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## **Discourses of Blame: An Analysis of Media Coverage in the Robert Pickton Case**

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**ABSTRACT:** When most Canadians consume their news media, they don't often consider the underlying narratives of colonialism, racism, and classism that can be spread through media representations of marginalized peoples. Such is the case with Indigenous women in Canada, who die violently at five times the rate of other Canadian women, but are given three and a half times less coverage in the media than white women for similar cases. News media articles covering Indigenous women's deaths are also less in-depth and less likely to make the front page. Prior to the apprehension of Robert "Willy" Pickton in 2002, media coverage of the dozens of missing women on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside was minimal, and often portrayed the women as the harbingers of their own misfortune. The Vancouver Police Department also failed to take action, citing the women's "transient lifestyles" as reason to believe they would return soon. However, even after widespread recognition of the issue began, media coverage continued to attribute a level of "blameworthiness" to the missing and murdered by regularly engaging with tropes and stereotypes that individualized the acts of violence against them. In this paper, I look to explore that phenomenon by asking how the women of the Downtown Eastside are named as culpable or blameworthy in the violence enacted against them, as evidenced in the media coverage of the Robert Pickton case. My analysis found that while an identifiable killer like Pickton provided the news media a temporary cause for the women's deaths, sex-working and drug using women maintained blame in the public eye both during and long after the case, due in equal parts to their use of drugs, their status as sex workers, and their proximity to "tainted" geographical regions like the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. As evidenced by this research, Indigenous women are continually and systemically blamed for the violence enacted against them.

*Keywords:* MMIWG, sex work, media bias, Downtown Eastside, gendered violence

In some way or another, most Canadians regularly consume news media. Be it through papers or television updates or, increasingly, the use of social media, the regular consumption of news media is a huge source of collective knowledge in Canadian society. However, news media coverage is by no means unbiased, and has been historically known for its allegiance to systemic narratives of racism, sexism, and colonialism. At the intersection of all three of those issues sits media coverage of Indigenous women, who

are one of the nation's most marginalized and at-risk populations. Indigenous women die violently at five times the rate of other Canadian women, but are given three and a half times less coverage than white women for similar cases; articles are also less in-depth and less likely to make the front page (Gilchrist, 2010:373). The media perpetuates colonial systems of violence against Indigenous women by constructing a hierarchy of victimhood, where the more "relatable" stories of white women sit front

and centre, while both the individual and systemic issues affecting Indigenous women go largely unmentioned. This hierarchy was especially evident in the coverage of the infamous Robert Pickton case, wherein Pickton abducted and murdered at least 49 women from the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver without detection. Pickton was allowed to carry out his violence for years without repercussion, while the news, the police, and the state turned a blind eye, largely because of who the missing women were; drug users, sex workers, the poor, and the Indigenous were deemed unworthy of saving.

To better understand the nature of the news media coverage surrounding the missing and murdered indigenous women in this case, 29 articles were analyzed from the two highest circulation papers in British Columbia, *The Province* and *The Sun*, using four theoretical frames. The frames include the pathological deviant, or how Indigenous lives are seen as inherently helpless beyond repair; the Madonna and the whore, which positions women as good versus bad depending on their conformity to traditional feminine traits; spatialization, or the way certain spaces become containers and stages for disordered behavior and deviant people; and the single deranged male, a news media narration that blames solely the perpetrator for the violence committed against women, instead of positioning their lack of safety as a failure of the state.

These lenses are used to explore how Indigenous women are ignored or even blamed for their participation in the violence that is committed against them, and how news media ignores the larger social factors that push Indigenous women into these positions of danger.

### **I. Research Topic & Significance of Study**

Since the 1980s, more than 500 Indigenous women and girls in Canada have

gone missing (Gilchrist, 2010; Jiwani & Young, 2006). More than 70 of these disappearances have occurred amongst women inhabiting Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, an area known well for its relationship with drugs, poverty, and the sex trade. Prior to the apprehension of Robert "Willy" Pickton in 2002 for two counts of first-degree murder, both pertaining to missing Downtown Eastside women, media coverage of the missing women was minimal and often portrayed sex workers as the harbingers of their own misfortune. Despite loud public outcry and annual demonstrations from the families of the continually disappearing women, the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) also failed to take action, citing the women's "transient lifestyles" as reason to believe they would return soon enough (Pitman, 2002). It wasn't until 1998 when reporters from the *Vancouver Sun* began publishing a series of stories on the increasing numbers of missing women that the concern began to gain traction both locally and nationally, as more and more stories hit the newsstands about these disappearing women. However, even after widespread recognition of the issue began, media coverage continued to attribute a level of culpability to the missing and murdered by regularly engaging with tropes and stereotypes that individualize acts of violence against them (Lindberg et al., 2012).

