

Portrayals of people with cerebral palsy in homicide news

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Through content analysis, employing qualitative and quantitative methods, Canadian media representation of people with cerebral palsy (PWCP) in public life was examined. Canadian NewsDisc, an online biographic database service, was used to examine the use of stigmatizing language such as afflicted by, afflicted with, suffered from, suffers from, or suffering from within the context of cerebral palsy. Between January 1994 and December 2000, 3939 media stories indexed included the term cerebral palsy. Stigmatizing language was significantly more frequently used within the context of homicide and cerebral palsy. In 94.74% of media stories, the terms mercy killing or euthanasia were used within the context of Tracy Latimer's homicide. While the Latimer case provided an extreme example of the media associating stigmatizing terms with the killing of PWCP, the same association was made in other cases. Results from this study are discussed in terms of self-categorization theory, media effect, and factors associated with discrimination against PWCP.

What is communicated by the mass media is not simply artistic expression. It is a representation of a society's beliefs, values, traditions – of its whole way of life. The media both reflect our culture and help to mould it; they select and interpret for us. They provide us with a framework of understanding; they produce our reality for us. (Vipond, 2000, p. 88)

Over the past decade, Canadians have been presented with issues such as assisted suicide, euthanasia, and compassionate homicide as humane solutions to living with a disability. Public and media interest in people like Sue Rodriguez, Larry James McAfee, Tracy Latimer, and Ryan Wilkieson, individuals with disabilities, who have been associated with these issues, has contributed to public, legislative, and legal discussions concerning the health, welfare, and quality of life of people with disabilities. While the precise impact that the media has had on public

opinion and behaviour is difficult to determine, research suggests that the media has had some effects in shaping public life (Taras, 1999).

Russell (1994) commented on the language used by reporters, which can distort objectivity and reality. Bias in language not only conveys meanings, but also emotions. Sensationalism in journalism, sometimes used to encourage a public response, may further distort reality. The headline, "The nightmare of coping with kids who aren't normal," for example, appeared in *The Province* (Vancouver) in conjunction with four children who had disabilities and were killed by their parents (Tait, 1997). The clear message that children with disabilities are *abnormal* and that caring for them is a nightmare for their parents might have been quite different if neutral language had been used by the editor.

Terminology used by the media to describe people with developmental disabilities (PWDD) may be reflective of media attitudes, general public attitudes, or both. While it is difficult to discern what influences specified descriptors have on public attitudes regarding PWDD, history suggests that labels have contributed at least to some degree toward their depersonalization. During the Third Reich, for example, describing PWDD as "useless eaters" suggested that they were expensive to care for (Gallager, 1995), and emphasized their differences from the rest of society. Seidelman (1992) notes that, during the Nazi regime, medical terminology became less personalized in order to facilitate acceptability of killing PWDD. Depersonalizing PWDD contributes to their being treated differently by society than others are. This treatment has sometimes included forced sterilization, mercy killing, euthanasia, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, denial of medical treatment, involuntary medical experimentation, and homicide (Sobsey, 1994; Sobsey, Wells, Lucardie, & Mansell, 1995).

In examining issues in the communication process, Jensen (1997) observed that greater sensitivity is needed to address possible ethical concerns related to language usage. Jensen notes that figurative language, "can capture attention, simplify the complex, make concrete the abstract, and foster visualization" (p. 125). The author points out that medical metaphors are frequently used in public discourse to describe

societal problems, with speakers generally portrayed as wanting to remedy the situation. Medical metaphors, such as “afflicted with” or “suffering from,” when referring to a disorder or disease or when describing PWDD, construct the person’s situation as distressing, and in need of being cured or fixed in some way.

Many English language editorial style guides stress the importance of avoiding such bias when describing people with disabilities. The American Psychological Association’s publication manual (1994) recommends avoiding language equating people with disabilities and their condition with superfluous or negative overtones, and language regarded as a slur. The Editors’ Association of Canada (2000), a national organization of over one thousand English- and French-language editors, states that “depressing clichés can unnecessarily emphasize the pathetic-victim picture of disability” (p. 112). The association suggests that neutral terms such as “affected by” or “affected with” are preferable to “afflicted with,” “stricken by,” or “suffered from,” when describing people with disabilities. Tasko’s (1999) *Canadian Press Stylebook* suggests that writers should strive for accuracy, clarity, and sensitivity when describing people with disabilities. The author stresses specificity and the danger of generalizations: “Afflicted with suggests pain and suffering. It doesn’t always apply. Nor does suffering” (p. 20). Federal media guidelines for the fair portrayal of people with disabilities, distributed by Human Resources and Development Canada (1996), stress that “references which cause discomfort, guilt, pity or insult, should be avoided. Words like suffers from...stricken with...afflicted by...patient...disease... [or] sick suggest constant pain and a sense of hopelessness” (p. 2). The *Globe and Mail* style book points out that many people with disabilities dislike expressions like sufferer, suffers from, and afflicted, and suggests that their wishes should be respected by writers (McFarlane & Clements, 1998). In spite of the general prohibition of such expressions by media guidelines, these expressions remain a part of our informal language and can be found in many media stories.

