</i>	44	100.0

<b><i>Defendant's Race</i></b>		
Minority	40	32.5
White	83	67.5
<i>Total</i>	123	100.0
<b><i>Race Identifier (code) defendant</i></b>		
Implied Minority	43	76.8
Implied White	13	23.2
<i>Total</i>	56	100.0
<b><i>Victim's Class</i></b>		
Poor	13	13.7
Not Poor	78	82.1
No fixed address	4	4.2
<i>Total</i>	95	100.0
<b><i>Victim's Class (collapsed)</i></b>		
Poor	17	17.9
Not Poor	78	82.1
<i>Total</i>	95	100.0
<b><i>Class Identifier (code) victim</i></b>		
Implied Poor	32	54.2
Implied Not Poor	27	45.8
<i>Total</i>	59	100.0
<b><i>Defendant's Class</i></b>		
Poor	38	34.2
Not poor	66	59.5
No fixed address	7	6.3
<i>Total</i>	111	100.0
<b><i>Defendant's Class (collapsed)</i></b>		
Poor	45	40.5
Not poor	66	59.5
<i>Total</i>	111	100.0
<b><i>Class Identifier (code) Defendant</i></b>		
Implied Poor	90	88.2
Implied Not Poor	12	11.8
<i>Total</i>	102	100.0

Table 4 focused on the relationship between victims and offenders in crime news as well as discussed violence that was specific to women. When the victim/offender relationship was reported in the news, 201 (68 percent) of the 295 cases were identified; and of the 201 cases, 47 percent were reported as perpetrated by strangers, followed by personal (acquaintance, friend, neighbour) at 26 percent and intimates (spouse, common-

law, boy/girlfriend, ex-boy/girlfriend) at 15 percent. There was some victim blaming in the news, as the media reported that 3 percent of the stories involved mutual fighting. There were no articles situating woman abuse in a broader social context such as reporting about the pervasiveness of the problem or sourcing experts to provide insightful information about ways to address this social issue, and since intimate (spouses, common-law, boy/girlfriend, ex-boy/girlfriend) violence was only the *third* most frequently reported type of victim/offender relationship, it appeared that VAW was mostly ignored in the news-production process.

***TABLE 4 Victim/Offender Relationship and Violence Against Women:***

<b>Victim/Offender Relationship</b>	<b>Frequencies</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Intimate	30	14.9
Stranger	95	47.3
Relative	8	4.0
Personal	53	26.4
Business/Professional	15	7.5
<i>Total</i>	<i>201</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<b><i>Mutual Fighting (Mutuality)</i></b>		
Yes	10	3.4
No	285	96.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>295</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<b><i>Violence Against Women (social context)</i></b>		
Yes	---	---
No	295	100.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>295</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Table 5 revealed that the most frequently reported rape myth in the news was the attribution of rape to ‘strangers’ (26 percent), followed by ‘rapists are sick’ and ‘rape involves violence’ at 19 percent each. What was particularly important in examining the most often reported victim/offender relationship and the most commonly reported rape myth was that both indexed ‘strangers’ as the leading type of offender. However, when

news reports focused on stranger violence, rather than the more likely offenders (intimates, friends and acquaintances), it implied that stranger rapists were more prevalent than in actuality, especially since it is well documented that rapists are usually known by their victims. The finding “raped outdoors” (14 percent) further fueled the stranger myth because the reported offences did not occur “indoors,” and this would appear to support Barak, 1994b; Surette, 1994; McCormick, 1995; Chermak, 1994b; Voumvakis and Ericson, 1984; Carringella-MacDonald, 1998 findings that the media perpetuate the myth that strangers lie in wait in bushes for unsuspecting women. The downside, according to Carringella-MacDonald (Ibid) about victims being raped “indoors” by intimates, friends and acquaintances is that the testimony victims is discredited, as it is presumed that defendants were either invited inside by the victim or the victim willingly entered the defendants premises, so the “sex” was likely consensual. This played into the rape myths, “rape fabricated” and “consensual” that were equally reported in the news at 9 percent, and my findings also indicated that 7 percent of rape stories revealed that a “previous sexual relationship” existed with the defendant.

Parriag and Renner (1998), Lonsway (2001), Benedict (1992), Voumvakis and Ericson (1984) and McCormick (1995) claimed that the most frequently used and distorted term to depict VAW in the news that reinforced rape mythology was the substitution of the word *sex* for *rape*; however, this was not supported by my findings, as the “rape is sex” myth was only the eighth (of eleven) most reported rape mythology at 6 percent. It is possible that the reason there were so few news reports that interchanged the word “rape” for “sex” may have been because the myth was promoted and captured under the rape myths “fabricated” and “consensual,” since both of these categories would suggest that the victim and the defendant engaged in “sex.” The remaining rape myths

(victim is upset [4 percent]; woman blamed [3 percent]; and torn clothing [2 percent]) were not prevalent in my study. The rape myth “woman blamed” was not explicitly reported in the news; this was a determination I later reached, once the totality of the rape myths and other results (i.e. moralistic overtones and sexist overtones) were examined.

**TABLE 5** *Characteristics of Rape Myths:*

<b>Rape is Sex</b>		
Yes	19	6.4
No	276	93.6
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b>Strangers Rape</b>		
Yes	78	26.4
No	217	73.6
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b>Rapist is Sick</b>		
Yes	55	18.6
No	240	81.4
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b>Rape Involves Violence/Injury</b>		
Yes	55	18.6
No	240	81.4
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b>Torn Clothing</b>		
Yes	6	2.0
No	289	98.0
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b>Victim is Upset</b>		
Yes	12	4.1
No	283	95.9
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b>Raped Outdoors</b>		
Yes	41	13.9
No	254	86.1
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b>Woman Blamed</b>		
Yes	8	2.7
No	287	97.3
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0

<b><i>Rape Fabricated</i></b>		
Yes	25	8.5
No	270	91.5
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Consensual</i></b>		
Yes	25	8.5
No	270	91.5
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Previous Sexual Relationship</i></b>		
Yes	21	7.1
No	274	92.9
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0

Table 6 listed the six forms of anticipated discourse structures as outlined by van Dijk (1998; 1993). The most frequently used form of discourse structures in my sample was 'quoting credible sources' (83 percent). But there was great disparity between this most widely noted discourse structure (quoting credible sources) and remaining discourse structures (storytelling 22 percent; structural emphasis 16 percent; lexical style 13 percent; rhetorical figures 6 percent; and argumentation 4 percent). The purpose of this descriptive data on discourse structures in this section of the chapter is self-evident; however, the importance of this finding is discussed in greater detail in the data analysis section, since it merits in-depth analysis.

***TABLE 6 Discourse Structures:***

<b><i>Argumentation</i></b>		
Yes	11	3.7
No	284	96.3
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Rhetorical Figures</i></b>		
Yes	18	6.1
No	277	93.9
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Lexical Style</i></b>		
Yes	37	12.5
No	258	87.5
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0

<b><i>Storytelling</i></b>		
Yes	64	21.7
No	231	78.3
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Structural Emphasis</i></b>		
Yes	47	15.9
No	248	84.1
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Quoting Credible Sources</i></b>		
Yes	244	82.7
No	51	17.3
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0

Three supplementary tables (Table 7, Table 8 and Table 9) provided additional information about other forms of discourses: overtones (moralistic, sexist, classicist and racist); linguistic devices such as verb formation (i.e. active verb); and linguistic strategies (i.e. use of quotation marks) in creating the news. In Table 7, when crime stories were examined for the overall *tone* of the news articles, 18 percent of the reporting contained moralistic overtones, with classicist overtones as the next highest form of tonality at 8 percent. Table 8 showed that news reports were overwhelmingly written in the ‘active’ verb format (96 percent). The lack of discourse structures and the small percentage of ‘overtones’ in my sample indicated that although some discourse structures were present, they were not prevalent, and this will be addressed in the analysis section. Table 9 indicated that 88 percent of the statements of the powerful were substantiated through the use of quotation marks, demonstrating that language and oppression were linked to underlying relations of power because of the importance placed on the individual’s social status, and they worked in unison to focalize specific characteristics of discourses such as those found in discourses of power and authority.

**TABLE 7 Overtones/Tonality:**

<b><i>Moralistic Overtones</i></b>		
Yes	52	17.6
No	243	82.4
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Sexist/Masculinist Overtones</i></b>		
Yes	18	6.1
No	277	93.9
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Classicist Overtones</i></b>		
Yes	22	7.5
No	273	92.5
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0
<b><i>Racist Overtones</i></b>		
Yes	6	2.0
No	289	98.0
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0

**TABLE 8 Linguistic Devices (Voice):**

<b><i>Linguistic Devices (Voice)</i></b>		
Active Voice	282	95.6
Passive Voice	7	2.4
Diffused Responsibility	6	2.0
<i>Total</i>	295	100.0

**TABLE 9 Quotation Marks:**

<b><i>Quotation Marks</i></b>		
Reporter inserts subjective opinion	10	11.9
Reporter substantiates statements of powerful	74	88.1
<i>Total</i>	84	100.0

***News Production and the Locality of Crime***

There is a great deal of literature that states that crime is an important topic in the news production process, and it has always been assumed that reporters primarily relied upon 'local' news items and events to construct the news, but this proposition has rarely been tested. My first hypothesis was to test this assumption. As illustrated in Table 10,

the results were highly significant and my hypothesis was supported. In fact, 98 percent of 'local' crime stories were produced by reporters, virtually eliminating any reliance on other forms of news producers for 'local' crime events. Although the classification 'other news producers' (wire reports, editors, affiliated reporters and citizens) infrequently produced local crime news stories, they did produce more than half (58 percent) of 'non local' crime stories, not an unexpected finding,<sup>18</sup> whereas, reporters in this grouping accounted for 42 percent of 'non-locally' produced news stories.

***TABLE 10 News Producers by Locality***

<i>News Producers By Locality</i>	<i>Local</i>	<i>Non local</i>
Reporters	150 (98.0)	60 (42.3)
Other News Producers (a)	3 (2.0)	82 (57.7)

N = 153      N = 142

(a) Includes wire reports, editors, affiliated reporters and citizens.

