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# Familicide, Gender and the Media

## Gendering Familicide, Interrogating News

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*To all the women and children who were killed by someone they once loved.*

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# About the Author

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## Familicide, Gender, and the News

It is difficult to fathom an act of domestic and family violence more extreme and explicit than the murder of an entire family by one of its own members. The murder of a partner and their children, often followed by the suicide of the perpetrator, is undertaken not only to end the lives of individuals, but to end the family itself—a family conceived of by the killer as a collective entity. It is a form of violence against individuals—almost always women and their children—and against the family 'unit' itself. This form of 'family annihilation', as it is often referred to, is defined as *familicide* (Wilson et al., 1995).

Surely, when an adult kills their partner and children, it would be recognised as an extreme but not inconceivable crime—another manifestation of the pervasive problem of domestic and family violence against women and their children. Of course, only a small number of domestic and family violence cases end in familicide.[1] Intimate partner homicides occur at much higher rates, as do filicides, the murder of children by their parents.[2] While familicide is relatively rare, as Kelly (1987, 1988) has argued, gendered violence exists on a continuum—an expansive continuum of overlapping forms of violence that are profoundly patterned and connected even as they are varied. Familicide, when it arises, is shocking but not out of step with this continuum when considered within the context of what we know about patterns of

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[1] While national incidence data is sparse, reported rates include an average of one case of familicide-suicide a year in the Netherlands, to an average of 23 such cases in the USA between 2000 and 2009 (Karlsson et al., 2021). In Australia, news reports suggest about one case per year.

[2] According to the Australian Domestic Violence Death Review Report (New South Wales Government, 2019), 292 adults were killed by a current or former partner in the context of domestic violence between 1 July 2000 and 30 June 2019, an average of just over 15 people per year; 234 of these were women, and the majority of women in all cases were the primary domestic violence victim leading up to the murder. The same report showed that 103 children were killed by a relative or kin in the context of domestic violence during this period.

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D. Buiten, *Familicide, Gender and the Media*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5626-3_1

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domestic and family violence. Familicide is committed almost exclusively by men against women and children (Karlsson et al., 2021). It is often preceded by a history of domestic and family violence, separation, and custody disputes (Karlsson et al., 2021). It is often precipitated by an imminent or perceived loss of control over the traditional domains of masculine authority: women, children, and finances (Karlsson et al., 2021; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Mailloux, 2014).

Yet, when a man kills his family, it is not always regarded as emblematic of epidemic levels of domestic and family violence—by the media, by police, or indeed sometimes by those close to the family. The connections between familicide and broader issues of domestic and family violence are often tenuous, inconsistently made, and contingent on the circumstances. Familicide is sometimes framed as the vile and abusive act of a monster, at others as a 'family tragedy' in which the killer is as much a victim (of mental illness or personal circumstances, for instance) as those whose lives he extinguished.

How familicide is interpreted and framed is complex. This is understandable. As a form of violence, familicide is rare, involves multiple victims, is little understood and under-researched (Karlsson et al., 2021). Further, while familicide is almost exclusively committed by men, women kill their children (filicide) in roughly equal numbers to men (Brown et al., 2019),[3] making the gendered dimensions of acts of fatal family violence involving children extremely knotty. Further, the existence of suicide in at least half of familicide cases (and in some studies, up to 100% of familicides) (Karlsson et al., 2021) often raises among the public the question of mental illness. It is therefore perhaps not unsurprising that familicide would not always be recognised as domestic and family violence or viewed as a patriarchal crime, receiving mixed interpretations. It may be interpreted as mental illness, as the outcome of personal stresses, as a mystery.

Whether and how familicide is understood as a form of gender-based domestic and family violence is telling. It tells us not just how we understand familicide itself, but how we understand the link between gender and violence, how we understand parental violence against children, and what comes to mind when we think about domestic and family violence. It tells us about the contours and boundaries around how we conceptualise these issues. Examining how familicide is represented is, therefore, not just about familicide—it is situated within a range of discourses available to make sense of gender, violence, and families. It is about the interpretive possibilities marking various forms of violence and the extent to which they are culturally intelligible (Buiten & Coe, 2022) as being about gender.

This book examines the representation of familicide-suicide in the news and what it reveals about cultural assumptions around domestic and family violence and gender. While there is much research on how domestic and family violence is

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[3] Incidence of male and female perpetrators of filicide varies. The most recent data in Australia suggests that, overall, men are more likely to commit filicide than women. Stepfathers are over-represented within these numbers, however. Biological mothers are more likely to commit filicide than biological fathers (Brown et al., 2020). This is discussed further in Chap. 5.

represented in the news, and a growing body of research on how filicide is represented,[4] very little research has examined how familicide is portrayed.[5] In this book, I seek to address this gap. Further, while there has been a range of research on familicide as a phenomenon, very little has examined it from a sociological perspective[6] and far less through a feminist lens. As such, to scaffold an analysis of news representations of familicide, I first to advance a feminist sociological framework for understanding familicide, one that can inform a critical analysis of news representations. My aim is therefore twofold: to better understand familicide as a form of gender-based violence and to explore representations of familicide in the news to reflect on the range of discourses available to make sense of it—especially in cases that do not map neatly onto understandings of domestic and family violence, as is often the case with familicide.

