

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%) involved killing 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.

THEY wanted to spend eternity together? Then why didn't each commit suicide instead of one killing the other and then that one committing suicide?

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!"

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.

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 know that it was done voluntarily, it has to hurt.

Reassigning Blame

Commenters often explained the incidents by reassigning blame.

Family members should have intervened

OMG! Where was the daughter when all of this happened? Why didn't she petition the court for guardianship?

Health problems caused the incident

Unless you're in their shoes, judge not. My mother has been in a nursing home now 4 yrs ...I understand fully the emotional trauma dealing with a loved one sick in this way.

Inadequate local and state-level services triggered incidents

The fact that somebody else died because DHS is incapable of doing what it is charged to do, well, that falls squarely on Oregon's shoulders, no one else.

Inadequate national healthcare

In more civilized nations, the sick and old are respected enough that they are given options, and we ought to have the same.

Summary & Implications

Commenters struggled to make sense of the incidents by rationalizing the behaviors and reassigning blame. By removing guilt from the perpetrator, commenters minimized the violence and marginalized the victims.

Comments were influenced, in part, by the way in which the incident was presented by reporters, comments made by other readers, and their own personal assumptions about IPV in late life and older adult relationships.

Altering public views of IPV in late life requires reframing the ways in which information about incidents of violence are presented in the media. Strategies are needed to remove the stigma associated with being a victim of IPV and reduce social barriers that ultimately impact social policy, decision making, and community response. Education should target reporters covering incidents of IPV, the general public, and community service professionals who routinely come in contact with older adults.