### *Newsmakers*

The literature states that news sources are selectively chosen and are key figures in the construction of crime news. These newsmakers, particularly authoritative sources, have specific motives in presenting certain types of crimes and information for public consumption. As a way to test my second hypothesis, which was that criminal justice officials would be the most frequently used source for crime news coverage (primary, secondary and tertiary), news sources was crosstabulated with types of coverage (Table 11). It was expected that criminal justice officials would be the most widely used sources of information for news coverage, and, as the results show, they dominated all three types

<sup>18</sup> "Affiliated reporters" were reporters working for the newspaper in provincial bureaus such as Truro.

of news coverage, thus supporting my hypothesis. In primary stories, I found that 48 percent was attributed to criminal justice sources, followed by ‘lawyers, victims and defendants’ at 38 percent and ‘other’ at 14 percent. In secondary stories, the pattern of attribution was as follows: criminal justice officials 59 percent; “lawyers, victims and defendants” 25 percent; and ‘other’ 15 percent. In tertiary stories, criminal justice officials were sourced 57 percent of the time, followed by ‘others’ at 33 percent and ‘lawyers, victims and defendants’ at 10 percent.

Although no table is provided, I have broken down the “criminal justice officials” category into individual sources to provide a comprehensive overview of the most frequently used crime sources. In *Primary* news stories, the most frequent news source was ‘judges’ at 20 percent, followed by the Crown at 16 percent, then the police at 13 percent; however, in *Secondary* and *Tertiary* news stories, the order of use frequency changed to the police, followed by the Crown and then judges. In *Secondary* news stories, the most frequently cited news source was also the police at 25 percent, followed by the Crown at 19 percent and then judges at 15 percent, and in *Tertiary* news stories, 32 percent were attributed to the police, followed by the Crown at 16 percent and judges at 10 percent.

***TABLE II - News Sources by Type of Coverage:***

<i>Sources by Type of Coverage</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Tertiary</i>
Criminal Justice Officials (a)	74 (48.1)	35 (59.3)	47 (57.3)
Lawyers, Victims & Defendants	58 (37.7)	15 (25.4)	8 (9.8)
Other (b)	22 (14.3)	9 (15.3)	27 (32.9)

N = 154

N = 59

N = 82

(a) Includes: judges, police and Crown

(b) Includes: court officials say; court documents; jurors; witnesses; and any remaining categories.

### *Story Newsworthiness*

The determining factor that reporters and other news personnel use to measure story 'importance' is *newsworthiness*, especially if crime incidents satisfy enough criteria in the news selection process and generate prolonged interest in the coverage. For story selection and longevity to occur, sensational crimes are often needed; and as the literature notes, the "unusualness" of the crime is a particularly salient element in the selection of crime news. For instance, *atypical* criminals such as White, middle/upper class defendants; *bizarre* crime stories like a woman pulling out a man's tooth with pliers; or *rare* types of crimes like stranger rapists are examples of unusual crimes. These unusual, bizarre and sensational crimes become primary news stories because they are awarded more news space, signifying that the relative level of importance assigned to a story corresponds with the amount of news coverage the crime receives (Chermak, 1994b).

I tested this notion that unusual crimes would be given more 'primary' news coverage compared to normal types of crime. The findings in Table 12 were especially significant and supported my third hypothesis. Unusual crimes (73 percent) were covered more than twice as often as 'primary' news stories than were other crimes (35 percent). This pattern was not repeated, however, for stories of secondary and tertiary importance. In secondary news coverage, 23 percent were usual stories compared to 16 percent for unusual; and in tertiary news coverage, 42 percent were usual stories compared to 11 percent for unusual.

**TABLE 12** *Type of Coverage by Unusualness:*

<i>Coverage by Unusualness</i>	<i>Unusual</i>	<i>Usual</i>
Primary	96 (73.3)	58 (35.4)
Secondary	21 (16.0)	38 (23.2)
Tertiary	14 (10.7)	68 (41.5)

N = 131      N = 164

### *The Gendering of Crime*

Much research has been written on the subject of gender and its link to story newsworthiness, which led me to test my fourth hypothesis that female victims would appear more frequently in primary news stories than male victims.<sup>19</sup> Researchers such as Chermak (1995) Best (1989) and Bennett et al. (1998) maintain that female victims are overemphasized in primary news stories compared to male victims. The findings in Table 13 were statistically significant and supported my hypothesis. I found that female victims appeared more than twice as often in primary news stories than male victims (63 percent and 31 percent respectively); however, in secondary and tertiary news stories, male victims dominated the news (31 percent to 17 percent; 39 percent to 20 percent), when compared to female victims.

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<sup>19</sup> I focused on primary news stories, as these are considered the most important types of news stories.

**TABLE 13** *Newspaper Coverage by Victim's Sex:* \*

<i>Coverage by Victim's Sex</i>	<i>Male Victim</i>	<i>Female Victim</i>
Primary	20 (30.8)	124 (62.9)
Secondary	20 (30.8)	33 (16.8)
Tertiary (a)	25 (38.4)	40 (20.3)

N = 65

N = 197

\* When victim's sex was identified.

(a) Percentage was decreased by 0.1 for rounding purposes.

*Demographics and its Effect on Crime*

Chermak (1995; 1994b) and Sherizen (1978) claim that the primary role of victim and defendant reports in the news is to provide the reader with basic demographics about crime like name, age, sex and occupation, but that *age* is the leading characteristic affecting story newsworthiness. Although it was expected that young males would be reported as perpetrating more crimes than other age groups, I, nonetheless, set out to test this supposition with respect to *violent crimes* and *sex crimes*, in particular. The results, however, were mixed, and somewhat surprising, since my hypothesis was only partially supported. Table 14 indicated that 17 – 25 year olds overwhelmingly committed the majority of violent crimes reported in the news (71 percent), but not for sex crimes; in fact, this age cohort committed the least amount of reported sex crimes (29 percent). The next highest age group reported for *violent crimes* was committed by 51 – 64 year olds (46 percent), then 36 – 50 year olds (44 percent) and 26 – 35 year olds (26 percent). Much to my surprise, it was the 65 + age group who reportedly committed the most *sex crimes* (88 percent), followed by under 16 years (85 percent), then 26 – 35 year olds (75 percent), then 36 – 50 year olds (57 percent) and finally 51 – 64 year olds (55 percent).

**TABLE 14** *Type of Crime by Male Defendant and Defendant's Age: \**

<i>Type of Crime by Male Defendant and Defendant's Age</i>	<i>1 - 16</i>	<i>17 - 25</i>	<i>26 - 35</i>	<i>36 - 50</i>	<i>51 - 64</i>	<i>65 +</i>
Violent Crime	6 (15.4)	29 (70.7)	26 (25.5)	10 (43.5)	5 (45.5)	2 (12.5)
Sex Crime	33 (84.6)	12 (29.3)	76 (74.5)	13 (56.5)	6 (54.5)	14 (87.5)
<i>N =</i>	39	41	102	23	11	16

\* When defendant's sex and age was stated.

### *Ethnicity, Social Class and the Reporting of News*

Negative characterizations in news reports about minorities allow for the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes and myths that exaggerate the extent of certain populations in criminal activity. The literature notes that crimes of White and wealthy defendants were presented differently in the news compared to minority defendants and the poor. For instance, the crimes of minority defendants were reported as though criminality was normalized in certain ethnic groups, whereas the criminal actions of White defendants were discussed as uncharacteristic behaviours. Because of this, their crimes tended to receive more news coverage than the supposedly "typical" crimes of minority defendants. Most researchers agree that discussions about race are usually not raised in crime news; however, Chermak (1995) found that when the issue of ethnicity was raised, it occurred in primary news stories, and that the victims and defendants were usually White. To test this assertion, I generated my sixth hypothesis, which was that White defendants would receive more 'primary' news coverage than minority defendants. The results were significant and supported this hypothesis. I discovered that White defendants (Table 15) received significantly more primary news coverage than minority defendants (84 percent and 58 percent respectively), supporting Chermak's (Ibid) claim

about the type of news coverage White defendants often receive. As for stories of secondary and tertiary importance, my findings revealed that the opposite occurred when defendants were minorities. Fifteen percent of minority defendants appeared in secondary stories, compared to 12 percent of White defendants, and minority defendants appeared seven times more often in tertiary news stories than White defendants (28 percent and 4 percent respectively). These findings indicated that the crimes of White defendants in my study were viewed as atypical in comparison to the crimes of minority defendants, except in secondary and tertiary news stories where crimes were used to “fill” news space.

***TABLE 15 Coverage by Defendant's Race:\****

<i>Coverage by Race (Defendant)</i>	<i>Minority</i>	<i>White</i>
Primary	23 (57.5)	70 (84.3)
Secondary	6 (15.0)	10 (12.0)
Tertiary	11 (27.5)	3 (3.6)

N = 40      N = 83

\* *Racial identifiers were not included.*

The literature review indicates that a defendant's ethnicity often correlates with the amount of media attention their crimes generate in the news. The majority of academic studies concur that a level of racial bias still exists in the media's portrayal of minority crimes by prominently displaying their offences in specific parts of the newspaper, mainly the front page. These assertions led me to test my seventh hypothesis that crimes of *minority* defendants and crimes of *poor* defendants would receive more 'front-page' news *prominence* than White defendants and lower class defendants.

Contrary to the research record, I found (Table 16) that this was not the case, and my hypothesis was not supported by the data I collected. Crime news about minority defendants and White defendants were evenly positioned on the front page of the newspaper (23 percent). White defendants appeared slightly more often than minority defendants in Section A of the newspaper (61 percent and 60 percent respectively), and there were more minority defendants than White defendants on the “other inside page” of the newspaper.