While the book focuses on providing an in-depth analysis of familicide-suicide in the Australian news, how this resonates with wider questions around news media representations of gendered violence internationally are highlighted throughout. Further, the theorisation of familicide as a form of gender-based violence provided in the first part of the book draws on and is oriented towards an international body of scholarship on familicide and gender-based violence. As such, it seeks to contribute to international conversations among a range of scholars of gender, violence, and the media.

Given the rarity of familicide, one may ask why this specific form of violence warrants research attention. There are two reasons I think it does. First, familicide as a form of gender-based domestic and family violence has some unique characteristics at the intersection of femicide, filicide and often suicide that warrant specific exploration. Not all perpetrators of familicide have a history of domestic violence and abuse, for instance (Websdale, 2010). However, while familicide often presents in ways that distinguish it, it is important to situate it as part of a complex continuum of gendered violence. Part of the aim of this book is to show the value of what Boyle (2019) has called *continuum thinking* around gender-based violence. This involves distinguishing and seeking to understand the unique characteristics of different forms of violence, while appreciating the deep connections between them (Boyle, 2019). Accordingly, in this book I cast a feminist sociological lens on familicide to better understand its unique features and to show its connections to other forms of gender-based domestic and family violence. The second reason for tackling how the phenomenon of familicide is represented in the news is that, when it

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[4] See, for example, Grau (2021) and Barnett (2005) for the US context, Niblock (2018) and Walklate and Petrie (2013) for the UK context, Cavaglion (2008, 2009) for the Israeli context, and Little (2015, 2021) and Little and Tyson (2017) for the Australian context.

[5] Buiten and Coe (2022), Galvin et al. (2021), Quinn et al. (2019), and Sisask et al. (2012) are among the few scholars who have examined representations of familicide, the latter two focusing on social media responses to news portrayals.

[6] Websdale (2010) is an exception here.

occurs, it receives intense media coverage. How it is reported on is therefore of conse-
quence; these high-profile cases can act as influential flashpoints for understandings
of domestic and family violence.

I have chosen to focus on cases of familicide ending in suicide (*familicide-suicide*).
This is for two main reasons. In practical terms, most cases of familicide reported in
Australia over the last few years ended in suicide. Importantly, too, I am interested
in how emerging public discussions of mental illness and suicide may be shaping
news reporting on violence. Reporting on domestic homicides involving suicide often
feature the inclusion of suicide prevention and mental health discourses (Quinn et al.,
2019; Richards et al., 2014a, 2014b); examining cases that involve suicide, there-
fore, provides an effective starting point from which to interrogate of the thorny
issue of mental illness. For the sake of scope and clarity, I do not focus on cases of
filicide-suicide, a form of violence committed in roughly equal numbers by women
and men. This is not to avoid the issue of female-perpetrated violence; indeed, I
believe more work is needed looking at how filicide-suicide by both fathers and
mothers is understood in gendered terms and represented in the media. Both famili-
cide and filicide-suicide are particularly complex issues, in some ways overlapping
and in others distinct. They are both worthy of close attention. In this book, I focus
on familicide-suicide. However, I reflect briefly through some preliminary research
notes on filicide-suicide as a gendered phenomenon (Chap. 5) and how it is reported
in the news (Chap. 12).

The book first presents existing research on familicide to articulate it as a form of
gender-based domestic and family violence, before presenting on a study conducted
on mainstream news media representations of familicide-suicide in Australia over a
six-year period (2014–2020). During this time, five cases of familicide-suicide were
reported, one of which sparked a moment of reckoning around domestic and family
violence in Australia. I place these representations within the context of broader inter-
national debates about gender and domestic and family violence and examine what
these representations tell us about how we conceptualise those connections. I show
that familicide is represented in complex and varied ways, and that a range of inter-
secting discourses—around mental illness, the gendered nuclear family, disability,
and childhood—operate to support and rationalise particular news frames. I advo-
cate for continuum thinking (Boyle, 2019) around gender-based domestic and family
violence, enabling us to see (and represent) the connections between familicide and
other forms of domestic and family violence, even while we recognise its distinctions.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One sketches the context in which the study
emerges, looking at key debates around the connection between gender and violence,
and presenting a feminist sociological understanding of familicide. It discusses what
I call the gender(-based violence) wars—the scholarly and public debates that signal
the contested position of a feminist lens on domestic and family violence—arguing
that familicide and how it is represented needs to be considered in the context of these
debates (Chap. 2). I then present a sociological framework for gender-based violence
that moves beyond a narrow conceptualisation of male violence against women
(while recognising that this is a principal form of gendered violence), accounting
for more varied forms of violence (Chap. 3). Chapter 4 applies this framework to

the issue of familicide, showing that—despite it seldom being recognised or even researched as such—available empirical evidence suggests familicide is indeed a form of gender-based domestic and family violence. Female-perpetrated filicide often elicits questions about the usefulness of a gender lens to understand family murder involving children. Therefore, while familicide is the focus of this book, Chap. 5 offers some theoretical reflections on how filicide-suicide can also be understood as a gendered form of violence. I then tackle the controversial question of mental illness and familicide (Chap. 6), acknowledging the role mental distress plays in familicide while arguing against psychocentric approaches that assume it stems from the minds or bodies of individuals. I advocate for a feminist sociological approach to mental illness and distress that addresses its social dimensions and situates it within gendered contexts.

