Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down:
Reader Reactions to Online News Stories about IPV in Late Life
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**Introduction**

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a hidden public health problem that touches nearly one third of all women aged 50+ each year (Bonomi et al., 2007; Mouton, 2003). Incidents of IPV include physical, sexual, and psychological/emotional harm caused by a current or former partner and sometimes include murder (CDC, 2006). Public awareness of IPV in late life is limited due to the social norms and expectations which keep it hidden in the home as well as weak coverage by the news media. The purpose of this study was to analyze online postings to answer the research question – How do online news readers respond to reports of incidents of IPV in late life?

**Methods**

Sample: News items reporting incidents of IPV involving persons aged 50+ were gathered through a daily newsfeed service of the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), Jan-Mar 2010. 22 unique incidents of IPV in late life were identified:
- 83 online stories covered the incidents
- 63 (75.9%) stories offered online commenting
- 340 comments collected ($M = 15.45; SD = 22.35$)

Analysis: Using grounded theory techniques, comments were analyzed by team members for patterns and themes to identify underlying assumptions and perceptions about IPV in late life.

- **Primary codes:** Commenting for personal attention, extending sympathy to the family, and placing blame (i.e., person, family, society)
- **Secondary codes:** Assumptions about aging, relationships

**Incident Details**

- **Victims:** Female (83%) aged 52 - 89 yrs ($M = 75; SD = 10.0$)
- **Perpetrators:** Male (83%) aged 58 - 90 yrs ($M = 78; SD = 8.6$)
- **Types of IPV:** Assault, neglect, neglect resulting in death, homicide, homicide-attempted suicide, and homicide-suicide.
  - 20 incidents (83.3%) involving the victim
  - 12 incidents (69%) perpetrator also killed self

**Suspected causes for IPV:** Caregiver stress and burden (20.8%), relationship tension (16.6%), poor mental health (including dementia) (33.3%), or a death pact between partners (8.3%).

No single cause was attributed to a specific type of violence

**Recognizing IPV**

- **Very few commenters identified incidents as acts of IPV**
  - **Another woman has died brutally by the hands of an inferior coward.**

**Underlying Assumptions**

**Perpetrators**
- Females were incompetent and just “crazy”.
- Males were in poor health, stressed out, and doing the best they could, even if it resulted in the abuse of their partners.

**Victims and their perpetrators**
- Engaged in healthy relationships prior to the incidents of IPV…they look very much in love, like the sweetest couple ever

**Homicide/suicide**
- Victims wanted to die and a death pact existed
- They were together as they wanted to be until the very end.

**Older adults**
- Not violent and not sexual beings
  - The thought of a 75 year old woman steppin’ out to get her freak on is just a little too much for most of us to take!"

**Extending Sympathies**

Many commenters extended sympathies to family and friends left behind to cope with the aftermath of an incident.

- **My heart goes out to the son and the family. It’s hard enough to accept that not one but both of your parents are deceased and to recognize IPV.**

**Reassigning Blame**

Commenters often explained the incidents by reassigning blame.

- **Commenting for personal attention, extending sympathy to the family, and placing blame (i.e., person, family, society)**

**Summary & Implications**

- **Commenting for personal attention, extending sympathy to the family, and placing blame (i.e., person, family, society)**

**Rationalizing IPV**

- **Some level of abuse may be deserved**
  - …after 60+ years of being married to a nagging demanding jealous woman that you may or may not love…sooner or later it will drive a man insane.

- **Acts of love, compassion, and desperation**
  - This is pure assumption, but I am going to guess that this man acted out of compassion and desperation…I am going to guess that he was tired of watching his wife suffer so he decided to put her out of her misery and take himself with her…kind of Romeo and Juliet-esque.

- **Homicide-suicide is an admirable act**
  - I actually have respect for the decision They lived a blessed and happy life together, the quality of life was gone, and rather than wither and shrivel away slowly they just decided that enough was enough and it was time to cash out. Cheers. Tip of the cap to them.