***TABLE 16 Prominence by Defendant's Race:\****

<i>Prominence by Race (Defendant)</i>	<i>Minority</i>	<i>White</i>
Front Page	9 (22.5)	19 (22.9)
Section A	24 (60.0)	51 (61.4)
Other Inside Page	7 (17.5)	13 (15.7)

N = 40

N = 83

\* *Racial identifiers were not included.*

The literature review also indicates that race and class are intertwined in the construction of crime news. Research often shows that media bias is not solely deployed to highlight the crimes of minorities, but that marginalized, economically disadvantaged groups also fall prey to preconceived notions about their complicity in crime. The data in Table 17 addressed this issue and confirmed the hypothesis that lower class defendants appeared on the front page three times more often (27 percent) than middle-to-upper class defendants (9 percent).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> My hypothesis focused on front-page prominence, as it is logical that this part of the newspaper would be considered the most important section of the newspaper.

***TABLE 17 Prominence by Defendant's Class:\****

<i>Prominence by Class (Defendant)</i>	<i>Lower Class</i>	<i>Middle to Upper Class</i>
Front Page	12 (26.7)	6 (9.1)
Section A	30 (66.7)	45 (68.2)
Other Inside Page	3 (6.7)	15 (22.7)

N = 45

N = 66

\* *Class identifiers were not included.**Predatory Criminals and the Random Nature of Crime*

According to Surette (1994) and Best (1999), most crimes are not committed by strangers, nor are victims selected randomly, yet these are the types of crimes often emphasized in the news. To test my eighth hypothesis, that the crimes of strangers (both violent crimes and sex crimes) would be reported more frequently in the news than crimes involving offenders that are 'known' to the victim, I crosstabulated 'type of crime' with 'victim/offender relationship.' Although the findings were statistically significant, my hypothesis was only partially supported, and this also was rather surprising to me. Table 18 illustrates that the largest percentage of reported *violent* crime in the news, when the victim/offender relationship was mentioned and the defendant's sex was known, was intimates (87 percent) and not strangers (18 percent), as was expected. Stranger-based victim/offender relationships, it turned out, were given less coverage when dealing with violent crimes. The next most frequently reported relationship in the violent crime category was relatives (63 percent), followed by professional/business (40 percent) and then personal (23 percent).

In *sex crime* reporting, it was the same two victim/offender categories displaying the highest and the lowest percentages, but the order was reversed. Strangers, as

anticipated, committed the highest percentage of sex crimes as reported in the news (82 percent), while intimates accounted for the least amount of sex crimes (13 percent). The next most frequently reported relationship committing sex crimes were personals (77 percent), followed by professional/business (60 percent) and then relatives (38 percent).

**TABLE 18** *Type of Crime by Victim/Offender Relationship:*

<i>Type of Crime by Victim/Offender Relationship</i>	<i>Intimate(a)</i>	<i>Stranger</i>	<i>Relative (b)</i>	<i>Personal(c)</i>	<i>Professional / Business (d)</i>
Violent	26 (86.7)	17 (17.9)	5 (62.5)	12 (22.6)	6 (40.0)
Sex Crime	4 (13.3)	78 (82.1)	3 (37.5)	41 (77.4)	9 (60.0)
Total	30	95	8	53	15

(a) Includes: spouse; common-law; girl/boyfriend; ex-girl/boyfriend.

(b) Includes: parent/child; siblings; other relatives (i.e. uncles).

(c) Includes: acquaintances; friends; neighbours.

(d) Includes: co-workers; employee/client; employer/employee; doctor/patient; business acquaintances; police officer/defendant; prostitutes/johns; prostitutes/pimps.

### *The Power of Talk*

Given that my study was a content-based investigation of newspapers, I broadened van Dijk's (1998; 1993) "semantic content" statements (negative evaluations) of minorities to include women and the poor, as they are also said to be frequent targets of discrimination. So, to determine whether or not the media promoted racist, sexist or classicist ideologies, my entire sample was examined for negative evaluations of minorities, women and the poor for discourse structures (argumentation; rhetorical figures; lexical style; storytelling; structural emphasis; and quoting credible witnesses), as theorized by van Dijk (1998; 1996; 1993). The findings, however, revealed that articles about women and the poor did not contain these discourse structures, so I refocused my attention to the claims of van Dijk (1998; 1993) and Henry and Tator (2002) about the

prominent use of discourse structures when minority defendants are involved in the news coverage. Based on their work, I tested my final hypothesis, which was that news coverage involving minority defendants contained more discourse structures than articles involving White defendants. Surprisingly, the findings in Table 19 did not support my hypothesis; in fact, none of the discourse structures had significance in the news-reporting process.

**TABLE 19** Race of Defendants by Discourse Structures (significant level):

<i>Defendants' Race by Discourse Structures</i>	<i>Significant or Not Significant</i>
<i>Argumentation</i>	N/S *
<i>Rhetorical Figures</i>	N/S
<i>Lexical Style</i>	N/S
<i>Storytelling</i>	N/S*
<i>Structural Emphasis</i>	N/S*
<i>Quoting Credible Sources</i>	N/S

\* The expected frequencies were too small, thereby rendering the use of Chi Square a non-significant test.

To sum up the findings, the images of crime presented by reporters in my study were stories that were mainly constructed from local crime incidents, many of which involved sensational cases that were overemphasized in the reporting of the news. The majority of sources cited in crime news articles, across all three levels of news coverage (primary, secondary and tertiary), were criminal justice officials (police, Crown and judges); however, when I examined the individual sources within this category, it was judges and not the police that were cited more frequently in primary news stories, contrary to my expectations. The vast majority of primary news stories in my study were

crimes that were indexed as unusual (i.e. serial rapists). Female victims, I discovered were overreported in the news; there were more than twice as many female victims reported in my study as male victims. An expected finding was that strangers committed the majority of reported rape cases in the news reporting. As for the perpetrators themselves, they were young males aged 17 - 25 that reportedly committed the bulk of violent crimes, while 65 + reportedly committed the majority of sex crimes in the news reporting. The crimes of White defendants generated significantly more primary news coverage than the crimes of minority defendants in my study; however, minority defendants exceeded the representation of White defendants in stories of secondary and tertiary importance. My findings disagreed with most studies in regard to the prominence (i.e. front page) of the crimes of minority defendants in the news, since they appeared as often as White defendants on the front page. In fact, it was only stories that appeared on the "other inside page" in which minority defendants exceeded White defendants in story prominence. Although it was not surprising that lower class defendants figured prominently in the news reporting, the most unexpected finding in my entire study was the absence of discourse structures in the reporting of the crimes of minority defendants.

### *Data Analysis*

How then do we make sense of these findings? What are the similarities and differences between my findings and other academic studies? Why were some hypotheses supported, while others were not? How do I explain the sometimes surprising differences in the findings?

*(a) News Producers and the Specificity of Crime Reporting*

Chermak (1998) emphasized that news agencies fulfill an organizational obligation by covering local events that appeal to readers by alerting them to serious crimes in the areas in which they lived, and my findings indicated that the majority of crime stories were created from local crime incidents. Not only did my results support other research findings, but I also discovered that four of the five celebrated cases (Shrubsall; Cop's Daughter; Regan; and Watts) that occurred during my research period originated in Nova Scotia. These were incidents that began in "our own backyard," but the salience of these crimes propelled them onto the national and international spotlight for various reasons: Shrubsall was a stranger rapist and an American fugitive; Cop's Daughter was a interracial gang rape of a White girl and Nova Scotia's first Rape Shield challenge after reforming the law; Regan was Nova Scotia's former premier charged with multiple rape offences; and Watts was a White man who suffered life-threatening injuries after being beaten by a group of Black men. All four trials took place in Halifax. Consider the Shrubsall case. Not only did his crimes receive extensive local news coverage and prominence, but had he committed them earlier on in my sampling period, I suspect that the percentage of crimes attributed to him would have been staggering as a proportion of my sample. For example, the first article sampled about Shrubsall was number 267 of 295, and 24 of the last 29 news reported crime stories in my sample were about this case.

Police beat and court beat reporters were responsible for the bulk of crime news reporting in my sample. As previously mentioned, my findings revealed that only 2 percent of news producers were attributed to wire reports, editors, affiliated reporters and citizens. I speculate that because there was an abundance of 'local' newsworthy crime

incidents, this may explain why the news organization was less reliant upon this “other” group of news producers to create crime news stories. But, this raises the question, why did so few editorials (3 cases) surface in my study, particularly considering the number of celebrated cases that occurred in Halifax? There are two likely reasons for this finding.

Lofquist (1998) states that editorials are one of the ways that news organizations emphasize stories of greater importance, yet we know this did not occur in Nova Scotia. I suspect that this may have been the result of the way that the high-profile cases developed in the news as well as the type of criminals involved in the crimes. Once the sensational crimes were discovered and the defendants appeared in court, these crime stories were already being reproduced on a daily basis (both morning and afternoon editions) in the local news coverage, inundating readers with a tremendous amount of news coverage. Therefore, there would have been less reason to produce editorials, since they would not have provided any ‘new’ additional information to the public that was not already being reported in regular crime news reports. There is a second explanation. Van Dijk (cited in Henry and Tator, 2002) claims that editorials serve as a source of opinion discourse and that they provide opinions that reflect the views of the newspaper, and Henry and Tator (2002) maintain that these organizational opinions are generally read by elites like members of Parliament and corporate managers, influential people that have the power to affect change to social policies. So unlike the celebrated cases in Henry and Tator’s research, where the focal point of editorial discourse was the issue of the deportation of undesirable Blacks and a failed immigration system, these themes were not the substance of the sensational stories in my study, so this would suggest that elites were not the targeted group in my study and this may explain why there were so few editorials.

(b) *Crime Definers*

My findings about the frequency with which criminal justice officials (judges, Crown and police) were sourced corresponded with Chermak's (1994a; 1994b; and 1998a) results. But despite empirical studies that almost always identify the police as definers of crime, I found that it was judges rather than the police who were cited more often in *primary* news stories. This was, for the most part, due to the quantity of high-profile cases that emerged during my study period. After the individuals were apprehended and appeared in court, reporters no longer relied on the police for leads on newsworthy crimes - they already had their stories. Although reporters generally make use of court sources when cases go through the judicial system, the number of sensational crimes that occurred in my study would have shifted the media's heavy reliance onto judges, rather than the police to source the news. These dramatic crimes received continuous coverage from the press, so once they reached the courts, it was logical that judges, and not the police or the Crown were cited more frequently because they were the "ultimate" authority among criminal justice practitioners.