This study was undertaken to determine how often the media uses some of these stigmatizing or biased expressions to represent people with disabilities who are victims of homicide or attempted homicide as

compared to when they are discussed in other news stories. For the purpose of this study, we restricted our focus from people with disabilities in general to people with cerebral palsy (PWCP) in order to allow reliable story selection criteria. Similarly, we operationally defined biased or stigmatizing language as the use of some of the specific descriptors consistently prohibited by media guidelines. These include *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffers from*, and *suffering from*. Our operational definition of stigmatizing language to these specific terms clearly results in underestimation of bias, however, it also allows objective, reliable measurement, and minimizes subjectivity, thereby allowing direct quantitative comparison of the various groups of news stories.

It is hypothesized that the media uses more stigmatizing language when providing coverage of homicides of PWCP than when PWCP are discussed in other news stories. Homicide is defined as the killing of one person by another, either directly or indirectly, by any means. Homicide is either culpable, such as in murder, manslaughter, or infanticide, or not culpable, such as in self-defense (Rodrigues, 1994). This hypothesis is based on three theoretical considerations. First, if media stereotype victims of crime, they would be likely to generalize victimization to the person's disability. Thus, the person's victim status may be generalized as a characteristic of the individual not the circumstance. This construct of the victim's role portrays the individual as a "victim of disability" and a victim of crime.

Second, depersonalization of people with disabilities suggests that the "pathetic-victim" role may sometimes be used to explain, justify, and even excuse crimes against them. In the extreme form, the portrayal of homicide victims with disabilities may be used to justify their killing as "mercy killing" or "compassionate homicide." In a less extreme form, the loss of a life that is presented as being of lesser value is viewed as a less serious crime since it is presented as the destruction of "damaged merchandise" (Sobsey, 1994).

Third, in some cases, the elimination of suffering is presented as the actual defense against criminal charges of homicide. In such cases, the

notion of suffering is emphasized by the defense in the courtroom and, in some cases, the defense may attempt to employ the media to build public sentiment in favor of their client in hope of influencing the outcome of the case. If and when such press manipulation occurs, press coverage might be expected to reflect such deliberately injected stereotypes. By associating disability with suffering or affliction, and homicide with compassion or mercy, one conclusion that may be drawn by readers is that death is preferable to living with a disability.

It is further hypothesized that the media emphasizes mercy killing and euthanasia over other categories of homicide when reporting homicides of PWCP. While homicide is a common cause of death for people with cerebral palsy, most cases appear to receive minimal attention. While formal research is scarce, one study reported that, of 732 children with cerebral palsy who died, only 23 (3.1%) had autopsies (Evans & Alberman, 1991). Another reported that, of 24 autopsies completed on children with cerebral palsy, 6 (25%) established the cause of death as homicide by a parent (Bunai, Komoriya, & Ohya, 1988). As a result, it is likely that the many homicides of people with cerebral palsy go undetected. Even when reported, however, most violence against people with disabilities appears to receive little media attention. For example, Project Censored, which identifies the 25 most important stories each year that have been ignored by the mainstream media, lists the reporting of high rates of violent crime against people with disabilities as one of the most underreported stories for the year 2000 (Roth, 2001).

Lastly, it is hypothesized that stigmatizing language labels will be used more frequently in news stories about the homicide of Tracy Latimer. Goyette (1994a; 1994b), Canadian Press (1995), and Rielly (2001) commented on the perceived media bias emphasizing Robert Latimer's claims of mercy regarding his actions that resulted in the death of his daughter Tracy. Media emphasis of a father's rationale in killing his daughter and framing his actions as merciful may, in part, suggest a degree of justification for his behavior. The homicide of Tracy Latimer, a child with cerebral palsy killed by her father on October 24, 1993 by means of carbon monoxide poisoning, continued to receive widespread national media attention in 2001. Her death, her father's trials, appeals,

interviews, editorials, demonstrations by supporters, public debates, and other related events have kept the story in the news for more than a decade.

On November 16, 1994, Robert Latimer was convicted of second-degree murder, however, a new trial was ordered by the Supreme Court. On November 5, 1997, Robert Latimer was again convicted of second-degree murder but granted an exemption from a mandatory penalty and sentenced to two years less a day. On November 23, 1998, the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal imposed a mandatory life sentence with no chance of parole for 10 years ("Saskatchewan farmer," 2000). Legal defense of Robert Latimer's actions equated the homicide of his daughter with an act of mercy or compassion as a means to prevent her suffering (Blatchford, 2000; Tibbetts, 2000). While other unrelated defense tactics (e.g., asking the courts to deny admissibility of his confession) were also presented in the courtroom, these received little attention in the press. On January 19, 2001, the Supreme Court of Canada dismissed the appeals against conviction and sentence, and ruled that Robert Latimer must serve a life sentence ("Latimer begins life sentence," 2001; "Murder is the most serious crime," 2001). Following his imprisonment, Mr. Latimer's supporters organized a massive petition drive requesting the government to invoke a rarely used Royal Prerogative of Mercy to effectively nullify the Supreme Court's decision and release Mr. Latimer.

This study focuses on homicidal violence, PWCP, and the Canadian news media. Any generalizations of this study's findings to non-Canadian media coverage, people with other disabilities, or crimes other than homicide, remains speculative pending further research that might extend or limit the findings. This study will use quantitative content analysis to examine the use of stigmatizing language in news stories of homicides of PWCP. Focus will be given to media coverage of the homicide of Tracy Latimer to determine if this specific measure of media bias regarding stigmatizing language labels is consistent with other media analyses that report bias concerning this case.