This historical practice of blame is part of what Gilchrist (2010) describes as the "symbolic annihilation" of Indigenous women, which contributes to their continued exclusion and marginalization in a variety of social structures, including in news media (p. 385). Whether erased entirely or conjured into symbolic "folk devils" of deviance and degeneracy, Indigenous women are routinely othered in the media, especially in the context of sex work (Hugill, 2014). Their bodies and their neighborhoods are utilized as distinctive social indicators to make clear the boundaries

of what Razack (1998) calls race and space, which she argues creates the perfect conditions for violence against women to occur with impunity.

Pickton's eventual confession to 49 murders was consumed by the media with fervor, and he was quickly constructed as the perfect predator, or as I call it, the single deranged male. I argue this construction of Pickton may have changed the dynamic of news media coverage of the women as victims and redirected some of the blame for this violence onto Pickton himself. Analyzing articles from the periods before his apprehension, during the period between his release and re-apprehension, and after charges had been laid, I will analyze the four discourses in an attempt to distinguish a change in perceived culpability towards the women. Through this analysis, I hope to untangle some of the intricate connections between the common discourses of race, place, and gender, and to explore the processes by which Indigenous women become depicted in the media as complicit in their own deaths. As well, I will attempt to uncover the impact that the "single deranged male" narrative has on the women's own victim status. In analyzing a variety of newspaper articles from before, during, and after Robert Pickton's arrest, I aim to gain insight as to whether the language used to describe sex workers and the harm that comes to them fluctuates when there is a figure to "blame" for their misfortune. I would also like to examine how the rhetoric of "high risk lifestyle" is mitigated or exaggerated in the context of a visualized, named predator. Analysis into the overlapping factors of oppression that often culminate in participation in the sex trade is critical to understanding the violence that affects sex workers at an endemic level. Media is a crucial avenue of exploration, as news media is widely known to influence stigmas and stereotypes of marginalized peoples, and

further enforce gendered and racialized binaries (Gilchrist, 2010; Pitman, 2002).

## **II. Research Question**

How are the women of the Downtown Eastside named as culpable or blameworthy in the violence enacted against them, as evidenced in the media coverage of the Robert Pickton case?

## **III. Literature Review**

The inspiration for this research comes mainly from the media analyses of Jiwani & Young (2006) and Hugill (2014), who have each researched the impact of news media narratives on women on the Downtown Eastside by analyzing newspaper texts released both before and after Pickton's incarceration.

I will begin with exploring the discourse of spatialization through Hugill's piece "Dazed, Dangerous, and Dissolute," which investigates the ways in which the imagery of the Downtown Eastside becomes associated with poverty and deviance, not only as a physical space but also as a symbolic one (2014). When all of the "immorality" of deviant lifestyles are collected into one neatly packaged area, it becomes what Culhane (2003), Hugill (2014), and Jiwani and Young (2006) all identify as a place that can be easily forgotten and classified as "waste" (Razack, 2016:291).

Hugill (2014) discusses the ways in which physical space becomes associated with decency or degeneracy, and how deviant spaces become seen as a "shared destiny" (p. 138) for all their inhabitants. Lowman also discusses the formation of this space, and argues that as society shifts, those deemed degenerate are intentionally isolated into these hopeless locales (2000). This space becomes what Razack (1998) calls a "cordon sanitaire," designed to prevent the contagion of immorality from spreading to the "good" citizenry (p. 367). Over time, these neglected

spaces, and the people within them, become naturalized as deviants, and function as a tangible storefront of opportunities for domination (Razack, 1998). This increased observation into degenerate spaces, especially by news media, has led to what Lowman (2000) defines as the “discourse of disposal,” wherein women are seen as disposable, allowing violence to be committed against them without pause (p. 1003).

I believe it is also worth noting the recurrence of the word “transient” in media and police coverage of the situation. As Hugill and Razack write, neo-liberal nationalism has created a language of belonging in a select time and space. Belonging depends on the concretization of participation in the social sphere, and as such, when sex workers are regularly dismissed as transient, their displacement comes to be seen as a pathological aspect of their existence, effectively eliminating their position of belonging in society (Razack, 1998). Pitman (2002) argues that identities of deviance become symbolically tied to a city’s identity, which further enforces a “good/bad” binary by depicting those who live there as “a world apart” from “normal” society (p. 180). This vivid illustration of the bad neighborhood also sets the stage for “morality tales,” or repetitive tropes that clearly communicate norm violations, such as drug use and sex work, and the associated consequences (Pitman, 2002, p. 179). An excellent example of this can be seen in this case study, when the missing poster for the disappeared sex workers distributed by the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) listed them not as Vancouver women, but women from the Downtown Eastside (Pitman, 2002).