McCormick's (1995) finding about the use of police sources in the news was based on sex crime coverage alone, so it was impossible to render an accurate comparison of his results with mine, which combined sex crimes and violent crimes. For instance, he found that the police were cited as the most frequent news source, and they were the highest reported news source in *primary* stories. My findings indicated that the police were the *third* most frequently used source in *primary* news, so my results did not support McCormick's (Ibid) second finding. There was, however, some similarity with his *first* overall finding, since my results indicated that the police were the most frequently cited news source *overall*. This finding also confirmed Sherizen's (1978) research results,

since he also discovered that the police were used more frequently to create crime news. Another important point that requires comment is that while the police were not the dominant source across the three types of crime news coverage, they were sourced more often in secondary and tertiary news stories. It should be noted that Chermak (1994b; 1995) claims that secondary stories are important in the production of crime news because of their potential to develop into primary news. So, although the police may not have been the highest ranking source in primary news, their role in the newsmaking process and in the construction of crime was, nevertheless, important. Furthermore, news sources in my study were collected as the *first* source cited in an article, and not all sources, so it is likely that police as definers of the news would have increased if I had developed a more complex sourcing index. For example, if I had tracked the top three news sources per news report, rather than only citing the first news source in the article, it would probably have revealed that the police were among the most frequently used sources of information in primary news sources as well.

When we think about the amount of empirical studies carried out on crime news sources, we discover that one study contradicts the others about the frequency with which the police and other criminal justice officials are sourced; Schlesinger et al. (1991) found that the police ranked *fourth* in crime news sourcing (15 percent for *mid-market* newspapers). I can only speculate that this was related to particular crimes or series of crimes that may have transpired during their collection period, which would have prompted the press to seek out the voices of victims, defendants and defendants' relatives, rather than official news sources, so that they could provide personalized accounts about how they were affected by the crimes. This raises another related issue; it is well documented that victims and defendants are often ignored as sources of crime

information, yet Schlesinger et al. (1991) found the opposite. My findings are at odds with Schlesinger et al.'s, and in line with the larger body of empirical research. I found that victims and defendants were in the 'bottom' four cited news sources, corroborating the findings of most researchers about the invisibility of victims and defendants in the newsmaking process about crime. It would appear that the news agency's desire to capture the opinions and views of victims and defendants in my study was not highly valued in the news production or of any interest to reporters. They, it would seem, were more focused on using official views to construct the news.

My findings indicated that the sources used to provide information about crime were groups that had the power to influence the content of the news. Surette (1998) states that because criminal justice officials are culturally accepted as 'knowers' of crime, when the press shares information with the public on behalf of these powerful groups, readers accept that the information is an accurate reflection of crime and they become conditioned to accept the dominant ideology that certain groups are responsible for crime. Influential individuals and groups have the ability to reinforce inequality and target less powerful groups in the creation of the crime news. The public may be manipulated through media discourses because the less powerful are represented as deviants. Surette (1998) claims that by presenting crime from a criminal justice viewpoint, readers obtain a restricted understanding about crime because of the limited number of sources and perspectives that are used to frame crime news stories, and this appeared to be supported by my findings, given that criminal justice officials were the dominant news source in my study.

(c) *Standards of Newsworthiness*

Researchers generally concur that the most valuable crime story for a news agency is the one that is the most *newsworthy*, and that the amount of news space and coverage allocated to cover crime news signifies the importance of this component of newsmaking. Part of the definition provided in the literature about newsworthiness is that certain types of stories contain elements that demonstrate that the crimes are unusual, sensational or bizarre. These tenets of newsworthiness, which are necessary ingredients in the newsmaking process, were also evident in my study, since nearly 3 out of 4 *unusual* crimes were *primary* news stories. The importance of the “unusualness” element in the creation of crime news was apparent and persistent throughout my entire study, and its function, usefulness and implementation in the manufacturing of crime news stories will be evidenced throughout this chapter.

(d) *Images of Gender in the News*

Barak (1995), Chermak (1995) and Bennett et al. (1998) discovered that women were overrepresented in crime news. My findings indicated that three in four victims in my study were women, and I also found that women victims were reported in primary news stories more than twice as often as men. Women, however, were not overreported in secondary and tertiary news stories, so my findings were partly at odds with theirs. Barak (1995) claimed that the negative portrayal of women in the news helped the press to construct more newsworthy stories in the reporting of crime, and this appeared to be the case in my study, since women were overrepresented in stories of primary importance. As for the reason why women were not overrepresented in secondary and tertiary news stories, I believe it is associated with the amount of sex crime stories in my

study. The reporting of male victimization in the news was fairly closely divided amongst the three types of news coverage, but I discovered that nearly two-thirds of all female victims were located in primary news stories and approximately one-third of my study involved high-profile sex crimes, which mainly generated primary news stories. The majority of stories in my study were sex crimes, so we can conclude then, that the remaining female victims in secondary and tertiary stories were primarily victims of violent crime incidents. It would seem that the large percentage of female victims in primary news stories suggests that the news media viewed rape as crimes of interest, that is, as more newsworthy crime events compared to violent crime stories. So the implication is that the media focused on reporting these 'bigger' newsmaking stories (sex crimes), which would account for the smaller representation of female victims in violent crime stories, as they were reduced to the ranks of secondary and tertiary levels of importance. Barak (1995) and Soothill and Walby (1991) claimed that rape was overrepresented in the news, and this was corroborated by my findings, as I found that a large proportion of my sample involved sex crimes. On the other hand, Surette (1998), Chermak (1994a), Meyers (1997), McCormick (1995) and Roshier (1981) maintained that rape was underreported in the news, so my findings did not support their results. The sex crime stories in my study were particularly brutal offences and we know this based on the violent keywords that I used to compile my data. These offences were the most serious sex crimes indexed in the *Criminal Code of Canada*, and the seriousness of the crimes (based on the injuries the victims sustained) made these incidents newsworthy in the crime news reporting and pushed many stories to primary news status. Some stories were newsworthy because of the types of criminal offences (i.e. serial rape), while others were

newsworthy because of the types of unlikely offenders involved in the crime (i.e. wealthy socialite).

*(e) Age and Criminality*

Chermak's (1995) findings about the age of defendants in the news reporting were only partially supported by my results. For instance, he found that 17 – 25 year olds committed most of the reported crimes in the news, and my findings were consistent with his results for this age group when I examined the *violent* crime category; however, I discovered that his findings were not substantiated for this same age group when looking at *sex crimes*. In my study it was the oldest age group (65 +) that reportedly committed the most *sex crimes* in the news reporting. This, however, can be explained by the specificity of my sample. Regan was 67 years-old when his case came to news prominence and accounted for most of the reported sex crime stories in the 65 + age category. Sex crimes reportedly committed by Regan and other elderly defendants were by definition unusual because they deviated from the dominant image of young males as rapists, so the crimes of this age cohort were the focus of the news reporting.

*(f) News Reporting and the Creation of Criminals*

Chermak (1995) and Sherizen (1978) maintain that any involvement of Whites in crime (either as victims or defendants) is viewed as 'unusual' or 'unexpected' by the press, whereas crimes involving minorities (again, either as victims or defendants) is considered normal. Most researchers agree that race is not usually raised in the news, but Chermak (1995) discovered that when it is discussed, the crimes of minority defendants are generally placed on the front pages of the newspaper because of the perceived normalcy of their participation in crime. This was not the case in my study. My research

findings indicated that minority and White defendants appeared equally on the front page, and there are a couple of reasons to explain this. Since the nature of the newsmaking business places a higher value on reporting high-profile stories over other crime events, the breaking stories of the celebrated cases that transpired during my collection period would have displaced other 'less worthy' crime stories intended for front-page placement. It is, however, also probable that the news reporting of crimes involving minority defendants in Nova Scotia differed from the news reporting elsewhere, that is news personnel in Atlantic Canada seemed to be more cautious about reporting minority crimes. My study indicated that much of what has been accepted about racial minorities and the news media differed from most studies about racist news reporting, and the equal representation of Whites and minorities on the front page of the newspaper appears to support this. This is not to say that racial stereotyping did not occur in the news reporting of minority crime in Nova Scotia, only that it was not as visible as we may suspect.

Although most researchers concede that news reports typically omit race in the news reporting, Reah (2002) insists that when it is stated in news reports, it is minority defendants that are identified. He found that the news media do not identify White defendants in the news reporting as such, and because of this, readers presuppose that the defendants are White. According to Chermak (1995), photographs are another means that news agencies use to alert readers about the race of victims and defendants in the news and as Sample one shows, a photograph of the defendant accompanied the news article. So based on Reah's observation about racial recognition, Chermak's elucidation about the use of photographs in news reports to identify race and the reference to the "silver-haired socialite" in the article, we can presume that the victim and the defendant in this story were White. Chermak (1995) also found that White victims and defendants usually

receive primary news coverage in the news reporting. My findings supported his results, since I also discovered that they received significantly more primary news coverage in comparison to minority victims and defendants. Sherizen's (1978) findings indicated that when high-status individuals are involved in crime, the news media also emphasize the unusualness of the crime, similar to their reporting about the participation of Whites in crimes. It would appear that positive details are emphasized in the news when higher-income individuals are involved in crime and negative details are stressed when lower-income individuals are involved, and Sample one and Sample two illustrate the contrasting news reporting. Sample one demonstrated Chermak's (Ibid) and Sherizen's (Ibid) claim that the media view the involvement of a White victim and defendant (who also happened to be wealthy) in crime as unusual because the press repeatedly commented on the couple's social status throughout the article, suggesting that this was unexpected.

**Sample 1**

JOUDRIE MENTALLY UNFIT, NOT GUILTY

The *Chronicle Herald* – May 10, 1996 – A19

Photograph (defendant)

1 Calgary – A stunned silence broken only by the sobbing of Dorothy Joudrie filled the courtroom  
 2 Thursday as a jury cleared the silver-haired socialite of trying to murder her estranged husband.  
 3 Joudrie, 62, was found not criminally responsible because she was mentally ill when she shot Earl  
 4 Joudrie, 62, in the back six times at her home near Calgary in January 1995.  
 18 Earl, 62, is chairman of Gulf Canada, Canadian Tire Corp. and Algoma Steel. He was also absent  
 19 Thursday from Canadian Tire's annual meeting in Toronto.  
 39 Crown attorney Jerry Selinger argued that Dorothy, aghast at losing her social status as the wife of a  
 40 powerful executive, gunned her husband down in an angry act of vengeance.