Method

Content analysis is a “research technique for the systematic classification and description of communication content according to certain usually predetermined categories” (Wright, 1986, p. 125) that was used to examine media stories about cerebral palsy. Krippendorff (1980) explained that its purpose is to “provide knowledge, new insights, a representation of ‘facts,’ and a practical guide to action” (p. 21). Content analysis may be used to examine the existence of bias in literature (Gay, 1987). This research method has recently been used by researchers to examine media coverage of people with disabilities (Gilbert, MacCauley, & Smale, 1997; Gold & Auslander, 1999; Haller, 2000; Maas & Hasbrook, 2001).

Advantages of content analysis are that it is inexpensive, unobtrusive, and allows the researcher to examine a large amount of data in a relatively short amount of time. It also allows longitudinal examination of a given topic (Babbie, 1999; Berger, 1998). Disadvantages of content analysis stem from potential difficulties with representative sampling (Berger, 1998). Berger noted that studying a sizable amount of content is one means to address this disadvantage. This study will examine Canadian media’s use of the term cerebral palsy from 1994 to 2000.

Content analysis can employ qualitative methods, quantitative methods, or a combination of the two (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Qualitative content analysis allows more detailed interpretation of specific text passages. Quantitative content analysis provides more objective analysis of specific characteristics of a sample, but lacks the richness of detail available through qualitative analysis. In this study, quantitative content analysis is used as the primary tool for testing hypotheses. This analysis is supplemented by examples from selected articles that illustrate some of the thematic qualities relevant to those hypotheses.

Cerebral palsy is defined as a group of disorders characterized by motor or postural delays associated with injuries to the brain during prenatal, perinatal, or postnatal events (Ratanawongsa, 2001). Classic presentation of cerebral palsy includes spasticity, seizures, muscle contractions,

difficulty sucking or feeding, irregular breathing, delayed motor development, mental retardation, impairments in speech, vision, and hearing, progressive joint contractures, and limited range of motion (WebMD, 2001).

Cerebral palsy is also a developmental disability, defined by Kiernan and Schalock (1995) as any neurological condition, affecting either mental or physical functioning or both, that begins prior to 18 years of age. The condition is chronic, meaning that the person will likely have this condition for the duration of his or her lifetime. The term developmental disability emphasizes a person's functional capacity, with impairment or significant functional limitations, defined by the amount of assistance required to perform activities, identified in three or more areas including self-care, both receptive and expressive language, learning, mobility, self-direction, capacity of independent living, and economic self-sufficiency. For the purpose of this study, the use of the descriptor cerebral palsy in a news story was the sole criterion for inclusion.

Canadian NewsDisc, an online bibliographic database service, was used to conduct this study. It provides full text media articles of every column and feature published by a selected group of major Canadian newspapers from 1994 to the present, and transcripts from the CBC and CTV News and Current Affairs. However, not all news sources included in Canadian NewsDisc are included for the same years. For example, at the time this study was conducted, the *Edmonton Journal* dated back to 1994 while the *Victoria Times Colonist* dated back only to July 31, 1998.

Searches on Canadian NewsDisc were conducted using key words as search terms. The term *cerebral palsy* was used to identify stories of interest. This term was combined with different homicide terms to determine what percentage of overall stories on cerebral palsy also focused on specific acts, homicide or attempted homicide. Search terms used to obtain information on homicide included *homicide*, *murder*, *manslaughter*, *mercy killing*, and *euthanasia*. The term *cerebral palsy* was combined with other specified terms like *inclusion*, *education*, *health*, *medicine*, *sport*, and *athlete* to identify topical stories about PWCP that

were not related to crime. Searches using homicide terms and other specified terms were mutually exclusive. This approach resulted in a third or “other” category of stories that focused on cerebral palsy but not homicide or specified terms, which represented topical stories not reflective of content obtained by the before-mentioned terms. These search strategies produced three groups: (1) stories related to homicide, (2) stories related to a specific list of non-crime topics, and (3) other stories that included all other topics, including an unknown number of crime stories in which people with cerebral palsy could be portrayed as victims of non-homicidal crimes.

The use of bias in language in media stories about PWCP was examined by combining the term *cerebral palsy* with the terms *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffering from*, and *suffers from*. The results were combined with the terms for homicide and other specified terms to determine what percentage of stories about cerebral palsy and homicide, and cerebral palsy and other specified terms, featured these descriptors.

During searches, the term *and* was used to combine terms together, and *or* was used to join alternative terms. The researchers attempted to reduce the number of cross-referenced stories by using the term *not* to exclude certain terms. For example, the search command *cerebral palsy and homicide not inclusion* would obtain all stories which included the terms *cerebral palsy* and *homicide*, while excluding any stories which included the term *inclusion*.

Due to the limitations of this database, parameters could not be set to limit the occurrence of combined key terms from occurring within a specified number of words from each other. Therefore, results from the searches using the different terms for homicide not only include stories about the homicide of people with cerebral palsy but also included the following kinds of stories:

- Two or more events covered in the same story, one of which may focus on homicide while the other is on cerebral palsy, with no connection between the two events; or

- A fictional account of a homicide and a person with cerebral palsy (e.g., a novel, stage play, or movie depicting a homicide); or
- The death of a person with cerebral palsy who wrote about the topic such as euthanasia or mercy killing.

This sampling limitation was, in part, compensated for by the large amount of data collected. A reliability check was performed to determine what percentage of stories found by our data-base search method focused specifically on the topic of cerebral palsy and homicide, not the three types of stories previously discussed. A random sample of 100 stories was examined in detail for content. Ten random stories per publication year were chosen for 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2000. Twenty random samples were chosen for the 1994, 1995, and 1997 publication years because of the greater number of stories about cerebral palsy and homicide written during these years.

