

# "Shades of Foreign Evil": "Honor Killings" and "Family Murders" in the Canadian Press

*Violence Against Women*  
2016, Vol. 22(10) 1163–1188  
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DOI: 10.1177/1077801215621176  
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## Abstract

This article compares murder cases labeled "honor killings" with cases labeled "family/spousal murders" in the Canadian news media, exploring the construction of boundaries between these two practices. We conducted a systematic qualitative content analysis, examining a sample of 486 articles from three major Canadian newspapers between 2000 and 2012. Our analysis shows that "honor killings" are framed in terms of culture and ethnic background, presenting a dichotomy between South Asian/Muslim and Western values. Conversely, articles presenting cases as "family/spousal murders" tend to focus on the perpetrators' personalities or psychological characteristics, often ignoring factors such as culture, patriarchy, honor, and shame.

## Keywords

honor killing, family murder, Canada, media, Muslims

On June 20, 2000, 39-year-old Gillian Hadley was taking a bath when her estranged husband, Ralph, barged into her Mississauga, Ontario home and shot her to death. Canadian reporters covering the murder painted a picture of a possessive man whose violent actions were allegedly propelled by the victim's sexual indiscretion near the end of their tumultuous relationship. Seven years later, on December 10, 2007, Mississauga teen Aqsa Parvez was at her home when her father and brother strangled her to death. Whereas the first incident was commonly referred to as a

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case of spousal murder, media reports on the second family murder labeled it an “honor killing.”

A cursory examination may suggest that these two murder cases in Mississauga are indeed entirely different. In the first, the jealous husband murdered his wife because he suspected her of marital infidelity, whereas in the second case, the perpetrators were the victim’s father and brother, attempting to protect a cultural notion of family honor. However, a deeper analysis of the two cases reveals many similarities. Both cases involved the murder of women by controlling and abusive male family members who felt threatened by the victims’ refusal to acquiesce to their demands and control. In both, feelings of rage, indignation, violated honor, and shame were present alongside a culturally instilled sense of possession and right (or even duty) to police female behaviors and sexuality. Yet, the mainstream Canadian media coverage of the two events was very different. In this article, we explore these divergent coverage patterns and try to assess the degree to which these are based on objective differences in occurrences and motivations.

We seek to investigate the boundaries between honor killings and other family murders as they are reflected in the media discourses that serve to produce and reinforce these distinctions. We argue that although these different labels for murder practices are often predicated on real differences, the definition of what constitutes an honor killing is often fluid, fuzzy, and highly contextual. Furthermore, using different labels affects the discursive treatment of the acts and the explanations and motivations attributed to them. In classifying murders involving family members as either “honor killings” or (“standard”) “family murders,” journalists tend to focus either on religion and culture, for murders in the former category, or on pathological psychological and personal characteristics, for the latter. This focus perpetuates the notion that individuals of certain cultures, religions, and nationalities are inherently misogynistic and are guided by notions of honor and shame that do not apply to members of Western societies. The use of the term “honor killing” in the news media fabricates a racial identity and contributes to the dehumanization and discrimination of South Asians, Muslims, and immigrants in Western society. Furthermore, the labeling of murders as either “honor killings” or “family murders” draws attention away from the underlying issues of patriarchy and the culturally induced honor and shame that stand behind many family murders.

The case of Canadian media provides a fruitful ground for comparing the treatment of honor killings with that of other family murders. Over the last decade, honor killings have become a topic of heated political, public, and academic debate in Canada, with some provinces allocating funding to devise action plans and recommendations for educators, legislators, courts, and law-enforcement agencies. For example, in October 2013, the Quebec Council for the Status of Women has come out with a series of concrete policy and legislative recommendations, after studying various reports of so-called honor crimes in Canada (CBC News, 2013). These debates and their media coverage suggest that this is a strategic field for a comparative study.

The article begins with a short review of the literature on the practice and common definitions of honor killing. This is followed by a discussion of the literature on the differential treatment of femicide in the East and the West and an examination of

former research on news media coverage of these practices. The central part of the article presents a content analysis of Canadian newspaper coverage of cases presented as honor killings and those presented as family murders. Finally, we highlight the implications of our findings for the use of the label “honor killings” and for immigrant and ethnic minority groups in Canada and the West.