Jiwani and Young’s analysis more largely focuses on what McLaughlin (1991) has identified as the Madonna/whore dichotomy. This framework suggests that women and our perceptions of them are defined in relation to existing structures of heteronormativity, wherein women are

redeemed by their ability to fit into these structures, or regarded as worthless for their failure to conform to them. Within this framework, the authors identify the ways that violence against these women becomes individualized, and more specifically, how their perceived degeneracy and lack of morality contributes to discourses of blame for their victimhood. Narratives about sex workers are compounded by news media’s reporting on them as largely poor, Indigenous women, which has consequences for Indigenous communities in life as well as in death. They argue that, in creating a ‘degenerate’ characterization of the women that occupy the Downtown Eastside, a binary is inherently created that allows for the presence of the good girl, or the Madonna. In fact, this binary is reinforced so often that Indigenous women have become fully associated with the whore identification – violent, drug addled, licentious, and dangerous (Jiwani & Young, 2006; Razack, 2016). Victimhood becomes patterned, and specific types of women are separated from victimhood by virtue of their race and class, while Indigenous women are assumed to fit the pattern. It becomes socially accepted that being Indigenous is simply an inmitigable risk factor (Lindberg et al., 2012). This results in what Jiwani and Young (2006) have identified as the dichotomy of invisible and hypervisible – “Invisible as victims of violence and hypervisible as deviant bodies” (p. 89). However, it is critical to note that the connotation of a drug-using, sex working Indigenous woman is rarely offset in media by the larger social context of racism and colonialism that surrounds Indigenous women’s victimization (Jiwani & Young, 2006; Lindberg et al., 2012).

This Madonna/whore dichotomy, Pitman (2002) argues, functions to provide a sort of boogey man for the status quo, a narrative which warns white suburban women that if you don’t behave like “them”, you won’t end

up like “them” (p. 180). Lowman (2000) expands on this, arguing that the lesson portrayed is not to avoid things that will bring you harm, but instead to simply avoid being mistaken for a prostitute, as prostitutes are perceived as “throwaway people” whose victimization is justified by their whore status (p. 995). This speaks to Lowman’s characterization of certain places as transforming the bodies within them to deviants, and also speaks to McLaughlin’s (1991) notion that while any woman can be raped, prostitution only “happens” to certain people in certain places.

Counter-framing this discourse is the Madonna, structured around dialogues of family and friends. Missing women’s respectability and humanity is reaffirmed through traditional tropes of the good woman – the daughter, the sister, and the mother. These frames contrast the sex workers as they are, presently, with how it’s believed they should behave, according to common conceptions of femininity and understandings of the “good” and “bad” woman (McLaughlin, 1991). This contrast is often also employed to provide a primer or a background to stories of the women’s fall from grace, or as Hugill (2014) calls it, “the descent” (p. 135).

Sex work, substance use, and poverty have also been pathologized, especially in relation to Indigenous women, associating their position amongst drugs and the sex trade as a chronic and inescapable way of being. Razack (2016) phrases this as “Indigenous pathology,” referring to the ways in which the danger Indigenous women face every day is explained away through their “high risk lifestyles” or violence from “their own” (that is to say Indigenous) men (p. 306). Culhane (2003) and McLaughlin (1991) also explore the “chronic hooker” and the addict, and the ways these two super statuses are pathologized as precursors to poverty. Instead of holding poverty responsible as the cause for these social phenomena, sex workers are seen

as poor because of their complete lack of control. Prostitution is seen as a compulsion, equally as powerful as drug addiction, that holds women captive while simultaneously portraying them as unwilling to change. McLaughlin references Foucault’s (1991) conceptualizations of sex, implying that the pathologizing of prostitution is in actuality a pathologizing of women’s sexuality. This, in turn, posits women as victims of their own sexuality, as well as perpetrators, for inducing and entertaining the immoral sexuality of others. As well as sexuality and Indigeneity, Razack argues that displacement itself has become pathologized. As mentioned earlier, nationalism has constructed displacement as a binary antithesis to belonging, which Razack believes has pathologized displacement into a chronic condition. Thus, the perception of transient women becomes one of a group of people who will never properly adjust to “normal” society, and thus should be left out of it, continuing historic notions of the “uncivilized” nature of Indigenous peoples (Jiwani & Young, 2006). As a majority of sex-workers on the Downtown Eastside are homeless or in tenuous housing situations, their spatialization compounds with the notion of the chronic hooker and pathological deviant to geographically construct a group of people undeserving of victim status or understanding.

Another critical aspect of pathologizing I’d like to explore is Razack’s discussion of “thingness,” a concept originally posited by Alexander Weheliye (2016, p. 295). I would argue that the way Indigenous women’s bodies and lifestyles have been medicalized and pathologized has led to a common understanding among colonizers of their position as objects as opposed to humans. Razack (2016) argues that for Indigenous women, sex work is often the pathway through which colonizers exhibit force and domination over racialized bodies, a process enabled by their identity as “things.” Because of the pathological othering of Indigeneity and

Indigenous life that is regularly displayed in the media and the criminal justice system, it is understood that the Indigenous body has been, and will continue to be, an encouraged place to express “political domination” and “colonial masculinity” which has led to a medical model of understanding that posits Indigenous women as inevitably damaged and inherently disposable (Razack, 2016, p. 295).