Chi-square test for goodness of fit, a nonparametric test of significance, was used to compare observed frequencies in the study with proportions expected. Gay (1987) notes that chi-square was appropriate for data, "in the form of frequency counts occurring in two or more mutually exclusive categories" (p. 397). Chi-square values increase as the differences between observed and expected frequencies increase. Rejection of the null hypothesis is suggested if a chi-square value is significantly large. "The null hypothesis specifies the proportion (or percentage) of the population in each category" (Gravetter & Wallnau, 1988, p. 418). Significance is determined by selecting an alpha level, typically set at $p \leq .05$ or $p \leq .01$. An alpha level of $p \leq .01$ was chosen to reduce the risk of a Type I error and demonstrate a significant treatment effect. For this study, the null hypothesis states that the frequency distribution of biased language in media stories about PWCP is not different from the distribution of biased language in media stories about homicide or stories about other specified terms and PWCP.

Results

Between January 1994 and December 2000, 3939 media stories were indexed in Canadian NewsDisc, which included the term *cerebral palsy*. Of these stories, 20.18% (795/3939) included homicide terms (*homicide, murder, manslaughter, mercy killing* and *euthanasia*), 31.68% (1248/3939) included a selected group of topics (inclusion, education, health, medicine, sport, athlete), and 48.13% (1896/3939) focused on neither homicide nor the selected topics. The homicide and selected term categories were mutually exclusive. Table 1 lists these three categories of news stories.

Table 1
Cerebral Palsy Combined with Specified Terms Sorted by Descriptors

	A/S	%	No A/S	%	N	Total %
CP + Homicide Terms	435	54.72	360	45.28	795	100
CP + Selected Terms	232	18.59	1016	81.41	1248	100
CP + Other Terms	417	21.99	1479	78.01	1896	100
N	1084	27.52	2855	72.48	3939	100

CP = cerebral palsy

Homicide Terms = homicide or murder or manslaughter or mercy killing or euthanasia **not** Selected Terms

Selected Terms = inclusion or education or health or medicine or sport or athlete **not** Homicide Terms

Other Terms = cerebral palsy **not** Homicide Terms **not** Selected Terms

A/S = afflicted by or afflicted with or suffered from or suffers from or suffering from

No A/S = no use of the terms afflicted by or afflicted with or suffered from or suffers from or suffering from

As seen in Table 1, 27.52% (1084/3939) of all stories which included the term *cerebral palsy* used prohibited descriptors such as *afflicted by, afflicted with, suffered from, suffering from, and suffers from*. These descriptors were found in 54.75% (435/795) of stories which included homicide terms, 18.59% (232/1248) of stories about other selected topics, and 21.99% (417/1896) of stories about content other than homicide and selected topics. Chi-square analysis, $X^2(2, N = 3939) = 373.740, p < .0001$, indicated that these descriptors were significantly more frequently used in stories which included different homicide terms than stories with other content.

A reliability check was performed to ensure that the stories obtained by our electronic searches actually referred to the designated categories. A random selection of 100 of the 795 articles found by combining the term *cerebral palsy* and homicide terms resulted in an overall reliability of 93.00%. The year-by-year reliability ranged from 70.00% for 1999 to 100.00% for four of the eight years. Of the three articles found in 1999 that did not deal directly with cerebral palsy and homicide as a crime, two focused on a theatrical play and one article was a combination of two stories; one dealt with murder and the other with cerebral palsy, with no relationship between the two stories. This reliability represents the inclusion of articles. It is uncertain what articles were excluded by this sampling method that may have addressed the topic but were not retrieved. For example, the search terms *Robert* and *Latimer* may have excluded stories referring to Bob Latimer or Latimer. Because the goal of this study was to identify an appropriate not-all-inclusive sample, this sampling limitation was not addressed or corrected. Correction of this sampling limitation would have resulted in a greater number of subjective decisions and judgements concerning sampling, hindering replication.

As seen in Table 2, 800 of the 3939 media stories included the terms *cerebral palsy* and *Robert* and/or *Tracy Latimer*. Of these stories, 80.75% (646/800) featured homicide terms, suggesting that these terms were predominantly used to refer to Tracy Latimer's homicide or Robert Latimer's trial for the death of his daughter. Descriptors such as *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffering from*, and *suffers from* were observed in 58.38% (467/800) of stories that included the terms *cerebral palsy* and *Robert* and/or *Tracy Latimer*. These descriptors were evident in 59.44% (384/646) of stories using homicide terms. This suggests that the majority of stories concerning Tracy Latimer's homicide used the descriptors *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffering from*, and *suffers from* as contextual information in combination with the term *cerebral palsy*.