Part Two presents the findings of the study on Australian news representations of familicide-suicide. I outline the details of the five familicide-suicide cases covered in the study of news media representations (Chap. 7) and reflect on some of the unique challenges and complexities encountered when examining media portrayals of familicide-suicide (Chap. 8). In particular, I argue that beyond critiquing journalists and 'the media' for the ways gender-based violence is represented, we need to examine the broader cultural context that is shaping the news and engage reflexively with complex role of surviving family members and social advocates in shaping the news. Chapter 9 examines the tendency to frame familicide as an unknowable, unpreventable mystery, particularly in cases without a known history of domestic and family violence, often characterised by a hollow focus on the forensic minutiae of the crimes in the assumed absence of social context. Chapter 10 examines the mental illness/distress frame in reporting on familicide cases without a known history of domestic and family violence, showing how such a frame is rationalised by notions of the idealised heterosexual, nuclear, middle-class family. I specifically interrogate some of the troubling ways intersecting discourses of disability and childhood operate to support and rationalise the mental illness/distress frame (Chap. 11), perpetuating ableist and adult-centric discourses that silence children and people with disabilities are full human beings. I then present a brief comparative reflection on news representations of filicide-suicide, showing overlaps and distinctions with reporting on familicide-suicide. Finally, in Chap. 13, I examine the rarer instances in which reporting on familicide cases *did* represent it as a form of gendered domestic and family violence, exploring what these reveal about when it is rendered culturally intelligible as a form of gender-based violence and reflecting on some of the limitations of these discourses.

The remainder of this chapter briefly situates this book within broader public discourses on domestic and family violence. Specifically, I contextualise it within the emergence of domestic and family violence as a public issue in Australia, and the simultaneous advancement of mental health as a public policy issue.

## Context: Domestic Violence in the Spotlight

There has been a significant shift in the last few decades in Australia towards conceiving of domestic and family violence in gendered terms—in policy and political discourse (Murray & Powell, 2011; Stubbs & Wangmann, 2017) and in media (Hawley et al., 2018). This shift, however, is by no means complete, uniform or uncontested. The role of gender in domestic and family violence has historically been a controversial and contested issue (Yates, 2018, 2020). While feminist scholarship and activism has significantly marked the domestic and family violence policy landscape in Australia and elsewhere, employing gender as an explanatory frame remains politically provocative. Gendered narratives compete with a range of alternative frames—such as mental illness—for hegemony. Nowhere is this clearer than in media reporting on the rare, sensationalised, and emotive issue of familicide on which multiple, often contradictory, meanings are laid in an attempt to make sense of extreme violence. Familicide connects multiple forms of violence—against children, against women, against the self—and transgresses a variety of cultural values about the family, parents and relationships between parents and children. The context and characteristics of familicide also regularly differ in significant ways to other forms of femicide, making a coherent broader narrative about its aetiology difficult to establish. As such, familicide can become a site at which a range of available discourses play out in mixed ways. In this section, I briefly outline some key points around the discursive context for the study.

During the 1970s, domestic violence came to be marked as an issue of social concern in Australia, coming out of the shadows of the 'private sphere' and being repositioned as a matter of public policy (Stubbs & Wangmann, 2017). Feminist activism and the women's refuge movement were central to this shift (Murray & Powell, 2011; Stubbs & Wangmann, 2017), as were the revelations to emerge from the Australian Royal Commission on Human Relationships between 1974 and 1977 (Arrow, 2018). These processes challenged the normalisation and minimisation of men's violence against women in the home, articulating domestic and family violence as a product of inequal gender relations (for example, Dobash & Dobash, 1979), and constructing it as a public issue (Arrow, 2018). In the 1980s, national and state governments commissioned several major inquiries into domestic and family violence, notably via the Commonwealth/State Co-ordination Task Force on Domestic Violence and a succeeding range of state-based task forces and commissions (Stubbs & Wangmann, 2017). These investigations revealed the extent of the issues at hand and compelled a more structured response to domestic and family violence (Murray & Powell, 2011). This push was further emboldened by international developments in women's rights and the 1995 United Nations Beijing Declaration and Plan of Action which required states to develop national plans of action tackling violence against women (Murray & Powell, 2011).

Since the 1980s, and especially from the late 1990s, Australia introduced and transformed a raft of policy measures and set up a multipronged support service system to respond to domestic and family violence—from policing, law reform,

special courts, and refuges, to medical, financial, and housing services for women experiencing violence (Murray & Powell, 2011). Government funding for domestic violence services, campaigns and action plans have also been significantly extended since the late 1990s (Murray & Powell, 2011).