Lastly, I’d like to explore a frame I identify as the single deranged male. Though somewhat crass, the phrase “if it bleeds, it leads” is accurate when it comes to what makes the news. Jiwani and Young posit that newsworthiness is most commonly found in the reporting of homicides, and the sensationalism surrounding these stories only increases in the case of a serial killer (2006). However, because of the desire for these sensationalist stories, news media often has a tendency to ignore the systemic issues surrounding violence. Jiwani and Young (2006), Pitman (2002), Lowman (2000), Culhane (2003), Razack (2016) and Hugill (2014) all discuss the willingness of the media to buy in to depictions of sex worker’s attackers as deranged individuals, hunting down women to fulfill some sort of compulsive need for violence. Creating this framework allows us to maintain the narrative that violent men are not, in fact, everywhere, but function as single outliers who have strayed away from the social order (Jiwani & Young, 2006). This individualized perspective allows for the Madonna/whore dichotomy to continue, by making these women responsible for being in situations where the social norms are more likely to be ignored (Hugill, 2014). If men are labelled as mentally unwell, there is no need to address the serious systemic issues underlying the violence, which allows us to continue participating in what Culhane (2003) identifies as “race blindness” – that is pretending we are all equally vulnerable to the same forms of marginalization. (p. 595). This

is all despite the fact that Lowman (2000) and many other scholars agree that the murder of sex workers is not the responsibility of a single killer, but is a “systemic pattern of violence” (p. 998).

While all the articles focused on the gendered relations that often make up sex trade activity, I noted that none of the authors made a point to acknowledge the often-compounding factors of queerness and Indigeneity. It is well known that LGBTQ and two-spirit sex workers are some of the most victimized of any sex worker demographic, and I believe it would have enhanced the analysis to explore the importance of changing gender and sexual identities amongst street-based workers. Further, I believe this research would benefit from a significantly larger sample size, so as to explore the media trends not just within British Columbia, but across Canada, considering the case has received both national and global attention.

#### IV. Methodology

To gather the texts being analyzed in this research project I utilized the database Canadian Newsstream, provided through the University of Alberta library database system. I used the initial keywords “prostitute” or “sex trade worker” or “hooker” or “whore” and applied filters after the initial search to narrow the results. I implemented custom date limitations to correlate with key moments in the case. Because the first news stories broke in relation to Pickton on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2002, I began the search dates exactly one month before, on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2002. The end search date was set as March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2002, exactly one month after Pickton was apprehended and charged. This time frame was chosen to encompass articles that discuss sex workers both before the introduction of Pickton as a suspect, and after his identification as a perpetrator, so as to potentially illustrate a change in blameworthy language over time

and across publications. In applying more filters to the search, I chose to narrow down by publication name, choosing the two highest circulation papers in the local region, *the Vancouver Sun* and *the Province*. This search with these three key filters resulted in approximately 80 results, which I then pared down by removing editorials and duplicates, of which there were many. In the case of articles that had two editions, national and provincial, I selected provincial iterations to provide a more boots-on-the-ground understanding of local coverage. The outcome was 29 articles for analysis; 18 from *The Sun* and 11 from *The Province*.

To analyze the texts acquired, I utilized a combination of quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis. For content analysis, I created a codebook with eight variables to track common tropes in news reporting of the Downtown Eastside, like mentions of race, substance use, parental status, and interviewees known to the victim, as well as more systemically inclined variables, like spatialization, depictions of perpetrator mental illness, and acknowledgement of systemic social issues. I kept the codebook small in order to provide a clear snapshot of the composite changes in writing style as they move through the various time periods, and intend to more heavily rely on discourse analysis. Creating the codebook was a critical step in creating clear categories of analysis to streamline and focus the research (Trimble & Treiberg, 2015:233).

For qualitative analysis, I challenged tropes and frames commonly utilized in news media in order to examine the meanings and representations that are conveyed through discourse, in an effort to “expose everyday understandings of social and political life” through minute textual details (Trimble & Treiberg, 2015, p. 228). Through an exploration of the four main discourse frameworks discussed in my literature review, including the pathological deviant, the

Madonna and the whore, spatialization, and the single deranged male, I aimed to notice patterns of language and narration that reflect how said discourses become structured, and how institutions are able to direct and denote culpability.