The couple in this case, particularly the defendant, received positive news coverage, in spite of the seriousness of the crime. Keeping in mind that this case was an attempted murder trial, the defendant appeared to receive sympathetic news coverage from the reporter covering the case because we were told that her 'sobs' "filled the courtroom." Numerous references were made about the couple's wealth and social

standing. We were informed that the defendant was a “socialite” cleared of the crime, and later we were told that the motive behind the crime was a combination of the defendant’s fear of “losing her social status” and vengeance. The reporter also made additional references about the victim’s social position (i.e., “powerful executive”) by listing the corporations he owned, so based upon the statements about the victim and the defendant, we can say that they were also wealthy. The manner in which this case was reported in the news informed readers that this case was different from the average violent crime story because the news reporting was not as negative as when crimes involving minorities and the poor are reported in the news. The hyperbolic reference that the defendant “gunned her husband down” served to reemphasize the unusualness of the defendant’s actions, since this would be the language typically used to describe the crimes of lower class individuals and ethnic minorities, actions not commonly associated with prominent individuals. Considering that media discourses influence public perceptions, it is possible that the press were able to persuade the public to adopt a similar viewpoint about the unusual involvement of this couple in crime, since they did not fit the dominant stereotype created about the types of individuals associated with crime. It would appear that the media viewed the involvement of this White and affluent couple in crime as uncharacteristic because the reporter frequently alluded to the couple’s wealthy backgrounds. This news reporting was typical for other reported crimes in the news. As previously stated, it appeared that the couple received rather positive treatment by the press compared to the way that the less privileged are typically portrayed in the news. You will note the differential news reporting in Sample two and Sample three when defendants were not well-to-do or White.

Barak's (1995) and Soothill and Walby's (1991) findings indicate that the news media criminalize the disadvantaged through the creation of stereotypes about lower-income defendants. This was corroborated by my findings, as I too discovered that 'lower class' defendants were assigned front-page news coverage nearly three times more often than 'middle-to-upper class' defendants in the news. The news media target lower income groups as deviants because they are easy to exploit in the newsmaking business. These defendants often lack the financial resources to hire exceptional or experienced attorneys and are often represented by Legal Aid lawyers. Low-income defendants would probably not have any associations with politically-connected and powerful elites to assist them in their legal troubles. Since they are one of society's most vulnerable groups, it would appear that they lack the social power to avoid the labeling and exploitation that occurs during the newsmaking process.

Sample two is an illustration of how the media promoted the myth that lower income defendants have substance abuse issues and a penchant for violence.

*Sample 2*

MAN GETS THREE MONTHS IN JAIL FOR ASSAULT ON FORMER GIRLFRIEND

*The Chronicle Herald, June 29 – Page: A4*

1 An unemployed bartender who terrorized his former girlfriend has been jailed for three months and told  
 2 to get help managing his alcoholism and anger.  
 4 She was asleep in front of the TV that morning when he came in drunk and in a foul mood ...  
 6 He grabbed her and repeatedly hurled her into furniture, walls and to the floor ...  
 17 Mr. Gauthier suffered from depression six years ago. The Crown said staff at the Nova Scotia Hospital  
 18 described him as a manipulative, very angry and egocentric person who "sees himself as a character in a  
 19 movie."  
 21 ... attend Alcoholics Anonymous, undergo alcohol abuse evaluation and counseling, attend an anger  
 22 management course and undergo psychological or psychiatric assessment and treatment if  
 23 recommended.

The events of that night leading up to and during the assault are sketched out for the reader. In this news report, we are informed that an "unemployed" man committed a serious assault against his girlfriend. The use of hyperbole ("terrorized") in the opening

sentence, directly following the detail that the defendant is jobless and that mental health professionals have assessed him as a manipulative personality, sets the stage for the negative evaluation that follows. Media discourses inform us that the defendant was not only violent, but also suffered from extreme alcoholism and mental health issues, as evinced by his reported actions in the assault, including the judge's orders upon sentencing. By focusing on the defendant's alcohol dependence and apparent mental health problems, readers were encouraged to negatively evaluate the poor by implying that this behaviour is indicative of individuals from lower socioeconomic groups. This would suggest that an association was made between poverty, violence and mental illness in the news reporting. By providing information about the defendant's background, the news media seemed to imply that the defendant was a threat to society because of his volatile temper and unprovoked attack. Van Dijk (1997) and Reah (2002) claim that language is used to convey specific ideas about certain groups, and this would explain why the defendant was seemingly portrayed in the news as more violent and dangerous than other criminals, including perpetuating the crime myth that the disadvantaged are mainly responsible for the crime problem in society. This defendant became part of the deviant population, not only because he was not a contributing member of society, but also because of his mental health issues and violent personality, and because of this, he threatened the established societal norms and values that Kappeler et al. (1993) discussed. It would appear that social issues like poverty and mental illness are crime-related problems linked to groups that are powerless to contest or resist domination and the labeling process. The news media appeared to reinforce culturally accepted stereotypes about the poor as lazy, addicted and disorderly and fueled existing myths about the criminality and propensity for violence of less privileged groups. It would seem that the

news reporting fed into the socially constructed notion that these actions are normative or typical of individuals from lower social classes; they do not work, they drink excessively and they are prone to violent outbursts against innocent victims known to them. In summary, such accounts almost normalize violent incidents.

(g) *The Image and the Reality of Stranger Violence*

My findings revealed some interesting results regarding the victim/offender relationship in the news. I discovered that *intimates* reportedly committed most of the *violent* crimes in the news and strangers the least. However, the order of these two categories was completely reversed in *sex crimes* coverage, as *strangers* reportedly committed the most sex crimes in the news reporting and *intimates* the least. It was quite surprising to find that *intimates* was the highest reported victim/offender relationship in *violent crimes*, particularly since it is well accepted that women generally conceal intimate violence from others. Roshier's (1981) and Meyers' (1997) research findings indicated that the media often ignored intimate violence in the news because it is commonplace, but this was not corroborated by my findings. It is possible that the reason for this divergence was because my study did not examine *all* cases of intimate violence. My study focused on Level 2 and Level 3 assaults that frequently resulted in serious injuries, rather than including common assault (Level 1), where there were either no injuries or only minor ones. The importance of my finding about intimate violence is that woman abuse *was* reported by the media in the news reporting. This particular finding contributes to the literature because it provides an alternative perspective that disputes the invisibility of woman abuse in the news reporting. My intimate violence finding is also significant in regard to news construction proper because it showed that the news

reporting of this crime closely resembled the reality of VAW. I suspect that the larger proportion of intimate violence stories in my study may have occurred because the police and/or court beat reporters determined that these crimes were the most newsworthy stories available for that day, and the press picked them up because they were serious offences that satisfied the selection criteria (Chermak, 1994b; Roshier, 1981). For news personnel to choose 'intimate' violence stories out of all the violent crime incidents may suggest that these stories were more unusual than other crimes; otherwise, they would have been bypassed during story selection. The unusualness of the crimes may have been the sheer brutality of the offences, their bizarreness or their atypical offenders and victims; whatever compelled reporters and editors to select these stories over other crimes indicates that they were the most newsworthy events for publication.

Sample three is an illustration of an intimate violence story that contained the necessary criteria news personnel used for story selection.

### **Sample 3**

#### **MAN SENTENCED IN SITCOM SLASHING**

CAPSULE, *The Chronicle Herald* - November 19, 1994 - D23

- 1 Toronto (CP) – A man who slashed his girlfriend during a fight over the prettiest actress in a TV sitcom
- 2 that features a sexy blond airhead and her Spandex-clad mother was sent to prison Friday.
- 3 Sajid Ali Bhatti was sentenced to 2 ½ years after an argument last spring over the show *Married With*
- 4 *Children*. He pleaded guilty to aggravated assault.
- 5 The couple fought over which female character on the Fox Network show is prettier.
- 6 Actress Katey Sagal plays mother Peg Bundy, a fortyish woman with teased red hair and a penchant for
- 7 tight pants. Christina Applegate plays her teenage daughter Kelly Bundy.
- 8 Bhatti, 23, and his girlfriend, Alisha Timla, 20, were watching the half-hour comedy when they began to
- 9 argue.
- 10 The fight got out of hand and Timla almost lost her arm after being stabbed and slashed.
- 11 Bhatti slashed himself with a broken wine bottle during the fight.

In this article the defendant was convicted of aggravated assault against his girlfriend.

The woman sustained a serious injury and nearly lost her arm. The news report stated that the defendant “slashed himself with a broken bottle during the fight,” and although this may have been strictly accidental, the implication is that the injury was self-inflicted.

The reader is informed that the crime was the result of a “fight” that the couple had over who each believed was the ‘prettiest’ actor in a sitcom show. While the defendant was convicted of the crime, it was the *circumstances* leading up to and during the crime event that made the story unusual. The news reporting overshadowed the seriousness of the assault by focusing on the peculiar reason for the assault and the actions of *both* the victim and the defendant in this crime. The news media portrayed the woman in this criminal offence as complicit in her own injuries. She “fought” with the defendant and this suggested in the reporting that the violence was *mutual* and may have provoked the assault. This would appear to corroborate Barak’s (1995) claim that the negative representation of women in the crimes make stories more newsworthy.