In many of these spaces, feminist perspectives on domestic violence have been increasingly influential—although not uniformly across institutions, governments, and states. Conservative governments such as Howard's in the late 1990s and early 2000s, for instance, put in place considerable funding and services in relation to domestic and family violence but saw a "demise of feminist influence on domestic violence policy" (Murray & Powell, 2011, p. 30) and the advancement of 'gender-neutral' language that obfuscated the role of gender. Some policy reforms at this time reverted to quite traditional gendered constructs of women as wives and mothers, men as heads of households and the in-tact nuclear family as the cornerstone of healthy communities—the "'white picket fence' discourse" (Murray & Powell, 2011, p. 30). In contrast, the successive Labour government headed by Julia Gillard was both more open to and prone to utilise feminist sector expertise to guide policy (Murray & Powell, 2011). Taking a rights-based approach and expanding the focus of domestic and family violence beyond physical and sexual violence to include emotional and other forms of abuse, the Labour government between 2007 and 2011 "incorporated a feminist analysis in addressing violence against women" (Murray & Powell, 2011, p. 32).

From 2013 to 2022, a more conservative Coalition government came into power. While a reasonably strong policy focus on domestic and family violence was maintained during this period, and a gendered analysis survived—under some prime ministers more than others[7]—the sector also saw a rolling back of funding for frontline women-centred services including (but not limited to) austerity measures imposed by the Abbot government following the global financial crisis (Pruitt et al., 2017). The Coalition government under Scott Morrison between 2018 and 2022 had what might generously be termed a spotted record with respect to violence against women, at once committing high levels of domestic violence service funding in some areas, while retaining a pointed deafness to many women's voices surrounding issues of gender, violence, and inequality (see Hill, 2021). The impact of the more recent election of a Labour government in 2022 remains to be seen.

Despite the resurgence of more conservative politics in the preceding decade, among domestic and family violence services dealing directly with victim/survivors, a "feminist power and control analysis of DFV prevails" (Yates, 2020, p. 262). Some, like journalist and writer Hill (2019), have gone as far as to suggest that a feminist discourse on domestic violence has achieved relative hegemony in Australian public policy and sector practice. This, she argues, has been incredibly important, but has also calcified a narrow focus on structural accounts of gender inequality as a driver for domestic and family violence, to the exclusion of a psychosocial approach that acknowledges the connection between social and psychological factors. Yates

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[7] Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, for instance, famously cited disrespect for women as the root of domestic violence, and a national campaign centred on this idea was rolled out.

(2018, 2020), while acknowledging the tremendous influence of gendered accounts of domestic and family violence in public administration in Australia, has highlighted how feminist accounts of domestic and family violence have been inconsistently interpreted and applied across contexts. The overall picture is of a not-insignificant influence of feminist accounts of domestic and family violence, but an ideological push and pull around the role of gender in understanding and addressing these issues (Murray & Powell, 2011).

Contemporary representations of familicide examined in this book must be considered in this context. As high-profile cases of familicide entered news headlines in Australia over the past few years, feminist ideas around these issues were receiving growing public visibility. With this, however, came a renewed scrutiny of the utility of a gender lens—and in many ways, a backlash against feminist accounts. Alcorn, for instance, wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper in February of 2016 that Australia had witnessed "a year-long consciousness-raising exercise on domestic violence, a communal confronting of a once-ugly secret" that generated "unprecedented momentum, goodwill and hope" (Alcorn, 2016). Yet, as Alcorn moved on to state, the ostensibly feminist understanding of domestic and family violence as stemming from the 'disrespect' of women that characterised this period was being vocally challenged. Commentators such as Alcorn herself questioned the feminist lens on domestic and family violence, arguing that while this lens is "pervasive, often presented as self-evident", it has been subject to questioning by "serious researchers who have serious doubts" (Alcorn, 2016). While acknowledging the importance of the issue of domestic and family violence, many like Alcorn have remained sceptical about the scientific rigour of feminist accounts of domestic and family violence.[8] Another commentator, McKenzie-Murray, questioned what he called the "Great Narrative" that is a feminist perspective on domestic and family violence, a narrative he argued has been "canonised by repetition" (2015). For McKenzie-Murray, gender as a lens through which to understand domestic and family violence has become so hegemonic and so narrow, that all other perspectives on the issue have become excluded. As such, while feminist ideas in this space have gained traction in public and media discussions, they have been subject to ongoing questioning, often discredited as part of what some researchers have identified as a backlash against gender equality (see, for example, Dragiewicz, 2011; Dragiewicz & Burgess, 2016; Flood et al., 2021).