## The Practice and Label of Honor Killing

“Honor killing” is a highly contested term. Its definition is often debated, and it may be used to describe a set of acts that are quite different from one another. For example, some have defined honor killing as “the murder, or attempted murder, of a woman by members of her family who do not approve of her sexual behavior” (Gill, 2009, p. 3; see also Abu-Odeh, 1996). However, many would find such a definition to be too broad, as it would include a wide host of family murders, including many spousal murders.

Some scholars therefore advocate for a narrower definition (e.g., Abu-Odeh, 2000; Chesler, 2009; Sen, 2005; Terman, 2010; Wikan, 2008). They argue that honor killings have four key characteristics, which distinguish them from other forms of murder within the family. First, the killing is planned and carried out by a member of the victim’s (typically a young woman) family of birth rather than family of marriage (e.g., a father, brother, cousin, or paternal uncle). Second, the perpetrator usually does not act alone. Rather, he has the support of a collective that is ready to reward the murder with honor. The honor is thus restored for the collective, not just the individual. Third, suspicion is usually enough to prompt the killing, and no proof or evidence of sexual transgressions is actually needed. Finally, honor killings are premeditated; these are planned crimes rather than “crimes of passion.”

These criteria may indeed sometimes be helpful in delineating the acts that may be deemed honor crimes. However, research suggests that politicians, policy makers, and even academics often ignore some or all of these characterizations and use other signals (primarily religion and ethnicity) to ascribe the *honor killing* label to various family murder cases. Thus, as Korteweg and Yurdakul (2009) note, honor killing discussions often serve as “a site in which boundaries between immigrants and majority society . . . are drawn” (p. 218). Thus, the focus on honor killing distracts attention from the fact that domestic violence is a problem for all women, not just Muslim or immigrant women. Other scholars further highlight that honor, shame, and the policing of women’s sexuality are common motivations in family killings in the West and are by no means limited to Muslim, Middle Eastern, or South Asian societies (Baker, Cassidy, & Gregware, 1999). Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2003) argues that

naming femicide as “crimes of passion” in the West and “crimes of honour” in the East is one reflection of the discriminatory constructions of frames of analyses, which . . . hides the intersectionality among political, economic, cultural and gender factors. (p. 590)

Such observations have led to a backlash against the term, with some scholars and activists declaring that the term “honor killings” should be integrated into the wider framework of family murders and domestic violence, to prevent singling them out for

racist or xenophobic treatment (Siddiqui, 2005; Terman, 2010). Others posit that we must adopt a new political language to challenge dominant power relations that are validated in popular discourse. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2003), for example, suggests creating a new and broader definition of “femicide” that highlights the myriad ways in which hegemonic power relations make women unable to control their personal lives and make it impossible for women to survive.

In the current study, we make no pre-suppositions regarding the nature of honor killing as a “real” or distinct entity. Rather, we wish to trace the process through which this category has been established and constructed and the criteria that journalists use in ascribing the label “honor killings” to some cases but not to others.

## **The Differential Treatment of Femicide Committed in the East and in the West**

The murder of women by family members is a global practice. Despite the universality of this misogynistic, violent act, previous research has shown that academics, journalists, and the public attribute different motivations to the murder of women based on culture, religion, and nationality (Abu-Lughod, 2006; Razack, 2008; Volpp, 2001). These authors have recognized a longstanding, socially constructed antagonism between the East and the West in how violence against women is perceived. This dates back to the attitudes of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries, which

established a set of binary oppositions in which the plenitude of the West was contrasted with the lack of the Orient: so that the West had rationality, the Orient was irrational; the West had tolerance, the Orient was fanatical; the West was progressive, the Oriental was traditional. (Sayyid & Sayyid, 2003, p. 33)

This dichotomy is evident in the treatment of femicide. Volpp (2001) argues that there is a ubiquitous assumption in the West that, due to cultural factors, a history of colonialism, and the established binary roles of the sexes, women from Third World countries are more vulnerable to patriarchal subordination and violence than are Western women. Accordingly, femicide is often regarded as a practice that is rooted and sanctioned in Eastern culture (Razack, 2008; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005; Volpp, 2001). Various scholars have argued that although the East is commonly thought to be violent and misogynistic, the West tends to regard itself as having no culture at all. As a result, when men from Western nations commit violent crimes against women, they are considered to be acting individually, disconnected from family, culture, or community (Razack, 2008; Volpp, 2001). Conversely, the failings of outsiders are viewed as reflecting their backwards culture, while their successes are treated as unique exceptions (Thobani, 2007). This common outlook perpetuates the false notion that whereas sexual violence against women of the Third World is culturally motivated, sexual violence and misogyny affecting White women from Western societies is independent from mainstream culture and is therefore not a mainstream issue (Volpp, 2001). These

assumptions cultivate the belief that the West is superior and that immigrant women need to be saved from their own culture (Abu-Lughod, 2006; Volpp, 2001).