## V. Findings

Despite the use of a relatively small sample size, all of the articles provided fruitful information and rich content on which to conduct analysis. The first variable coded for, race, is not directly related to any of the qualitative frames, but was instead intended to offer a statistical lens into who exactly is recognized as a vulnerable population in the news media. Of the 29 articles examined, only 2 of the articles directly mentioned the race of the victims, using phrasing like “aboriginal Abbotsway” and “a tiny 31-year-old native woman” (Bolan, 2002a; Douglas, 2002). Of the two articles previously mentioned, one also made reference to a different woman’s Cambodian ethnicity, and one additional article indirectly mentioned race through descriptions of the woman as blond with blue eyes (Bolan, 2002a). Overall, race was mentioned directly and indirectly in only 10.1% of articles examined. These findings are significant considering 50-80% of the sex-workers on the Downtown Eastside are Indigenous, and it is estimated that anywhere from 33-67% of Robert Pickton’s final victim count were Indigenous women. Of the six murders Pickton was convicted of, four were Indigenous women (Hugill, 2010:46; Razack, 2016:294). This refusal by the news media to acknowledge the obviously differential suffering experienced by Indigenous women in Vancouver contributes to the erasure of Indigenous women’s stories. To add to this, the news media frenzy that happened as Pickton’s story leaked to the public created a sensationalized lore surrounding what happened to the missing and murdered Indigenous women of Vancouver, gorily

detailing violence and disembodiment, despite for many years prior ignoring equally pressing stories of Indigenous women's disappearances. The implication of such coverage is that the epidemic violence committed against these women is normal and thus not deserving of coverage, or is simply "a lack of respect for women and girls on reserves" enacted by Indigenous men and Indigenous men only (Kappo, 2014, para. 15). Ultimately the blame for Indigenous women's victimization is laid at the feet of Indigenous communities themselves, not the systems that have created the involved social structures.

The lack of regular coverage of these crimes seemingly stems from a near compulsive desire for "exotic" forms of violence, or what Indigenous author Dara Culhane (2003) identifies as outside of the "ordinary and mundane brutality of everyday poverty" (p. 595). In vigorously covering sensationalistic stories associated with Indigenous women and girls, while ignoring the omnipresent threat of violence that faces this population, the "normal" or non-sensational depictions of Indigenous women's murders are seen as standard and in no need of coverage.

The second variable coded for was the presence of drug or alcohol abuse mentioned in reference to the victims. Substance use was coded simply as 0 or 1, mentioned or not mentioned. Of the 29 articles, substance use is explicitly listed as a characteristic of the missing women in 18 of the articles, for a total representation of 62%. Of the 18 articles that feature substance abuse, half of those mentioned drug or alcohol abuse in the headline, byline, or very first paragraph. This is significant, given that the headlines act as what David Hugill (2014) identifies as "cognitive organizers," which set the tone for how we perceive the rest of the information portrayed in the article (p. 137). This exemplifies the way in which news media typically assigns drug use and the deviance

associated therein as a master status to those who are victimized as a method of delegitimizing victimization of "disposable" bodies and assigned blame to the victims themselves (Jiwani & Young, 2006, p. 900). Often the drug use was mentioned in same breath as the women's relation to sex work, such as "Debra, age unknown, was a known drug user and sex trade worker in the Downtown Eastside when she disappeared" ("The Missing," 2002). In this same article, 50 other women's names and information were listed alongside their mugshots. Of the fifty names on the list, 33 of them (66%) are described in their one sentence biography as a sex trade worker and drug user. Some feeble attempt is made to humanize the women, though often this falls short. For example: "Diana, 20, always had her hair in a ponytail and was a drug user and sex trade worker in the area of Victoria and Hastings" ("The Missing," 2002, para. 15). Also worth noting is that this often repeated yet frequently remodelled phrase hits on two key frames: spatialization, through the geographically relevant notation of two Downtown Eastside crossroads, and the pathological deviant, due to the woman's entire identity being taken up by deviant labelling.

The amount of substance use mentioned in the articles varied throughout the phases of Pickton's arrest and apprehension. In period one, prior to the direct involvement of Pickton in the storytelling, eight out of ten articles featured references to substance. Contrastingly, in period two, when Pickton is arrested, released, re-apprehended, and charged, the number of articles featuring drug use plummets significantly, featured in only three out of eleven articles. However, this cessation of drug use as a primary story-telling agent is short lived, as in period three, the number of articles that feature substance use jumps back up to eight out of ten articles. I hypothesize that this is in part due to the distraction offered in speculating on the life



and habits of Robert Pickton and the identification of a potential serial killer, which provides a temporary abdication from sex-workers as blameworthy in their own victimization. However, this understanding of blame and violence is not built to last, and appears to be only a fleeting change in perspective that is not strong enough to drown out existing social narratives of substance use and deviance.

I also analyzed parental status and character references to determine the frequency of redemptive or damning tactics in telling the story of Downtown Eastside women. The importance of this coding is paralleled in the framework of the Madonna and the whore, where a sex worker is redeemed through her relation to traditionally “good” people, like their children, parents, and or other street-involved or community people. Parental status was codified as a simple mentioned or not mentioned response, and five articles made mention of the parental status of a missing or murdered woman, for a total of 17%. Three of the articles fall in period one, and two are in two. There were no articles that mentioned motherhood in period three.