At the same time as gender and domestic and family violence were subject to growing visibility and scrutiny, mental health as an issue of public importance has been gaining ascendancy in policy, political, and public debates (see, for example, Bastiampillai et al., 2021; Cui et al., 2019; Holmes, 2016). Like domestic and family violence, the scale of mental illness has been measured and reported in unprecedented ways. Like domestic violence, it has been coming out of the shadows as an issue that affects millions of people living in Australia. Suicide as a national problem, especially among young people, Aboriginal people, and men, has become subject to greater levels of research, policy, and funding. Like domestic and family violence, mental illness and suicide are increasingly been framed as *public* health

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[8] More around this will be discussed in Chap. 2.

issues (Buiten & Coe, 2022). However, while feminist explanations of domestic and family violence have been garnering greater authority, when it comes to mental illness a psychocentric lens has remained—that is, while mental illness is regarded as a public issue in terms of scale, its aetiology has remained largely understood in individualistic, "psychocentric" terms (Rimke, 2016).[9]

It is unsurprising, then, that when cases of familicide-suicide have, in all their horror, pierced news headlines they would be subject to a range of interpretations at the intersection of emerging public discussions about mental health and domestic and family violence. Familicides, as I will show in Chap. 4, do not always fit cleanly into the discursive categories of mental illness or 'domestic violence'. As such, cases of familicide represent what Fairclough (1992) called "moments in crisis"—points in time and space, often around particular events, characterised by high levels of ambiguity. In these spaces, things that had often remained naturalised or out of view are laid bare: hidden meanings, assumptions, and values bubble to the surface as social actors struggle to forge clarity and meaning. Not only do moments in crisis reveal, but they create: they reflect "change in process" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 230) where disputes over meaning can create new understandings. Such "moments of crisis" can often be seen around cases of familicide-suicide that attract concentrated media attention and puzzle the public.

## Why Examine News Representations?

News on domestic and family violence has had a considerable, if complex, role to play in national understandings of gender and violence (Sutherland et al., 2017). As Berns (2004) has observed, "most people learn about domestic violence from the popular media. The media are the most common and influential tour guides for exploring the landscapes of social problems" (p. 37). News reporting plays a significant role in determining which problems come to be seen as public issues, "invested with a broader meaning and made available for public consumption" (Sacco, 1995, p. 142). This in turn shapes policy responses (Berns, 2004). News reporting on domestic and family violence can also have more immediate lived effects, acting as a catalyst for victim-survivors to seek support (Richards et al., 2014b). It can influence would-be perpetrators; sympathetic portrayals of intimate partner murder-suicide can potentially encourage similar actions by others (Richards et al., 2014a). When couched in the language of parental love, framings of the murder of children as 'altruistic' can serve to validate the thoughts and plans of potential perpetrators of filicide (O'Hagan, 2014).

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[9] More on this is discussed in Chap. 5. As Bastiampillai et al. (2021) point out, policy provisions and funding to address mental illness in Australia have focused on individual, rather than sociological, factors.

In Australia as elsewhere, high-profile cases in the news have also spurred considerable changes in public attitudes and policy responses, demonstrating the power of news coverage of prominent cases. This can be seen in the national response to the 2014 murder of eleven-year-old Luke Batty by his father. As Hill observes, "Nowhere did an entire population wake up to [the issue of domestic violence] like Australia did on February 12" (Hill, 2019, p. 2). On this day, eleven-year-old Luke Batty was murdered by his father while attending cricket practice, a case that attracted national attention. Luke's father had abused Luke's mother, Rosie Batty, for several years before she managed to escape the relationship. However, on that day Luke's father arrived at his son's cricket practice and, as people began to leave, killed his son in broad daylight. Luke's father later died of police gunshots and self-inflicted stab wounds. Luke's murder in the context of domestic and family violence against his mother woke Australia up to the extreme consequences of domestic and family violence and the failings of the system for preventing its escalation despite multiple points of contact with courts and police. The effect of this case on the Australian public was one of "scales [falling] from our eyes" (Hill, 2019, p. 3), a watershed moment for Australian public debate about domestic and family violence (Hawley et al., 2018).

Since then, Australia has been shaken by numerous family murder-suicides, many of which have become major cases in the news igniting debate around issues of family violence. This has included, on average, one case of familicide every year. In 2014, Geoff Hunt shot and killed his wife, Kim, and their three children, Fletcher, Mia and Phoebe. In 2015, Darren Milne disabled the airbags in the family car, filled it with petrol bombs and deliberately drove his family into a tree. His wife Susana, who was 29 weeks pregnant at the time, and son Liam died; their second son, Benjamin, was the sole survivor. In 2016, Fernando Manrique gassed and killed his wife, Maria, and their two children, Elisa and Martin, along with the family dog in their home in Sydney. In 2018, Peter Miles shot and killed his wife, Cynda, adult daughter, Katrina, and her four children, Taye, Rylan, Arye, and Kadyn in the largest mass shooting in Australia since Port Arthur.[10] All cases had been perpetrated by men and ended with suicide. Then in January 2020 Rowan Baxter murdered his former partner Hannah Clarke and their three young children, Laianah, Aaliyah, and Trey. Hannah Clarke had fled her relationship with Rowan Baxter, who had for years been subjecting her to myriad forms of abuse. In response, he tracked her and their three children down on the school run, doused them in petrol and set them alight. When passers-by tried to help Hannah and the children, he stopped them, ensuring they could not be saved before he took his own life.