Abu-Lughod (2006) suggests that although these views reinforce negative stereotypes about immigrant cultures, they also negatively affect Western culture, as they hinder our ability to appreciate cultural diversity and the complexity of the lives of Muslim and immigrant women. She argues that since September 11th, 2001, the binary distinctions of East and West have further amplified and have become even more simplistic. This process has influenced the media representation of Muslims and Islam, serving as justification for additional legal sanctions against immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia in Western countries (Abu-Lughod, 2006; Thobani, 2007). In Canada, Muslim immigrants have increasingly been thought of as a threat to the nation, and as a result have experienced processes of exclusion similar to what Japanese Canadians and First Nations have endured over the course of Canadian history (Thobani, 2007).

### **Previous Research on Honor Killings in the Media**

Three prominent studies have recently systematically analyzed the media coverage of honor killings in Europe and North America. First, Reimers (2007) studied the discourse in three daily Swedish mainstream newspapers, following the 2002 murder of Kurd woman Fadime Sahindal by her father. She found that journalists emphasized the victim's role in the act and her poor judgment. Furthermore, the act was made intelligible by adopting cultural references and contrasting the archaic and alien father, representing a distinct and backwards ("middle ages") patriarchal culture that is hostile to Swedish values, with an imagined Swedish modern way of living—free, independent, successful, and a haven for gender equality.

In a second study, Korteweg and Yurdakul (2009) analyzed the newspaper discussions surrounding prominent honor killing cases in the Netherlands and Germany. They found that in both countries, much of the newspaper reporting tends to reinforce boundaries between immigrants and majority societies, treating honor killings as a form of violence against women that is rooted in Islam, ethnicity, and national origin. In these reports, Islam and ethnic traditions were often presented as homogenous, unitary, and ahistorical.

Finally, in a follow-up study, Korteweg and Yurdakul (2010) expanded their analysis to newspaper coverage in two additional countries—the United Kingdom and Canada. They identify three major media and public discourses over honor killings: ones that stigmatize immigrant communities, ones that are culture blind and portray honor-related violence as domestic violence, and ones that contextualize these acts and recognize the communities in which they occur without essentializing the cultures of the community as a whole. Although Korteweg and Yurdakul identify stigmatizing discourses in all four countries, they argue that these appear in varying degrees. Specifically, they report that Canadian discussions tend to ignore the immigrant context and the way it affects the violence, and that powerful actors in the public sphere are less likely than in other countries to label murders *honor killings*.

These previous studies make an important contribution to our understanding of honor killings and their media depictions. Most of them, however, focus on one or two specific “honor killing” cases within a country. We believe that to fully understand the place of “honor killings” within the larger phenomenon of family murders, it is useful to adopt a comparative framework, one that focuses on the labels rather than on the cases. Such an approach can help one identify in which cases this label is applied and trace the process of label-assigning and boundary construction. To our knowledge, such a comparison has not been previously attempted in a large and systematic empirical media study.

Our unique design, comparing the different labels assigned to various murder cases, allows us to test not only the common discourse surrounding “honor killings,” but also the very definition and categorization of such cases and how they come to be labeled as such. Although previous media studies highlighted the role of culture, religion, and nationality in the branding and coverage of honor killings, these studies paid little attention to the role that such factors play in the coverage of other family murders. Our study thus provides the first systematic comparison of articles presenting both “honor killings” and other “family murders” in the Canadian news media, allowing us to examine the construction of these two categories of murder and the discourse surrounding each of them.

## Method

### Data

Our study compares the discussions surrounding “honor killings” and “family murders” in mainstream Canadian newspapers, seeking to evaluate differences and similarities in the coverage of these two categories. We conducted a comprehensive critical discourse (content) analysis (see Fairclough, 1995; Shor, 2008b, 2008c; Shor & Galily, 2012; Van Dijk, 1988) of 486 newspaper articles dealing with the murder of individuals by members of their own family, as well as by past or current romantic partners. Our sample included 291 articles that used the term “honour killing” and 195 articles that used the terms “spousal murder” and/or “domestic murder” (henceforward “family murder”).