Most research studies on stranger violence acknowledge that these types of crimes rarely occur in society. Lofquist’s (1998) findings indicated that stranger-related crimes were overrepresented in the news reporting and that these crimes were portrayed as more violent than other types of criminal offences. Stranger stories also generate extensive coverage in the news reporting. So based on these premises, I surmised that ‘strangers’ would dominate ‘violent crimes’ and ‘sex crimes.’ This was not the case, as strangers, it turned out, were not the most frequently reported victim/offender relationship in violent crimes, and because of this, my findings are not in line with conventional research outcomes. It is possible that the reason why my findings were not supported in the violent crime category may have to do with the gendering of violence. By this, I mean that although criminal victimization affects both genders, “stranger” violence appears to be more germane to women than men. This categorization may explain why my results or findings differed from that of other researchers. My findings are valuable because it challenges traditional studies that have come to accept the typification of strangers as the

culprits of crime in the news. Although strangers were the most common victim/offender relationship *overall* in my study, my finding about strangers demonstrates the importance of examining different forms of violent crime so that a more accurate picture of the victim/offender relationship emerges. This allowed me to more closely examine how the news media actually addressed two *distinct crimes* that typically affect *separate genders*. But it is also likely that the press may have deployed a more investigative approach that allowed them to see through their own conventional myths about strangers.

While media representations of strangers as the dominant offender in the violent crime category did not occur in my study, it is well established that the news media characterize *rape* as a crime that occurs at the hands of strangers. My results are in line with the research findings of Best (1995); Surette (1994); Chermak (1994b; 1995); Barak (1994a); Caringella-MacDonald (1998); Lofquist (1998); McCormick (1995); and Voumvakis and Ericson (1984) because *stranger-related rape* was the highest reported victim/offender relationship in *sex crimes*. This finding was anticipated, since the prevalence of stranger rapists play into the dominant constructed image created by the news media about this crime. In addition, because it is overrepresented in the news, it intensifies the “stranger danger” phenomenon that Best (1999) and Surette (1994) maintain occurs in the construction of crime news. When we consider the connotation “predator,” we envision criminals who are unknown to their victims and who prey on unsuspecting women. These types of criminals are deemed by the press to have some form of moral and/or psychological defect, and the public is encouraged to liken the offender to a monster or an animal. But when Bernardo was apprehended for the abduction, rape and murder of two Ontario teenage girls, he did not fit the constructed image of a “sex fiend.” He was attractive, White, middle class and intelligent, attributes

generally not associated with mass killers, so *he* became the focus of the news reporting. The Bernardo case exemplifies how the media transformed a “stranger,” from what Surette (1994) describes as the “faceless” predator, into someone akin to a celebrity, mainly because of his good looks and social position.

**Sample 4**

**BERNARDO TO FACE FIVE MORE CHARGES**

*Chronicle Herald*, May 5, 1994 – Page: A18

20 Bernardo, 29, a bookkeeper who grew up in the Toronto suburb of Scarborough pleaded not guilty to  
 21 abducting, sexually assaulting and killing Leslie Mahaffy, 14, of nearby Burlington, and Kristen French,  
 22 - 15, of St. Catharines.  
 25 Bernardo dressed in a black suit, spoke in a clear and confident voice from a glass-enclosed prisoner’s  
 26 box when he entered pleas on nine separate charges.

**Sample 5**

**BERNARDO PLEADS NOT GUILTY**

*Chronicle Herald*, May 3, 1995 – Page: A2

6 Speaking with a firm voice into a microphone, Bernardo answered “Not guilty, sir” to each of the nine  
 7 counts as a court clerk read out the charges. ...  
 14 Bernardo, dressed in a dark blue suit, was flanked by lawyers and two court security guards as he stood  
 15 and entered the pleas.

**Sample 6**

**COURT-IMPOSED SECRECY IN BERNARDO CASE ABOUT TO END**

*Chronicle Herald*, May 17, 1995 – Page: C5

8 After a long and frustrating police investigation, a young couple with model-like good looks and  
 9 middleclass backgrounds were charged in the deaths. ...  
 27 Bernardo, 30, is charged with killing French and Mahaffy in St. Catharines, where he and Homolka, 25,  
 lived in a quaint, Cape Cod-style house. ...

In Sample four, media discourses informed the reader that the conceptual ideal of a “predator” is unreliable, since we were told that Bernardo was educated (a bookkeeper) and that he grew up in a well-to-do suburb, hardly the background one might expect for a serial killer. Bernardo himself was the focal point of the news reporting, and in Sample five his attire and demeanour during his court appearance were highlighted in the news report, rather than the criminal proceedings. In Sample six, readers were reminded about the unusualness of having such an unlikely killer charged with committing serious crimes, since the public did not envision that a couple with “model-like good looks and middle-

class backgrounds” would be at odds with the created image of the ‘monster’ responsible for the sex crimes. These articles revealed that the arrest and conviction of Bernardo defied the mythological construct of a serial rapist because his physical features, class and charm contradicted prevailing concepts that presumably allow us to identify predator criminals, and because of this, his case was sensationalized. Rather than reporting that men from any class or ethnic group can rape, the media seemed to imply that White, middle-class men do not rape.

The heavy reporting of stranger rapist cases like Bernardo and Shrubbsall demonstrate how sensationalism is at the heart of the newsmaking process, and given what is known about the news construction process and elements of newsworthiness, it was not surprising that the news reporting of the crimes of these two individuals amounted to nearly one third of my entire sex crime sample. Highlighting these atypical crimes in the news was problematic because it represented stranger violence as the norm, and it failed to disclose the reality of rape that women are more likely to be raped by someone they know than strangers. Media constructions such as these are harmful to women because they perpetuate and reproduce the myth that strangers rape, and it gives women a false sense of security by thinking that if they are vigilant about their safety, they will not be raped.

It is well accepted in criminological and sociological circles that acquaintances and/or friends represent the greatest threat to rape victims. I discovered that “personal” rape was the second highest reported victim/offender relationship in *sex crimes*. This was *not* an unexpected finding, since I anticipated that personal rape would be reported less often than stranger rape, in spite of being the reality of sexual violence. What I did not expect was that ‘personal’ rape would be reported in the news as frequently as it was.

The reason for this finding would seem to be the news reporting of the Cop's Daughter case. This particular story was newsworthy because the victim knew some of her attackers and had consensual sex with a couple of them prior to her rape; a fact that became a central issue in the news reporting because this information was used by the defense to challenge Canada's Rape Shield law. The negative reporting of the victim in the news was largely attributed to the media's view that she was complicit in her own victimization (victim blaming). For instance, consider how the following statement encouraged readers to form a negative evaluation of the victim in this case: "In testimony, the court was told that the girl regularly had consensual sex with the accused and often when more than one person was present" (*Chronicle Herald*; May 11, 1995, A1). Media discourses reinforced the common stereotype about proper and improper behaviour for women, which Smart (1990) claims occurs in cases of rape, and it also perpetuated the rape myth that a past sexual relationship implies consent for future sex and that a woman's sexual history is relevant in cases of rape.

My finding about *intimate* rape fits well with the larger body of research on the underreporting of this crime in the news. Not surprisingly, this was the *least* reported victim/offender relationship in the *sex crimes* category. Surette (1998), Meyers (1997), Benedict (1992) and Voumvakis and Ericson (1984) discovered that the media ignored marital (intimate) rape in the news and this was corroborated by my research findings.

*(h) Media Discourse and Crime News Reports*

News articles in my sample, not surprisingly, were infused with legal discourses (offences; arraignments; preliminary hearings; etc.), including commentaries by judges used to substantiate the authoritative power of judicial sources, particularly the power

they have to label offenders. For instance, in one news article, the judge presiding in the Bernardo trial questioned him after he confessed to being sexually aroused while filming one of his victims urinate and defecate. The judge asked Bernardo, "What possible sexual attraction could there have been to filming what you just did?" (*Chronicle Herald*, August 19, 1995, A2). Although this question may appear innocuous, it was laden with connotations about Bernardo's sexual perversion, thus labeling him abnormal. This "rapist is sick" mythology was one of several rape myths I found in the news reporting - the most notable, as discussed, was the "stranger rapist" myth. But the statement mentioned above about Bernardo also illustrates the pathology discourse that I discovered in my study and I discuss this over the next few pages. We need only look to the sensational crimes of Bernardo to preview how media discourses about stranger rapists reinforced the dominant ideology that rape resides within the realm of demented strangers. It would seem that it was easier for the press to report about the psychopathy of a predator than it was to explain how normal men could rape or harm the women they supposedly loved. Grover and Soothill (1996) found that the media made a speculative link between the impoverished as psychologically defective men and connected them to sex murders in the United Kingdom. The media employed terms such as "weirdos" and "misfits" to negatively depict them in the news and blame them for the heinous crimes. As van Dijk (1993:264) notes, "one of the ways to discredit powerless groups is to pay extensive attention to their alleged threat to the interests and privileges of the dominant group." The use of the pathology discourse in the news reporting was an attempt by the media to typify the marginalized as moral outcasts to the stability of British society. Grover and Soothill (1996) claim that media representations linking sex murders to the

underclass have become so embedded in British news reporting that news agencies do not give a second thought to their biased news reporting.

The pathology discourse that Grover and Soothill (1996) found that the media employed to construct an image of depravity was also found in my study, but to a lesser degree than anticipated. What I did discover was that the language in the majority of the articles in my study was “toned down” compared to the vocabulary in Grover and Soothill’s (Ibid) research findings, and so my results did not support their findings about the overtness and directness of the pathology discourse. My findings indicated that reporters in Nova Scotia employed subtle forms of the pathology discourse when reporting sex crimes in the news. For example, a lawyer described that his client “has lived in mental hospitals, group and foster homes and prisons since he was seven. The man, who has only a Grade 2 education, said his “mind was screwed up” at the time and he wants help” (*Chronicle Herald*, September 1, 1994, A4). This excerpt shows that the new media did not resort to the discourse structures that van Dijk (1993) claims they often use to express ideological views about the deviancy of particular groups. The significance of this finding about discourse suggests that investigations into the construction of crime news must also consider different forms of media discourses that criminalize selected groups through the presentation of stereotypes and prejudices.

Below are two articles taken from my sample; one demonstrates the more detectable form of the pathology discourse put forth by Grover and Soothill (1996), while the second illustrates the more discreet form of the pathology discourse found in my sampled news articles.

**Sample 7****BERNARDO 'SICK' BUT NO MURDERER**

The *Canadian Press* - August 29, 1995 – A18

- 1 Toronto – Paul Bernardo may be the “devil incarnate” but he didn’t murder two Ontario schoolgirls and  
 2 deserves justice as much as anyone, his lawyer said Monday in his final address.  
 3 John Rosen suggested his “depraved and twisted” client should instead be convicted of manslaughter,  
 4 emphasizing that Bernardo will go to jail either way.