While Baxter's actions were unspeakably cruel and contextualised within an extended history abuse perpetration, the other cases were more opaque; they did not, at least to the knowledge of the public, involve a known history of abuse prior to the murders. Yet, they represented the ultimate expression of violence and control. This raised questions for me: when is an act of extreme violence against the family

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[10] The Port Arthur massacre of 1996, in which a shooter killed 35 people, lead to sweeping gun reforms in Australia.

reported in the news as 'domestic and family violence'? When is it recognised as gendered? The ambiguity in many cases of familicide-suicide makes news reporting on it a site on which a range of potential meanings can be layered and stripped away. How it is represented in the news can, in many ways, reveal to us about how domestic and family violence, and its relationship to gender, are understood.

## Methodology

This book addresses the following research questions:

- How is familicide-suicide represented in mainstream Australian news media?
- How do media representations reflect or counter a feminist sociological understanding of familicide?

Part One of this book sets the scene for answering the second question, reviewing literature on familicide, and placing it into dialogue with broader feminist sociological accounts of gender-based violence. To answer the former question, news articles representing familicide-suicide over the period of September 2014–September 2020 are analysed. The period of study follows the watershed case of Luke Batty's murder in 2014, which shifted public understandings of domestic and family violence (Wheildon et al., 2021) and captures a period of, on average, one case a year ending with the highly publicised murder of Hannah Clarke and children Aaliyah, Laianah, and Trey in January 2020. Table 1.1 outlines the cases of familicide-suicide cases included in the study.

### *Data Gathering*

The study is based on five cases identified via an online search for all reported cases that meet the definition of familicide-suicide applied in this book during the period of 2014–2020, namely the murder of a partner/former partner and at least one child and ending in suicide (Wilson et al., 1995). The news coverage analysed in this book comes from the major mainstream news outlets for states and major cities, representing a spread of coverage across Australia (see Table 1.2). Some large national news sources, both traditional and tabloid, right-leaning and left-leaning, are included. Two independent critical news outlets, *Crikey* and the *New Matilda*, are also included as alternatives to the more mainstream, conglomerate-owned newspapers, though their coverage of the cases is relatively sparse. The sample used in this study comes from the *Australian and New Zealand Reference Centre*, used to source print, as well as an online search conducted in 2020 capturing online-only content for the same publications.

**Table 1.1** Familicide-suicide cases analysed (2015–2020)

| Year | Familicide perpetrators | Adult victims and relationship to perpetrator | Child victims (no.) | Names of child victims/age/relationship to the perpetrator |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2020 | Rohan Baxter | Hannah Clarke (former partner) | 4 | Aaliyah, 6 (child) Laianah, 4 (child) Trey, 3 (child) |
| 2018 | Peter Miles | Cynda Mile (partner) Katrina Miles (daughter) | 6 | Taye, 13 (grandchild) Rylan, 12 (grandchild) Arye, 10 (grandchild) Kadyn, 8 (grandchild) |
| 2016 | Fernando Manrique | Maria Lutz (partner) | 3 | Elisa, 11 (child) Martin, 10 (child) |
| 2015 | Darren Milne | Susanna Estevez (partner) | 2 killed 1 survived + 1 unborn | Liam, 11 (child) Benjamin, 7 (child)—survived + Unborn, 29 weeks |
| 2014 | Geoff Hunt | Kim Hunt (partner) | 4 | Fletcher, 10 (child) Mia, 8 (child) Phoebe, 6 (child) |
| Total | 5 (5 men) | 6 (6 women) | 20 + 1 unborn | 14 (7 boys; 7 girls) |

**Table 1.2** Newspaper data summary

| Publications | Cases | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Hunt | Milne | Manrique | Miles | Baxter | Total |
| The Australian | 5 | 1 | 7 | 10 | 13 | 36 |
| The Canberra Times (CT) | 5 | | 7 | 5 + 1 duplicate (SMH) | 7 | 25 |
| The Daily Telegraph (DT) (Sydney)[a] | 4 | 8 | 21 | 1 + 5 duplicates (News.com) | 1 | 40 |
| Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) | 19 | 4 | 16 + 1 duplicate (CT) + 3 duplicates (The Age) | 9 + 8 duplicates (The Age) | 53 + 1 duplicate (WA; The Age) | 114 |
| Northern Territory News | 1 | | 1 | 2 | | 4 |

**Table 1.2** (continued)

| Publications | Cases | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Hunt | Milne | Manrique | Miles | Baxter | Total |
| The Daily Mercury (Tasmania) | 1 | | 4 + 1 duplicate (DT) | 9 + 2 duplicates (News.com) | | 17 |
| The Age (Melbourne) | 10 + 12 duplicates (SMH) | 3 duplicates (SMH) | 5 + 9 duplicates (SMH) | 16 | 48 duplicates (SMH) | 103 |
| The West Australian (WA) | | | | 10 | 7 | 17 |
| The Guardian (Bundaberg) | 7 | | 4 | 6 | 15 | 32 |
| Crikey | | | 1 | 2 | 6 | 9 |
| The New Matilda | | | | | 2 | 2 |
| News.com | 4 + 1 duplicate (DT) | 1 + 3 duplicates (DT) | 13 + 3 duplicates (DT) | 5 | 56 | 86 |
| Total | 70 (56 original) | 20 (14 original) | 100 (81 original) | 91 (75 original) | 210 (161 original) | 491 (original) |