The articles I examined displayed a different tone to what I had initially hypothesized, which was that children would be used to humanize and soften the depiction of the murdered woman in question, based on the Madonna and whore dichotomy as described in Jiwan & Young (2006, p. 900). On the contrary, the tone of many of the articles utilized the mention of children almost as an accusation or example of the unfitness of the mother, alongside her occupation and her substance use. While all but one of the articles also mentioned positive and touching characteristics of motherhood, they were often abruptly juxtaposed with the pathological deviance that ripped these women from “normal” motherhood. For example, in this article written in period one by Kim Bolan

(2002b) of the *Vancouver Sun*, a woman whose body has been found is named in the title as a “mother of three”, and in the byline and the second paragraph she is bluntly described as being a crack cocaine user and a sex worker. Several paragraphs later, her parental status is mentioned again: “her cousin said she believes the mother of three was murdered,” it reads. The very next sentence continues, “Williams smoked crack cocaine” (2002b). The proximity of the woman’s motherhood to her drug use is a frame utilized by the news media to act as a reminder of deviant behaviour. In reminding the audience of the presence of a child in an already tragic environment, those that are posited as bringing the children into such a cruel world are constructed in the public perception as an inherently villainous, unredeemable figure. The women are deemed culpable in their assaults by virtue of their perceived inability to maintain their maternal instinct.

However, there are also positive depictions of the women with their children, though they often occur later on in the article, after the sensationalism has been spun. Towards the end of the article Bolan (2002b) writes from Williams’ funeral “Speaker after speaker told of [her] friendly, easy-going manner and her love and commitment to her children, of whom she was hoping to regain custody.” It is worth noting that while her attempts to restore the connection with her children are potentially redemptive, this quote is the only positive sentence about her parenthood in the article, and it is written in conjunction with her deviant status. In positioning the woman as a loving parent, though a failure at retaining custody, we are reminded of her deviance. This exact juxtaposition can also be seen in another of Bolan’s articles (2002a), where he writes “her family is devastated about the loss of the woman they called “an absolute angel” who was committed to beating a drug problem to regain custody of her children.”

To further assist in analyzing the Madonna and the whore trope and the potential redemptive language attributed to sex-working women, I chose to analyze and code data on who speaks for and about these missing women. To do this, I coded according to three main relational subgroups who spoke in the articles either about either the women specifically or the general situation, either via direct quote or through the authors words. The three relational subgroups were 1) immediate friends and family of one of the victims, 2) other street involved people, be they employers, friends or acquaintances, and also including local community-based organizations, and 3) people in positions of authority or otherwise unrelated to the victims. As well as police, emergency responders, and academics, subgroup three was expanded to include comments from neighbours, non-Downtown Eastside based services, and more. I also coded the values of 0, for no applicable character references, and for 4, meaning multiple types of reference in one article, at which point the multiple subgroups themselves were also coded down to the individual reference form. Nine of the articles were coded as having multiple references, and as such there is some overlap in the total observed percentages. Of the 29 articles analyzed, six had no character reference, quotable or otherwise, to elaborate on the victim(s) and their experience. In these articles, the narrative was entirely constructed by the author and provided little humanity or personalization to the victims. The articles are evenly spread in timing across all three categories.

11 of the articles (38%) feature interviews or statements from close family friends of the victims. This number is more than I originally would have expected, considering the tendency of the authors to assign drug use and sex work as the women's master statuses, however it is worth noting that the content in four of the articles containing input from

family and friends is little more than one or two sentences. Further, the familial aspect of the women's lives is often rapidly juxtaposed alongside their deviant identities as sex workers, street people, and substance users. 10 articles (34%) fell under subgroup two, which included other street-based people like fellow users or women who may have worked the streets with them, street-involved boyfriends and friends, and extended to community-based organizations like WISH Society and Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education Society (PACE). Interestingly, 4 out of the 10 subgroup two articles provided character references from associated members of local churches, including a pastor, two reverends, and a teacher who was introduced to a missing woman through a church program. I found this interesting considering the context of the missing women's relation to the church is often not in relation to their personal religiosity, but instead comes from their proximity to social services offered by the church. Further, four other articles (14%) featured in subgroup two reference local, community-based non-profits, like WISH Drop-In Society, Pace, and others. One article went fairly in-depth in the local community, citing three non-government organizational representatives in one two-page article, which is surprising considering only the one article previously mentioned consulted with more than one community-based resource. This seems shocking, considering community partners are likely the people who should be able to provide investigative journalists with the most information given their direct lived experience of working with street-based women. However, it is also somewhat surprising that a number as statistically significant as 14% can be attributed to the voices of community organizers, as within "tough on crime" (2015, Comack, Fabre & Burgher) political environments that tend to vilify drug users and sex workers as drains on society, non-government organizations can

often be seen as enablers of deviant and/or licentious behaviour.