**Sample 8****RAPIST A DANGEROUS OFFENDER – ELDERLY VICTIM**

The *Chronicle Herald* - September 20, 1994 – A3

- 3 ... William Junior Bird, a group home resident the family befriended and took in as a boarder. He was  
 4 convicted and served his full six-year sentence for the 1985 attack.  
 5 The 36 year-old man pleaded guilty Aug. 31 to raping his frail landlady – a woman in her 80’s – in the  
 6 bedroom of her north-end home. He was sentenced to nine year in jail.  
 11 Declaring him a dangerous offender would keep him behind bars until officials decide he is no longer a  
 12 threat.  
 22 And there’s no guarantee a judge will grant the request, even if the Crown proves the culprit committed  
 23 a violent attack, cannot control his sexual impulses and is likely to do it again.  
 24 “It’s still up to the discretion of the judge,” he said. If rehabilitation appears possible or if the offender is  
 25 willing to undergo treatment, a judge will often refuse the application.

In the first passage (Sample seven), the reader is told that Bernardo was mentally disturbed to have committed the crimes with which he was convicted by quoting Bernardo’s own lawyer referring to his client as the “devil incarnate” and that he was “depraved and twisted.” It would appear that Bernardo’s lawyer used this form of pathology discourse as a way to encourage jury members to excuse his client’s culpability in the crimes so that he would receive a lesser sentence. Media discourses perpetuated the cultural stereotype that “sick” individuals rape, corroborating what Meyers (1997), Grover and Soothill (1996) and Benedict (1992) discovered in their research findings. Furthermore, these discourses imply that *abnormal* rather than *normal* men commit sexual violence. In this particular story, the news media promoted the pathology discourse that Grover and Soothill (1996) discovered in their research findings; however, my results indicated that this occurred infrequently, as the more common form of

pathology discourse in my study was consistent with the type identified in the second excerpt.

In Sample eight the media raise the issue of declaring the convicted rapist “a dangerous offender.” We are told that the Crown seeks dangerous offender applications whenever sexual offenders commit violent attacks, when they are incapable of controlling their “sexual impulses,” and when they pose a threat to reoffend. The offender’s mental instability is further confirmed when we are informed that the court denies applications if offenders agree to undergo “treatment” for sexual offences. It appears that the pathology discourse that identifies the defendant as possessing some form of mental ‘defect’ is nuanced by the media’s use of the more subtle pathology undertones in the news reporting. The reason my results differed from Grover and Soothill’s study may be connected to van Dijk’s discourse structures, or the lack thereof, in my sampled news articles. The language exhibited in their study is indicative of parts of speech belonging to discourse structures identified by van Dijk, which links stereotypical representations of discriminated groups with crime; however, these structures were not evident in my study, so this may explain why Grover and Soothill’s results did not correspond with my findings about blatant forms of the pathology discourse. In fact, the most unexpected and significant finding in my entire study was the considerable absence of Van Dijk’s discourse structures in crime news reports. This is at odds with what he and Henry and Tator maintained about the racist representation of ethnic minorities in news reports. They claimed that discourse structures are embedded in language as a way to sanction racist ideologies and practices and that it is particularly evident in crime news reports about minority groups, yet my findings differed. Instead, what I did discover was that the stereotypical representation of targeted groups was inconspicuous, as Sample nine

illustrates. This is an article about the Cop's Daughter case, so the defendants have already been identified as Black from earlier stories in this high-profile case.

**Sample 9**

ACCUSED BOYS SAY GIRL CONSENTED TO SEX

The *Chronicle Herald* – April 12, 1995 – Page: A1

7 The most casually dressed of the three laughed several times during his cross-examination and claimed  
8 people in the courtroom were making him laugh.

19 The boys told the court they were well behaved and that she offered them beer. However, two of the  
20 boys said they were afraid the others would steal things, though they did not see anything being taken.

27 He said the girl told the boy she was on her period and “if he didn't mind a little butt, then she didn't  
28 either,” the boy said.

39 The girl testified that on Nov. 9, the boys forced their way into her home and took things. The only way  
40 to get them to leave was to go with them, she said.

In this story, negative evaluations of Blacks may have been encouraged by reporting about the frequent (several outbursts of laughter) and, it would seem, inappropriate behaviour of one of the defendants about proper courtroom protocol (including the casualness of his appearance), insinuating that he was showing contempt and disrespect for the judicial system and was apathetic about the rape charges. There was also the implication that Blacks may be deceitful and possibly have a criminal propensity, as readers were told that the defendants in this case attempted to portray themselves during testimony as “well behaved” during the alleged crime, but the interjection of the disclaimer ‘however’ in the news report negates this claim, since two of the boys themselves admitted that they feared “the others would steal things.” It would appear that the cultural stereotype was promoted in the news that links Black youth to crime by what could be construed as a “home invasion” by reporting that “the boys forced their way into her home and took things.” The press may have reinforced the myth about the sexual deviancy of Black men by the manner with which the girl's sodomy was reported in the news. By using quotation marks to highlight the defendant's testimony about the victim supposedly stating that “if he didn't mind a little butt, then she didn't

either,” reporters attempted to malign Blacks and influence readers to share their view about this racial group.

The news article above is representative of the types of stories involving ethnic minorities in my study that were devoid of discourse structures. Although this might imply that the news agency did not partake in racist news reporting, it is possible that reporters attempted to conceal their biases about ethnic groups by employing restraint in the manner with which they reported minority crime in the news, similar to the discrete manner that the pathology discourse was conveyed in the news reporting. The news agency did not resort to euphemisms, hyperbole or false analogies in crime news reports about minorities, a decision that may have shielded them from potential allegations of racism. My discovery about the infrequent use of discourse structures in crime news reports was significant because my findings did not support van Dijk’s and Henry and Tator’s results and disputed that blatant forms of racism in news reporting is as systemic as they argue. The value of my findings is that another Canadian study can be added to the growing body of literature about the use of language in the construction of crime news.

There is another explanation as to why my research findings diverged from van Dijk’s and Henry and Tator’s results. Canada is a multicultural society where tolerance is promoted and disseminated through various governmental and non-governmental programs designed to sensitize individuals about cultural differences and diversity. So it is possible that the Canadian press reported minority crimes differently in this country than news agencies abroad. Since van Dijk’s (1993) studies focused on the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States, it is plausible that the press in those countries were less monitored and citizens more accepting of blatant forms of

racial stereotyping and prejudices than what would be accepted in Canada. It may be that the steady exposure of readers to discourse structures that stress the differences, the deviance and the threat of ethnic minorities that van Dijk identified as legitimizing oppression and marginalization may have normalized the racist stereotyping of ethnic minorities in those countries and could explain why discourse structures were prevalent in his studies but not mine.

So how do I account for Henry and Tator's results, given that their study is Canadian? They focused on four Toronto newspapers and although this would appear to contradict my statement regarding the levels of tolerance of the Canadian public about racist news reporting, the variance can be explained. Henry and Tator state that Ontario has been the mainstay of antiracist struggle for decades, primarily because the province has the largest population of people of colour, so their findings about the use of discourse structures that promote racial bias and discrimination in news reports may be more prevalent and pertinent to that particular region of Canada and not necessarily applicable to the news reporting in Atlantic Canada. Regional differences may explain why my findings digressed from their research results because it may be that news agencies in this part of the country are more cautious about the manner that minority crimes are reported in the news.

To summarize, because of the manner in which crime stories are selected for print, the picture and the information presented to the public about crime is limited and is not always reflective of the reality of crime. The media's dependence on 'official' sources to construct crime news came with a price because reporters adopted the views of their news sources, and the flow of knowledge the public received about crime and victimization was restricted by criminal justice officials and the news media. The most interesting and

valuable finding, however, was the discovery of the virtual absence of discourse structures in crime news reports about ethnic minorities. This finding was particularly relevant because it provided an opposing finding about the frequency with which racist views are supposedly promulgated in the news reporting. Although criminal stereotyping of minority defendants was not pronounced in the news reporting, it was for economically disadvantaged defendants, suggesting that this form of discrimination is still socially acceptable in creating and reporting the news. Reporters, it seems, viewed the involvement of Whites in crime as unusual because they received primary news coverage in the news. While it is well established that offenders do not indiscriminately choose their victims, I found that law enforcement and the news media continued to promote the stranger rapist myth because this type of rapist was the most frequently reported sexual offender in the news reporting. The media distorted the truth about the pervasiveness of this atypical crime and presented it as symptomatic of crime. Because the cultural phenomenon of strangers and violence has become so ingrained in our psyche, it is unlikely that this myth will be dispelled in the near future.

*Ch. 5*  
*Conclusion and Recommendations*

A crime cannot become news until it has been ‘officially’ acknowledged as such by criminal justice officials. So it is these sources that have the power to define crime as well as the authority to limit its content. What becomes troubling, however, in the news-production process is that crimes are not contextualized for the public. Official news sources are culturally accepted as ‘knowers’ of crime, so when information is released to the public, readers believe and expect that the information in the news is accurate and reliable. But the pursuit of newsworthy stories makes it more lucrative for news agencies to follow these leads than it does to report more mundane crimes. This is not to say that reporters do not provide readers with usable information about crime. But there is an inherent contradiction at times about ‘what’ types of information are represented as truth.

There are ramifications about overemphasizing dramatic crimes and presenting them as the norm. Not only do they promote myths about crime and criminals, but they lead to fears about certain crimes that, in all probability, will never affect the majority of the population. The distorted views the public form about crime and victimization have the unintended consequence of mobilizing citizens to rally for change by pressuring politicians to amend crime control policies that in all likelihood will have little or no effect on crime. We need only consider Prime Minister Harper’s recent “Tackling Violent Crime bill;” it satisfies a self-serving agenda. The bill was created to appease pressure groups angered and frustrated over the supposed escalating crime problem (i.e. gang violence in Toronto and Vancouver) and the apparent lack of deterrence in curbing the violence. He was obligated to comply with their request for harsher penalties for law

breakers; otherwise, voters may have perceived him to be “soft on crime” and this might have tarnished his public image and possibly hurt his chances for reelection.