[a]The Daily Telegraph content is also shared across other platforms such as the Hornsby Advocate, Manly Daily and NewsCorp Australia Network content. As such, these representations have wide reach

The Baxter case received by far the greatest level of news reporting, with further reporting emerging well into the writing of this book. Given the rolling and increasingly temporally dispersed nature of reporting on the case, I focus on the first few months of coverage, the most intensive period of reporting, after which attention to the case significantly died down as the COVID19 pandemic came to dominate the news cycle for several months. However, a postscript is provided after the final chapter reflecting on some emerging trends in later reporting on the case, especially reporting catalysed by a Coronial Inquest held in 2022.

There are a range of challenges to conducting online news media searches (Blatchford, 2020), among them significant duplication of articles across multiple publications and the more ephemeral nature of online news, where changes to content and access can quickly change. This book reports on data that was downloaded to PDF and saved in the form it was initially accessed in 2020. Articles with some overlapping content are treated as separate news items, while complete duplicates are excluded as separate news items but noted in Table 1.2 to show the spread of access

to this content across publications. The search term used was the name of the perpetrator of the crime, noted as the most reliable way of capturing news stories relating to these cases. Following up links embedded within articles to similar content also enabled further checks for relevant content.

## *Theoretical Framework*

I have applied a sociological, feminist lens to gender-based violence, articulated in Chap. 3. This theoretical framework for understanding gender-based violence is applied to consider familicide as *gender-based domestic and family violence* (in Chap. 4), and to identify how news representations reflect, contest, adopt, and resist a feminist sociological understanding of domestic and family violence and familicide (in Part Two).

To analyse these news items, I use critical discourse analysis. Discourse analysis enables a close examination of language and other forms of communication to explore how meaning is constructed. Critical discourse analysis adds to this a normative component: the goal is not merely to investigate and describe, but to explore how discourse is connected to social outcomes, and to provide a social critique that can shed light on how better social outcomes can be produced (Lê & Lê, 2009). Drawing on Fairclough (1992), within the tradition of critical discourse analysis language is conceived of as a social practice and a form of social action. In other words, it is used in patterned ways that tell us about our society, and its use contributes to shaping society. As such, it is both reflective and constitutive, "defin[ing] and produc[ing] the objects of our knowledge" (Lê & Lê, 2009, p. 5). The way issues such as familicide are portrayed in news media, in line with this, is understood as both signifying contemporary social meanings around gender and violence (among other things), and as (re)creating them. These representations are therefore examined as material, of consequence to the pursuit of social outcomes.

My approach to critical discourse analysis of news is influenced by the work of Carvalho (2008), who proposes a framework for attending to three dimensions of critical discourse analysis that, she argues, are often undertheorised and under-applied in research on news: examining the discursive strategies of various social actors in producing the news (including but not limited to journalists); analysing how discourses shift across time and space, attending to the (contextualised) evolution of discourse; and what she calls "extra- or supra-textual effects" (p. 164), the way representations in turn shape the genealogy of social and political issues. As such, my analysis of news representations of familicide is contextualised within political debates around, and mediated depictions of, gender-based violence. This helps to move beyond, as Carvalho calls it, a 'snapshot' approach to critical discourse analysis of news that characterises much media scholarship. While the period for the research is six years, Part One of this book seeks to provide a strong sense of the historical evolution of thinking around domestic and family violence. My analysis also seeks to highlight the possible effects of the way these cases were represented

and how they may have contributed to the unfolding of discourses around these issues. Finally, I agree with Carvalho that many analyses of news representations pay scant attention to why and how different social actors utilise news media, in varied ways, to shape discourse on social issues, and the influence of social actors beyond those working within the newsroom. Here, I pay close attention to these factors, highlighting the complex role of feminist researchers, political commentators, families of familicide victims and various social advocates in moulding diverse and competing news frames.

Finally, Bacchi's (2009) framework for the application of discourse analysis to problem representations is used. Bacchi's work is useful in providing a systematic set of questions to applied to texts, questions attuned to Carvalho's points on aspects of discourse analysis that need particular attention. Bacchi's set of guiding questions critically unpack problem representations by asking researchers to identify *problem constructions*, the *assumptions* they rely on and the *silences* that are maintained. In line with Carvalho (2008), Bacchi's (2009) guiding questions encourage researchers to consider how discourses come about (the evolution of discourse over time), where, how, and by whom they are *disseminated, contested and defended* (the strategies of social actors) and their *effects*—both lived and discursive (supra-textual effects).