The most frequent relational references are those in subgroup three, including the RCMP, VPD, other agencies or persons unrelated personally to a missing or murdered victim. Subgroup three references were present in 16 out of the 29 articles, comprising a total of 55%. One of the most commonly cited speakers in this category is VPD media liaison officer Constable Catherine Galliford. Galliford, who “speaks for the missing women task force” is utilized as a consistent representative figure and face of the RCMP (Kines & Bolan, 2002a). I believe, given the regularity with which Galliford’s voice is used to answer tough questions asked by media, that her status as a woman is utilized as a tool to soften the criticisms of racism and sexism being faced by Vancouver police in the case. I also believe that the prevalence of police voices in this reporting is significant, as it contributes to the perception of police voices as the most trustworthy and necessary, above and beyond the families and friends of the women who cry out for justice that has gone unserved. It is particularly telling that over half of the total articles feature input from police, despite one of the running theories surrounding the mass of disappearances being police incompetence and discrimination.

Beyond input from the RCMP and the VPD, both as organizations and from individuals within the organization, there is also interesting commentary from the Mayor of Port Coquitlam, multiple “concerned” community residents, a representative from the Vancouver SPCA, an anthropologist from Simon Fraser University and several references unrelated to the women, from friends of Robert Pickton. Seven total articles feature commentary from someone not associated with law enforcement and mostly unrelated to the victims, such as those mentioned above, though all of these articles also include input from law enforcement

agencies. In the case of the concerned neighbours, they seem to exist in the narratives to serve as what Beverly Pitman refers to as a “morality tale”, to provide urgency and proximity to the deviant behaviours taking in place in what “should” be a non-deviant space (Pitman, 2002, p. 179). These quotes serve to not only villainize sex workers and drug users, but also to spatialize “their” neighbourhoods as a world apart from the world these women live in. For example, one article is titled “One community’s victory is another’s new problem” and goes on to use buzzwords like “hookers and dopers” and “thieves and hookers” and “criminals and hookers” to create a correlative habitus between sex work and illicit and dangerous activity. As the interviewee in the article continues “We are not ever going back to where I have to walk my kids past prostitutes on the way to school,” the physical importance of moral taint is clearly portrayed (“One community’s victory,” 2002). In another example of the erasure of the humanity of missing and murdered women, one article from period two and subgroup three contains no reference to the anything personal about the four murdered women, other than where their bodies were found and their status as sex workers, but contains three entire paragraphs referring to the welfare of animals found on Pickton’s farm, including direct interviews with a manager at the British Columbia SPCA. While the women’s names are only mentioned three times with no personal or identifying information, there is a full inventory listed of exactly what and how many animals were taken from the farm, and the quote from the SPCA reads

“*“Our concern ultimately was for the health of the animals and it felt the best thing for the animals was to remove them from the site,”* said Shawn Eccles, manager of field operations [emphasis added]” (Jiwa, 2002, para. 3)

From this quote and the structuring of the article, it is clear which lives are prioritized more heavily by news media. The coverage of animal lives at a higher frequency than those of missing and murdered women contributes to what Razack identifies as the “colonial story of whose bodies have value,” as emphasized by news discourse (Razack, 2016, p. 291).

In order to speak to the importance of spatialization in determining the blame attributed to victims, I also coded for spatialization as a variable. I coded for any articles which specifically placed the women on the Downtown Eastside, distinctly placed them outside the Downtown East side, or a mixture of both. Overall, 23 of the 29 articles explicitly mentioned the women’s association with the Downtown Eastside in their reporting for a total of 79%, showing the prevalence of linkage between the deviance of sex work with the spatialized area of the Downtown Eastside. I had hypothesized that spatialization would be the key in determining culpability in missing and murdered sex workers, but five articles that made no mention of the Downtown Eastside as a factor in the women’s lives and disappearances show resistance in using spatialization explicitly, even when the option is readily available through the content of the article. For example, instead of referring to the Downtown Eastside, the authors discuss “the North Shore”, “the Lower Mainland”, “in the last decade in B.C.” and reference to the murder site via “Port Coquitlam” though not the originating location of the murdered women (“Killings may hold clue”, 2002; Berry, 2002; Jiwa, 2002; Tonner, 2002). These examples are interesting, as they step outside of the critical spatialized identifiers that Razack (1998) coins “zones of degeneracy” (p. 339).

The last variable that I analyzed was the prevalence of notions of insanity or psychopathy in association with the murderer

of the women, which contributes to the frame I identify as the single derange male. I coded for this information using three variables, including 1) the mental illness of the perpetrator is named directly, either by a justice or medical official, 2) the mental illness of the offender is speculated through words like crazy, insane, psycho, stalking, predator, etc., and lastly, 0) which was a code for no mention of mental illness, speculated or otherwise.