Criminal justice sources (particularly the police) and reporters have an obligation to be forthcoming about the integrity of the information they provide to readers on the subject of crime because of the public’s reliance on that knowledge. Readers may buy newspapers to learn about crime, but the information they obtain does not always empower them with the *knowledge* they seek because, at times, the “facts” are misleading. Misconceptions about violence that arise out of the newsmaking process must be questioned because they misinform the public about some of the *actual* dangers in society. The news media are an influential force in shaping people’s beliefs and opinions, so it is crucial that reporters are more accountable about the information they disperse to citizens.

Women are often negatively represented in the news by failing to protect themselves, by expressing their sexuality or by “choosing” to remain in abusive relationships. We have to question how violent assaults against women can be reported in the news, yet paradoxically remain invisible? It would appear that the media and society have become desensitized to this social problem, because it would seem that it is commonplace. As purveyors of knowledge, we would assume that the media have a responsibility to enlighten society about matters that have a broad effect on a large proportion of the population – not only on women, but on children who, when they mature, are at a high risk to repeat the violent behaviour that they have learned in childhood, or even become victims of violence themselves – and the cycle continues.

Over time, the media have improved in their reporting of ethnic and racial minorities in the news by being more cautious about the manner with which visible

minorities are portrayed in the news. My study indicated that the news media refrained from resorting to discriminatory language in the reporting of ethnic minorities in the news, as evinced by the lack of discourse structures in my study. This finding also disputed many studies that insist that the news media regularly use racist news reporting in the presentation of minority crime. The once common practice of promulgating racist views and opinions intended to denigrate minority victims and defendants in news reports appears to have been curbed. Limiting biases and prejudices in the reporting of crime is the first step in being more accountable about the news reporting because of the power of the press to criminalize particular groups. There is room for improvement, however, because it would appear that negative stereotyping about other less powerful groups like lower status defendants abound in society, since they were unequally represented in the news coverage compared to other individuals displaying similar criminal behaviour. Damaging stereotypes about the poor are maintained by the dominant culture, and reporters are often apathetic in their approach to crime by allowing them to be used as scapegoats to make and sell the news because of their overrepresentation in news reports in my study. Since media discourses influence public perceptions, the dominant constructed reality links the poor to crime and violence, rather than addressing the social structures that enabled the problem to develop in the first place. It is always easier to “point the finger” at the problem than it is to fix it!

Based on the number of violent crimes that readers are regularly exposed to, we have to hope that the public is more discernible about media claims regarding the frequency with which certain crimes occur. For instance, the overemphasis of stranger rapes in the news is misleading both in terms of its frequency and because it deludes women into thinking that they are more apt to be attacked by strangers, when this is

merely a creation and a consequence of newsmaking. We are left to contemplate whether readers accept 'facts' as truth about the images of crime they are presented, or if they are more skeptical than they are given credit. Many researchers state that the public are not as susceptible to media manipulations as we might presume, and while some readers are astute enough to doubt media claims, there are others that are more receptive to the same assertions. Whenever particular points of view are persistently fed to the public as demonstrations of fact, we have to question if the public can detect media ploys that are intended to embellish information for sensationalism and shock value. It may well be that readers accept the media's version of the truth and buy into the construction of crime.

### *Recommendations*

I have outlined 4 recommendations for the direction of future research: (1) interviews and ethnography (2) case studies of a sensational crime (3) study of news sources (4) study of reporters (gender).

Future studies into the reporting of crime would be advantaged by including other methodologies as a way to collect the richness of subjective interpretations that qualitative data can provide. A major limit in my research was not having *interviews or ethnography* to complement my findings and provide additional insight into the newsmaking process. Using interviews, the researcher could question the reporter to determine what specific details or guiding principles he or she employs in making a determination about the merits of a story. Is there a particular strategy involved in determining newsworthiness, or do they rely more on instinct? How much freedom or leeway are they given to "run" with a story? Is there an industry standard that all news

organizations adhere to when questioning victims? How or where do they draw the line to get *the* story?

Furthermore, with participant observation, the researcher could be immersed in the reporter's environment and gain understanding about how and why reporters take a particular angle in a story. Is it a group mentality approach to a story? Do reporters and other news personnel "feed off" one another, or is it strictly competitiveness that drives them? Observing the inner-workings of the newsroom firsthand and getting an intimate portrait of the reporter in action in constructing the news story would provide a wealth of descriptive information to record and further assist in the analysis of the data that I have already collected and analyzed.

My findings were impacted by a number of celebrated stories that emerged during my study period, causing me to wonder how many stories a news agency could actually produce from one high-profile case. These are the types of stories that news agencies thrive on. Is there a point where news agencies say that an event or the details of a crime are no longer 'newsworthy' enough to maintain public interest, or does its continued existence depend on the next 'breaking story?' How far can the story be carried using repetitive facts before the agency decides to "cut it loose?" These are the types of questions that can be answered through a combination of interviews with editors, reporters and/or other news personnel and content analysis. I suggest that more *case studies* be conducted on celebrated crime stories because these are the types of crimes that produce the most crime stories, and they are the kinds of events that generate primary news coverage, including the types of crimes that misinform readers about the reality of crime. Future studies might include Chermak's method of rating story importance (primary, secondary and tertiary), as this is a wonderful tool to assist the researcher in

determining elements of newsworthiness (or lack thereof) such as the type of crime; the details of the crime; the age of the victim and defendant; the events leading up to the incident; etc. So the researcher could collect all the articles that a particular news agency published about a sensational crime, beginning with the discovery of the crime, the individual's arrest, the arraignment, the trial and then through the sentencing phase, including any appeals the case generates to assess how a story progresses via the various stages of the judicial process. How many stories are produced at the discovery stage? What did reporters say about the crime, the defendant and the victim upon the individual's arrest? What discourses are used in the news reporting of the defendant during court appearances? Is the person's social status or race discussed during any phase of the news reporting? Does the news coverage change over time? Why and with what consequences? This would provide an in-depth analysis of the data to evaluate the tactics and strategies that reporters use to sustain sensationalism.

My third recommendation is a study of *news sources*. News sources are integral players in the construction of crime, and as stated in the preceding paragraph, crimes that are dramatic enough to maintain momentum in the news should be evaluated more closely to identify who the newsmakers are in the news. During my data collection I did not track the *number* of sources per story, and, in hindsight, it would have been useful to know how many official sources were actually used in each story – mainly to ascertain if the police were cited in the same articles as judges. The manner in which I collected my data about sources prevented me from confirming that the press also relied on the police to lend additional credence to the information provided in the news accounts about the crime. It would have been interesting to see if the same sources were used throughout

each phase of the court proceedings, or whether different sources were used once the story began to change or wane in the news.

Something else that I recommend is to differentiate between the different ranks of police sources, or even if multiple police sources are used in the same story. By knowing which sources (including the number of sources) are used per story, we could determine the value that the news agency places on specific types of crimes. Were the same sources used in high-profile cases as in other serious crime incidents? Did they vary by level of story importance (i.e. secondary and tertiary)? What was the officer's rank in celebrated cases? How often were other criminal justice sources (Crown) used in the story? All these elements are beneficial for future research, in the analysis of celebrated cases, specifically.

As for the last recommendation, I suggest that a *study of reporters* be conducted to determine whether or not the slant a story takes is impacted by the reporter's gender. It is supposed that women working in male-dominated professions such as reporters sometimes adopt the viewpoints of their male colleagues/counterparts in the reporting of violence against women. It was evident by reading some of my sampled news articles that they were written by men, based on the discourse found within the story, and the gender of reporters was often apparent even before confirming it through the byline. One particularly condescending and critical news article written about a victim's actions prior to her rape left me surprised when I discovered that the reporter in the story was a woman. Apparently, she espoused the stereotypical views of her colleagues regarding victim blaming in cases of rape, and this made me think about the frequency with which this occurs with other women reporters. Was this case an anomaly, or was it prevalent in newsrooms?

Although this case was only one, it raised questions about the supposed impartiality of news reporting. Are women reporters assigned to cover specific stories because of their gender? Does a reporter's gender grant access to higher-level official sources, or are reporters treated equally by news sources? It has been suggested by Ross (1998) that news sources consider women reporters as possible dates, so does this imply that they are given the story because they are women? If this is so, do sources provide different information when reporters are women that they are attracted to? All these questions and issues must be examined to better understand the image of crime that is presented in the news. Judging by the types of questions I have raised, interviews and/or participant observation were suited as methodologies to complement content analysis which can not provide answers to these important questions.

This study showed that the portrait presented to the public about crime is not generally reflective of the reality of crime because of the emphasis on incidents that are unlikely to occur. Readers rely on news agencies to keep informed about matters that affect them, but, oftentimes, the information they provide is misleading and insufficient to allow the public to make informed decisions regarding crime and victimization. Readers are inundated with media images that, to a large extent, incompletely and inaccurately represent the nature of violence.

There is little doubt that the news media are key players in perpetuating myths. They select news stories that support their viewpoints about crime and persuade the public to do in kind by disproportionately highlighting offences that fit (and strengthen) existing cultural stereotypes about individuals involved in crime and victimization. This encourages the public to form particular and often negative evaluations about defendants and victims in the news reporting and results in certain groups being regarded as deviant.

The placement of crime information within the layout of the newspaper, including the amount of news space the story occupies are other measures with which to gauge the importance that news agencies place on particular crimes, victims and defendants, as their participation in the newsmaking process impacts upon the “newsworthy” element of crime news.

Our society is dependent upon a system of communication for the dissemination of information. Technological advances have further improved methods of communication, so given the public’s easy access to information using these different forms of transmission, it is imperative that the facts that individuals receive about crime in the news are accurate. Media practices in which details are manipulated, border on irresponsibility because it is knowledge that is circulated via inaccuracies and it influences public perceptions about crime and victimization. Readers, my study suggests, would be better served if they developed a “healthy dose” of skepticism about the quality of the information they receive in the media.

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