## A Note on Terminology

A note on the terminology employed in this book is important. There is substantial contestation around terms such as 'domestic violence', 'domestic abuse', 'violence against women', and 'intimate partner violence'. Words matter and thinking about terminology is important. That said, I agree with Boyle (2019) who urges us to employ terminology critically without seeking to erase the value of different terms, ensuring instead that we articulate the insights they bring and the connections between them clearly. As she says, "the answer is not to abandon any of these terms or to claim one as inherently better (or worse) than the other, but to be alert and critical to the ways in which they are used and to think about the—conceptual, political, practical—work they enable us to do" (p. 32).

First, I use the term *familicide* to reference the murder of an intimate partner or former partner and at least one child (Wilson et al., 1995). I argue that while not all familicides follow the same patterns as other forms of domestic abuse, such as coercive control, it is indeed a form of *domestic and family violence*. Further, I argue it is a form of *gender-based violence*, a violence fuelled in important ways by gender (Boyle, 2019; Buiten & Naidoo, 2020). The meaning of and theoretical underpinning of the latter is explained in depth in Chap. 3. In this section, I wish to explain my choice of the term *domestic and family violence* to discuss familicide rather than, for example, violence against women, domestic abuse, or family violence alone.

In Australia, 'domestic violence' has been a term generally applied to violence between intimate partners. The term 'family violence', or combined use of 'domestic and family violence', is increasingly also being employed in recognition of many

Indigenous peoples' preference for the term 'family violence', which more closely acknowledges a range of kinship connections and the impact of violence on whole families and communities (Stubbs & Wangmann, 2017). Further, unlike terms such as 'intimate partner violence' or 'domestic violence', the term 'family violence' is better able to capture violence between a range of family members, such as between siblings, extended family members, and parents and children (ibid.). A fuller appreciation is also developing of how domestic violence against women and other forms of family violence, especially violence against children, are often inexorably intertwined.[11] The term *domestic and family violence* can therefore help to extend the account beyond violence between intimate partners, centralising it while signalling the intertwined nature of women's and children's experiences in this context.

Some scholars and advocates have criticised terms such as 'domestic violence' and 'family violence' as endorsing a de-gendered approach, preferring terms such as 'violence against women' (Boyle, 2019). One of the limitations of this term, however, is both its breadth (many forms of violence, outside of the family or intimate partnerships are included) and its capacity for circumscription (it precludes, for instance, intimate partner violence between same sex, queer, and gender nonconforming partners, or parental violence against children) (Boyle, 2019). As will be discussed in Chap. 2, most domestic and family violence is male violence against women, meaning there are important connections between the terms 'domestic and family violence' and 'violence against women'. However, these terms are not synonymous. Thus, in the context of this book I use the term *domestic and family violence* because it captures violence against women as well as violence against children. I note that while this is an ostensibly gender-neutral term, within the Australian context 'domestic violence' has come over time to be associated with a gendered approach (Yates, 2020). To continue to signal the important connection between gender and domestic and family violence, I often use the terms together—calling it *gendered domestic and family violence* or including it under the umbrella term of *gender-based violence.*

In recent years, there has been a concerted effort to shift understandings of domestic and family violence away from a narrow preoccupation with physical violence. As such, domestic and family violence is progressively being used to refer to a range of abuse, not just physical but emotional, financial, sexual, and even religious. Resultantly, there has been some criticism of the continued use of the term 'violence' to reference a range of abusive behaviours that may not involve direct or physical violence. Some scholars, writers, activists, and survivors have preferred to use the term 'domestic abuse' rather than 'domestic violence' (Hill, 2019).

I acknowledge both the strategic and conceptual value of the term 'abuse' over 'violence'. In the context of this book, however, I have chosen to use the term domestic and family *violence* for two main reasons. One reason is that, in line with the contributions of feminist scholars, I conceptualise violence more broadly than as physical

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[11] See for instance Katz (2016) and Dragiewicz et al.'s (2021) work on the imbrication of coercive control of women and their children, or Kirkwood (2012) and Mailloux (2014) on why children are murdered in the context of domestic violence and separation.

abuse, as a form of violation and harm (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Second, given this book deals with fatal physical violence that is not always preceded by a known history of patterned domestic abuse, the term domestic and family violence is better able to capture the context and meaning of the violence that is familicide without precluding cases without a known history of abuse. The term violence is, from a feminist perspective, suitable to describing domestic homicide without a known history of abuse while capacious enough to capture a range of non-physical forms of violence or harm. Boyle (2019) asks of feminists to consider what certain terminology can 'do' in a particular context—politically, theoretically, and conceptually. In this case, the term *domestic and family violence*, which I articulate as one form of gender-based violence against women and children, works to enfold children as family members into the discussion, while recognising the connection to other forms of domestic and family violence against mostly women. It enables us to understand both familicides following patterned abuse and those without a known history of abuse as 'violence'.

In the following chapter, I dig deeper into the context for the study, examining the contested position of gendered understandings of domestic and family violence within politics, public debate, and academic research. This next chapter therefore fleshes out what I have briefly introduced here: the politically live question of identifying and treating domestic and family violence as gendered, and some of the key discourses and debates within which representations of familicide are located.

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