Six of the 29 articles pointed to the presence of a singular crazed psychopath in relation to the murders of the women, for a total of just over 20%. This framing is significant, as it shifts blame entirely to a conjured image of an unhinged individual instead of discussing the endemic levels of violence that are faced by marginalized women, and in particular Indigenous women, and the negligence and racism from several systems that contributes further to this oppression. Coding examples of this value include headlines, like “Violence stalks Downtown Eastside [emphasis added]”, quotes, like “a *serial killer* may be *preying* on the vulnerable women of the Downtown Eastside [emphasis added]” and even bylines, like “investigators searching for a *serial killer* believed to be *hunting* prostitutes in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside” (“Missing-women list grows to 50”, 2002; Bolan, 2002c; Tanner, 2002a).

What was even more surprising about this level of analysis was that nearly the same number of articles positioned Pickton after his arrest and charge, both in period two and period three, as a colloquial “good guy” and pillar of the community – shocking considering in period two he had been charged with weapons offenses, and in period three with multiple homicides. References from close friends as well as acquaintances provided insight that contrasted the accusations Pickton faced both during the initial arrest period and after charging. Character references included people Pickton

sold pigs to, neighbours of the farm, and even a woman known to “party” with Pickton who claimed to have “known him for years” (Kines & Bolan, 2002d). This and other articles go on to describe Pickton as a ““nice caring man” who likes to help out single mothers in the community” and an “honest and generous” person and “very nice community-minded [man]” (Kines & Bolan, 2002d; Kines & Bolan, 2002c). Considering he snuffed out the lives of dozens of women, it is truly telling that the media would still attempt to make Pickton a redeemable figure, often at the expense of the deceased women.

## VI. Discussion

Aligning with my initial suspicions, the pathological deviant frame remained true in relation to drug use and sex work, though not in relation to race. I had initially hypothesized that due to racialized understandings of trauma and substance use, Indigeneity would be a key factor comprising the basis of the pathological deviant, but racial identity was absent from almost all of the news coverage examined. Addictions and status as sex workers, however, were relegated as a master status in the identities of the missing and murdered women. This frame functioned to position the missing as fallen women, out of control, unable to fight back against their addictions and abuses, yet still degenerate enough to continue deviant behaviours. This deviancy discouraged sympathizing with the women, ultimately critiquing their deaths as nothing more than the product of bad decision making. In creating imagery of the missing women as junkies, hungry enough for the next fix to get in the car with a stranger while a deranged killer is on the loose, these women are posited as blameworthy for the potential damage their vices may bring. Despite the other series of identifying characteristics in the women’s lives, like their families, faith, talents, and histories, drug use and sex work are consistently assigned the master status,

thus limiting the public’s perception of the women as victims with whom we should sympathize and assist.

In correlation with this binary, the fact that most references in the news media came from authority figures or organizations constructs a view of the women and their voices as unnecessary or irrelevant in the context of their own victimization. Despite much of the causal narrative surrounding the murders being based in police failings, continuing to provide the police a more prominent platform of communication than families or other street involved people only enables the supremacy of the police state over marginalized bodies and stories.

Further, the analysis showed, unexpectedly, that Pickton was nearly equally likely to be seen as a “good guy” as he was to be seen as a “predator.” The news coverage provided a stronger drive in understanding and investigating into the background of Pickton, and disputing or confirming the actualities of his life and persona, than was ever provided into the lives of the missing and murdered women. I believe more research into this area is necessary to determine exactly what impact more sympathetic coverage of the women and their lives would have in the future. Additionally, I would like to further explore the impact of gender on the construction of the offender in the news media to determine whether male identity and masculinity has anything to do with the way a suspect’s guilt is questioned, and if there is more leniency for male offenders in providing a “well-rounded” analysis of their character as opposed to a female offender. I would also be interested in doing further research that analyzes who exactly is allowed by the news media to speak on behalf sex workers and their inequalities, if the “expert” voices utilized by the media are inherently gendered, and what the impact of that gendered analysis is.

## VII. Conclusion

All of these factors contribute to and enable what Kristy Gilchrist (2010) identifies as the “symbolic annihilation” of marginalized bodies in the news media, and distracts from or entirely eliminates any understanding of the deeply rooted social issues that simply continue the oppression of the oppressed (p. 385). Ultimately, while an identifiable killer like Pickton provided the news media a temporary cause for the women’s deaths, sex-working and drug using women maintained blame in the public eye both during and long after the case, due in equal parts to their use of drugs, their status as sex workers, and their proximity to “tainted” geographical regions like the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Though the Pickton case and the origination of a serial killer provided some small relief to the identities of Indigenous women under siege, the phenomenon did not last, and quickly women of the Downtown Eastside subsumed the master statuses that have been used to describe them for decades. As evidenced by this research, Indigenous women are continually and systemically blamed for the violence enacted against them. If we as a society want to change this, I propose we move away from blaming women as victims, and instead begin blaming the systems that make them victimized.

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