Table 2

Cerebral Palsy Combined with Specified Terms and the Terms Robert and/or Tracy Latimer
Sorted by Descriptors

	A/S	%	No A/S	%	N	Total %
CP + Homicide Terms + R/T	384	59.44%	262	40.56%	646	100
CP + Selected Terms + R/T	5	33.33%	10	66.67%	15	100
CP + Other Terms + R/T	78	56.12%	61	43.88%	139	100
N	467	58.38%	333	41.63%	800	100

CP = cerebral palsy

R/T = Robert and Latimer or Tracy and Latimer

Homicide Terms = homicide or murder or manslaughter or mercy killing or euthanasia **not**
Selected Terms

Selected Terms = inclusion or education or health or medicine or sport or athlete **not**
Homicide Terms

Other Terms = cerebral palsy **not** Homicide Terms **not** Selected Terms

A/S = afflicted by or afflicted with or suffered from or suffers from or suffering from

No A/S = no use of the terms afflicted by or afflicted with or suffered from or suffers from
or suffering from

Of the 3139 stories featuring the terms *cerebral palsy*, not *Robert* and/or *Tracy Latimer*, 4.75% (149/3139) included homicide terms, 39.28% (1233/3139) included selected terms, and 55.97% (1757/3139) included terms other than homicide or selected terms (see Table 3). The descriptors *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffering from*, and *suffers from* were observed in 19.66% of stories which included the terms *cerebral palsy* not *Robert* and/or *Tracy Latimer*. These stigmatizing descriptors were evident in 34.23% (51/149) of stories which included *cerebral palsy* and homicide terms, 18.41% (227/1233) of stories about selected topics, and 19.29% (339/1757) of stories about content other than homicide and selected topics. Chi-square analysis, $X^2 (2, N = 3139) = 21.392, p < .0001$, indicated that these descriptors were significantly more frequently used in stories featuring the term *cerebral palsy* and homicide terms than stories which included selected terms or terms other than homicide or selected terms.

Table 3

Cerebral Palsy Combined with Specified Terms Excluding the Terms Robert and/or Tracy Latimer Sorted by Descriptors

	A/S	%	no A/S	%	N	Total %
CP + Homicide Terms not R/T	51	34.23%	98	65.77%	149	100
CP + Selected Terms not R/T	227	18.41%	1006	81.59%	1233	100
CP + Other Terms not R/T	339	19.29%	1418	80.71%	1757	100
N	617	19.66%	2522	80.34%	3139	100

CP = cerebral palsy

R/T = Robert and Latimer or Tracy and Latimer

Homicide Terms = homicide or murder or manslaughter or mercy killing or euthanasia **not** Selected Terms

Selected Terms = inclusion or education or health or medicine or sport or athlete **not** Homicide Terms

Other Terms = cerebral palsy **not** Homicide Terms **not** Selected Terms

A/S = afflicted by or afflicted with or suffered from or suffers from or suffering from

No A/S = no use of the terms afflicted by or afflicted with or suffered from or suffers from or suffering from

Combining the terms *cerebral palsy* with *mercy killing* and/or *euthanasia*, not *homicide*, *murder* or *manslaughter* or selected terms, resulted in 474 media stories (see Table 4). This finding suggested that 59.62% (474/795) of stories which included the terms *cerebral palsy* and homicide (*homicide*, *murder*, *manslaughter*, *mercy killing*, *euthanasia*) focused on cerebral palsy, mercy killing and/or euthanasia. In 94.73% (449/474) the terms *mercy killing* and/or *euthanasia* were used within the context of Tracy Latimer's death. Of these stories, 59.92% (284/474) used the stigmatizing descriptors *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffering from*, and *suffers from*. In 94.73% (449/474) of stories, the terms *cerebral palsy*, *mercy killing* and/or *euthanasia*, and *Robert* and/or *Tracy Latimer* were included within the context of the story. In 61.02% (274/449) of these stories, the stigmatizing descriptors *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffering from*, and *suffers from* were used. The stigmatizing descriptors were present in 40.00% (10/25) of stories about cerebral palsy and mercy killing and/or euthanasia when reference to Tracy Latimer's death was excluded.

Table 4
Cerebral Palsy Combined with Mercy Killing or Euthanasia Sorted by Descriptors

	A/S	%	no A/S	%	N	Total %
CP + M/E + R/T	274	61.02%	175	38.98%	449	100
CP + M/E not R/T	10	40.00%	15	60.00%	25	100
N	284	59.92%	190	40.08%	474	100

CP = cerebral palsy

M/E = mercy killing or euthanasia **not** (homicide, murder, or manslaughter) not Selected Terms

R/T = Robert and Latimer or Tracy and Latimer

Selected Terms = inclusion or education or health or medicine or sport or athlete **not** Homicide Terms

A/S = afflicted by or afflicted with or suffered from or suffers from or suffering from

No A/S = no use of the terms afflicted by or afflicted with or suffered from or suffers from or suffering from

Discussion

Media representation of PWCP in public life varied from topics of inclusion, education, health, medicine and sports, to homicide of PWCP. While media coverage of homicides of PWCP accounted for only 20.18% (795/3939) of overall coverage of cerebral palsy, 80.75% (646/800) of that coverage was in reference to the death of Tracy Latimer. The terms *mercy killing* and/or *euthanasia* in combination with *cerebral palsy* were most commonly associated with the death of Tracy Latimer, accounting for 94.73% (449/474) of stories.

Stigmatizing language, through the use of such prohibited terms as *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffers from* or *suffering from* within the context of cerebral palsy was observed in 27.52% (1084/3939) of media stories. While these descriptors were used by the media for a variety of topics, they were twice as frequently used within the context of cerebral palsy and homicide, accounting for 54.72% (360/795) of homicide coverage. Stigmatizing language was observed in 59.44% (384/646) of media stories which referenced the death of Tracy Latimer within the context of homicide and cerebral palsy, and 61.02% (274/449) of media coverage within the context of mercy killing and/or euthanasia and cerebral palsy. Importantly, stigmatizing language accounted for 34.23% (51/149) of media stories which excluded reference to Tracy Latimer's death within the context of homicide, and 40.00% (10/225) of

stories within the context of mercy killing and/or euthanasia. This suggests that, while the Latimer case provided an extreme example of the media associating the use of prohibited terms with the killing of PWCP, the same association was made in other cases.

Self-categorization theory addresses group membership based on social identity and shared beliefs. "The more accessible the particular shared conception of social identity, the more individuals depersonalize their self-perception and view themselves as group members" (Bar-Tal, 2000, p. 5). By perpetuating portrayals of PWCP as suffering and their deaths as acts of mercy, as illustrated by the numerous articles written between 1994 and 2000 about Tracy Latimer's 1993 homicide and the prominence of television news coverage by *CTV-News, Canada-AM* and *CBC's The National* (Mansbridge, 2001; Matheson, 2001; Robertson, 2001), the media appear to be contributing to a particular shared conception of social identity, which may further contribute to shared expectation of agreement among individuals in society.

Bar-Tal (2000) notes that disagreement within the group, such as society, about beliefs that should be consensual may result in group members exerting social influence through persuasion and negotiation in order to establish consensus. Society's response to perceived injustice for Robert Latimer appears significant. The media's role in contributing to public reaction to Tracy's death can be seen in their mobilization of support for or against Robert Latimer. Dr. Gifford Jones, a nationally syndicated columnist, wrote in support of Robert Latimer and against the Supreme Court's decision to incarcerate him a second time. The columnist requested readers to write letters of support for Latimer, which would be personally delivered to the Prime Minister and Governor General if enough were received (Jones, 2001a). This request resulted in several thousand letters of support (Jones, 2001b). The public was asked to telephone or email *Daily News Hotline* to express their opinions about Robert Latimer's motivation for killing his daughter (Bornais, 2001). Opinion polls were overwhelmingly supportive of Robert Latimer and felt that he was unfairly treated by the judicial system (Korstanje, 1994; Perreux, 2001).

Apart from public reaction directly associated with news media, media coverage of Tracy Latimer's death and her father's subsequent trials further stimulated the public into action resulting in more media coverage. A trust fund was set up to assist Robert Latimer with his legal costs, with donations ranging from \$10 to \$1,000 (Canadian Press, 1994). His legal defense fund was expected to surpass \$100,000 with newspapers directing readers as to where their donations could be sent (Perreux, 1997). New Democratic Party Member of Parliament, Svend Robinson, advocate of legalized assisted suicide, expressed his intention to raise the issue of mercy killing in the House of Parliament ("NDP's Robinson," 2001). Supporters of Robert Latimer initiated a ribbon campaign ("Supporters of Latimer," 2001), candlelight vigil outside the Supreme Court in Ottawa (Laflamme, 2001), and volunteered to serve time on his behalf (Bailey, 2001; Naumetz, 2001) to encourage the government to release him from incarceration. In response, Prime Minister Jean Chretien stated that the government would not make a decision about Robert Latimer's sentencing without parole board recommendations (Perreux, 2001). Perreux noted that, through the Royal Prerogative of Mercy, the Corrections and Conditional Release Act, the Solicitor General is given the authority to investigate applications. Public consumption of media's construction associating cerebral palsy with suffering and homicide with mercy may in part have contributed to public reaction in support of Robert Latimer and associating his incarceration with injustice.

The use of biased descriptors, such as *suffering from cerebral palsy*, has a special implication within the context of the debate on the appropriateness of the Latimer conviction and sentencing, and the larger debate on mercy killing. These debates revolve in part on whether the individual who was killed was suffering or not. The uses of descriptions that make suffering an inherent characteristic of the person's disability clearly bias the debate. Arguing that someone who *suffered from cerebral palsy* was not *suffering* seems illogical since we have already accepted the fact of suffering with the description.

While the use of such prejudicial terminology is perhaps the most easily demonstrated aspect of a much larger pattern of bias in the coverage of

this homicide, it is hardly the only indicator of bias. While it would go beyond the scope of this article to report on all of the examples of biased reporting in this case, two prominent examples are presented here. First, Tracy Latimer was frequently described as having severe, unrelenting pain from a dislocated hip, that doctors could not treat with medication (e.g., Henton, 1997; Jones, 2001a). Second, Robert Latimer was portrayed as an honest, law abiding farmer who had never been in trouble with the law and who openly admitted and defended his actions (e.g., Jenish, 1994). Neither of these claims was true. Written records from the months, weeks, and days before her killing repeatedly describe Tracy Latimer as a “happy” girl with occasional discomfort. While it is true that her hip was causing her some significant pain, doctors at her trial testified that Tracy could have been given stronger medication to control the pain. They testified that this would have been a good short-term solution but that the best long-term solution to eliminate her pain was surgery. The claim that Tracy could not be treated with more powerful pain medication was not made by a physician, but rather by Mark Brayford, Mr. Latimer’s defense attorney (Sobsey, 2001a).

The portrayal of Mr. Latimer as an honest and law-abiding farmer also appeared to have little basis in fact. Mr. Latimer lied to his family and to police about Tracy’s death. He burned evidence and tried to have his daughter’s body cremated before the actual cause of death could be discovered. He confessed only when there was overwhelming evidence pointing toward his guilt and only then suggested that he had acted from compassion. The statements that he gave police and the press that suggest that he killed his daughter out of love still have apparent contradictions in them. While he gave statements to the press, he refused to testify in court where his statements might be cross-examined and, even after conviction, he tried to have his confession ruled inadmissible (e.g., Sobsey, 1995).

The portrayal, by some members of the media, of the killing of Tracy Latimer as a justifiable act of mercy, based on the argument that she was suffering, may also have resulted in copycat crimes. Surette (1998) observes that:

For a crime to be a copycat crime it must have been inspired by an earlier, publicized crime – that is, there must be a pair of crimes linked by the media. The perpetrator of a copycat crime must have been exposed to the publicity about the original crime and must have incorporated major elements of that crime into his or her crime. The choice of victim, the motivation, or the technique in a copycat crime must have been lifted from the earlier, publicized crime. (p. 137)

Research and literature findings on media and social aggression, suicide, aggregate crime rates, copycat crime, and terrorism, indicate that, while media affects crime rates, it is difficult to discern exactly what that effect is (Surette, 1998). Surette notes that it has been easier to demonstrate that media coverage has influence on how people predisposed to committing criminal behaviour commit crimes than on whether the media portrayals actually trigger criminal behaviour. Nevertheless, it appears that intermediate and interactive factors play a role in media influence on future crimes. These variables include:

Reward or lack of punishment for the perpetrator, portrayal of violence as justified, portrayal of the consequences of violence in a way that does not stir distaste, portrayal of violence without critical commentary, the presence of live peer models of violence, and the presence of sanctioning adults. This effect depends on the combined influence of social context, media context, and media content interacting with characteristics of the audience. (p. 152)

Surette concludes that the greater the consumer's reliance on the media for information about his or her society and environment and the greater his or her predisposition to behave criminally, the greater the effect. While it is not implied that most citizens are driven to murder by media exposure, it is suggested that, for a few individuals, their predisposition and exposure to realistic media models of dysfunctional behavior may, to some degree, result in the imitation of dysfunctional behavior.

In the media coverage of the Latimer case, many of the previously mentioned variables appeared to be present. Results from this study established that media coverage of Tracy Latimer's death was extensive and that this coverage predominantly presented her death as a mercy killing and euthanasia. Tracy's condition was also frequently associated with stigmatizing descriptors *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffers from* or *suffering from* rather than neutral terms. These findings are consistent with Surette's justification factor.

Robert Latimer was convicted of second-degree versus first-degree murder despite the fact that Tracy's homicide was planned (Canadian Press, 1997; Henton, 1997). The Criminal Code of Canada defines first-degree murder as planned and deliberate. Murder may be reduced to manslaughter if the perpetrator who committed the murder acted in the heat of passion caused by sudden provocation (Rodrigues, 1994). A conviction of second-degree murder may suggest that Tracy's premeditated homicide is perceived as less serious than other premeditated homicides. These attributes appear consistent with Surette's minimal consequence factor.

Robert Latimer's legal defense suggested that Tracy's death was an act of love by a father who cared too much for his daughter to see her suffer through a life of pain, and who wanted to prevent further suffering from future surgery (Tibbetts, 2000). This study demonstrates that media coverage of Tracy Latimer's death was biased and emphasized suffering. Although it was overturned on appeal, the precedent-setting sentence of Robert Latimer to two years less a day, consisting of a one-year jail term and one-year house arrest, was significantly less than the mandatory life sentence for murder ("The Robert Latimer murder case," 1997), and might suggest some sanctioning of his behaviour. These and other factors suggest that the media coverage of the Latimer case would be likely to result in copycat cases.

Following Tracy Latimer's much publicized homicide, some intrafamilial homicides of children with developmental disabilities in Canada appeared to bear similarities to Tracy's homicide regarding choice of victim, motivation, and act causing death. In December 1994, shortly

after the close of the first Latimer trial, in Ontario, 16-year-old Ryan Wilkieson was killed by his mother, who also took her own life. Ryan was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. He and his mother died by carbon monoxide poisoning in the back seat of the family car in the garage. Cathy Wilkieson was described as a caring mother who murdered the child she loved. The mother had left a note for her daughter and husband, suggesting premeditation (Edwards, 1994; MacDougall, 1994). In 1996, 35-year-old Andrea Halpin, described as mentally handicapped, was shot to death by her father, Bernard Halpin, prior to his taking his own life. Mr. Halpin, described as loving and caring father, had reportedly been worried and insecure about his daughter's future should he die. Premeditation was suggested by the telephone call the father had placed prior to taking his own life, and by documents left by the father detailing burial requests (Wilton, 1996a; 1996b). In 1996, in Montreal, six-year-old Charles Antoine Blais, who had been diagnosed with autism, was drowned by his mother, Danielle Blais, in the bathtub. Ms. Blais' lawyer reportedly stated that his client could not explain her actions because it was an act of love (Solomon, 1996).

Based on the media information provided, what these cases appear to have in common with the Latimer homicide is that all the children had disabilities, were killed by their parents, with the parents appearing to justify their actions by stating that they loved their children and wanted to prevent them from perceived suffering. The majority of intrafamilial homicides were also planned. In addition, while help was available to these parents concerning child care, the parents perceived this help to be either insufficient or inappropriate and perceived themselves as being the only persons able to provide for the best interests of their children. This misperception might, in part, have contributed to the parents choosing death for their children as a better alternative than living with a disability.

One of many alternative interpretations may be that these parents were having difficulty coping with their own issues such as depression, and that caregiving demands were a variable in this equation. It was reported by Ryan Wilkieson's father that Cathy Wilkieson was undergoing personal crises at the time she killed herself and her son, and that their

deaths were not related to a perceived lack of government support for Ryan (Blatchford, 1995; Galloway, 1995; Nielsen, 1995). Bernard Halpin removed his daughter from a provincially sponsored job training program prior to her death, wanting to take care of Andrea himself following the death of her mother (Wilton, 1996b). A psychiatrist testified in court that Robert Latimer, who killed his daughter shortly before her scheduled surgery, reportedly had a phobic reaction to medical instruments and procedures, which contributed to his overall personality (Henton, 1997).

Canada has seen a sharp increase in intrafamilial homicides of children 12 years of age or younger since 1993. Statistics Canada reported that the average percentage of parent-child homicides as a percentage of all homicide incidents was 5.3% between 1974-83. The average percentage dropped to 4.9% between 1984-93, but increased to 7.1% for 1994-98 (Fedorowycz, 2000). This increase, at a time when the overall homicide rate has been declining, along with the fact that almost all of the increased killing of children has come from fathers, not mothers, suggests that the massive media coverage of the Latimer trials beginning in 1994 may have contributed to the murders of many children by their parents (Sobsey, 2001b).

Grossman (1995) uses distance theory to explain how soldiers are desensitized to killing. This theory may also, in part, explain how parents kill their children and how some in society have accepted the homicides of others. Grossman explained that soldiers must achieve a psychological distance from their opponent. This is accomplished, in part, by distancing oneself from the victim, whether morally, defined by one's belief in moral superiority; socially, where the victim is perceived as being of a lower social class; or mechanically, defined by the physical distance from the victim one's weapon allows. The greater the distance one can achieve, the less difficult it becomes, emotionally and psychologically, to kill someone.

Robert Latimer demonstrated distance theory in his confession about his daughter's death. He first considered shooting Tracy in the head and burning her body, prior to killing her by means of carbon monoxide

while she sat in the cab of the family truck, covered by a sleeping bag (Canadian Press, 1997; Jang, 1994a). By shooting his daughter, Mr. Latimer would have had to be close enough to her to ensure that he would not miss. This would imply a shorter mechanical distance than gassing Tracy in the cab of the truck, while standing outside the vehicle. If Tracy had been shot, Mr. Latimer would have witnessed first hand the results of a gunshot wound to the head. Emotionally, this would be more difficult to defend against if the finger that pulled the trigger was one's own. By gassing his daughter while she was in the cab of the truck, Mr. Latimer did not have to see her die since she was covered by a sleeping bag and the windows eventually fogged up (Jang, 1994b). Socially, Mr. Latimer defended his actions by claiming that his behaviour was motivated by mercy, compassion and love (O'Hanlon, 1997). Mercy would imply that the act was done with the best interests of his daughter in mind.

Public opinion may have been shaped, in part, by the media and court proceedings or may have been a factor in shaping media coverage. The media's portrayal of the death of PWCP was predominantly through the use of descriptors emphasizing suffering and affliction and in terms of mercy or euthanasia. Initial judicial response to Robert Latimer's actions was to show leniency, with his behaviour generally portrayed as morally and socially acceptable. Bar-Tal (2000) commented on the formation of societal beliefs, stating that its content is "based on collective experiences of society members, whether real or imagined and/or on implications that are drawn from these experiences" (p. 56). The author further stated that, "usually, there is no single societal belief formed on the basis of a collective experience, but rather a number of beliefs organized around a particular theme" (p. 56). The common collective experience of Tracy Latimer's death and her father's legal proceedings, as played out in the media and consumed by the public, would suggest that societal beliefs were, in part, shaped by the common themes of cerebral palsy, suffering and mercy killing.

Our initial hypothesis, that the media used more stigmatizing language when providing coverage of homicides of PWCP, was supported by results from this study. The three theoretical considerations on which the

hypothesis was based also appeared to be supported by the findings from this study. In Tracy Latimer's case, Tracy's victim status was generalized as a characteristic of the individual not her circumstance. The "pathetic-victim" role was used to explain and excuse crimes against Tracy, and her father's defense against criminal charges of homicide was presented in terms of his desire to eliminate Tracy's suffering. Our second hypothesis, that the media would emphasize mercy killing or euthanasia over other categories of homicide when reporting homicides of PWCP, was also supported by findings from this study. Lastly, the hypothesis that stigmatizing language labels would predominantly be used in news stories about the homicide of Tracy Latimer was also supported by findings from this study.

Conclusion

The media's use of stigmatizing language in describing PWCP varied in topic, but was predominantly evident within the context of homicide of PWCP. Reference to the homicide of Tracy Latimer dominated homicide coverage of PWCP. The use of the terms *mercy killing* and *euthanasia* and descriptors such as *afflicted by*, *afflicted with*, *suffered from*, *suffers from* or *suffering from*, were most frequently associated with Tracy's homicide. The findings of this study, based on one measure of media bias, demonstrated bias for justification of killing Tracy Latimer and are consistent with other reports of media bias in favor of justification (Canadian Press, 1995; Goyette, 1994a, 1994b; Rielly, 2001). While this study measured bias in one particular manner and showed a clear indication of media bias, it does not necessarily follow that other measures of media bias would show the same direction or degree of bias. The possible implications of this media coverage for the public, public reaction to this coverage, and possible explanations for public reaction have been explored.

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