The sample is comprised of news reports on murder cases (about half of the articles), longer opinion pieces, editorials, and letters to the editor responding to articles written by journalists. Articles were analyzed from January 2000-January 2012, allowing us to trace developments in the media discourse of honor killings and family murders over the last decade. More than 95% of the articles in the sample cover homicides perpetrated in Canada.

### Sampling

Articles were retrieved using the ProQuest Canadian Newspaper online archival database. The data were systematically gathered from three leading Canadian newspapers: *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, and *Toronto Star*.<sup>1</sup> *The Globe and Mail* and

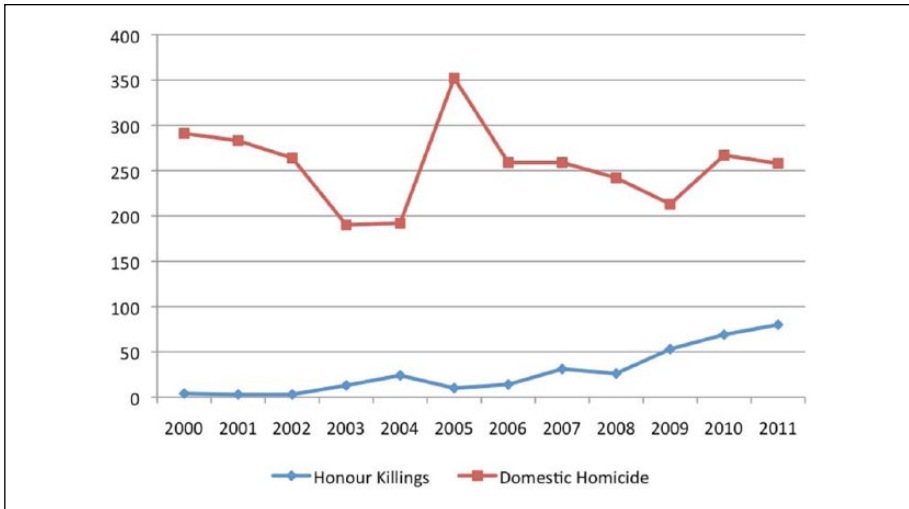
*National Post* are both nationally distributed newspapers, whereas *Toronto Star* is distributed mainly within Ontario. These three newspapers hold various political stances. *Toronto Star* often self-identifies as being liberal and is commonly considered the most leftwing newspaper in Canada. *The Globe and Mail* is considered more centrist or center-right, whereas *National Post* is often considered to be more conservative. That said, we found no substantial differences in the discourse of the three newspapers (neither according to their proclaimed political agenda nor by their local vs. national distribution).

**Honor killing sample.** From each of the three newspapers, we examined *all* of the 291 articles including the terms “honour killing” and “Canada” appearing between January 2000 and January 2012 (94 from *The Globe and Mail*, 107 from *National Post*, and 85 from *Toronto Star*). The majority ( $n = 257$ ) of these 291 articles reported on one of 30 individual murder cases, 14 of which occurred in Canada. The remaining 34 articles did not mention a particular murder case and instead focused on issues such as the use of the term “honor killing” and debates regarding immigration policies.

**Family murder sample.** Our initial search provided a total of 3,350 articles that included the keywords “domestic” and/or “spousal” “murder” and/or “homicide,” and “Canada” (1,401 from *The Globe and Mail*, 988 from *National Post*, and 961 from *Toronto Star*). We therefore took a sub-sample of this population. Using a proportionate  $k$ -interval, we sampled five articles from each of the three newspapers for every year from January 2000-January 2012, resulting in a total of 195 articles (65 articles per newspaper). These 195 articles reported on a total of 123 separate cases of spousal or domestic murders, 95 of which occurred in Canada.

## Coding

There is no one agreed-upon way to conduct and code content analyses. Although there has been a recent surge in quantitative computerized analyses of media content (Shor, van de Rijt, Ward, Askar, & Skiena, 2014; Shor, van de Rijt, Ward, Blank, & Skiena, 2014; Shor, van de Rijt, Miltsov, Kulkarni, & Skiena, 2015; van de Rijt, Shor, Ward, & Skiena, 2013), qualitative hand-coded discourse analysis remains very useful in penetrating the deeper meanings and nuances of the media coverage of minorities (Shor, 2008a; Shor & Yonay, 2010, 2011; Yonay & Shor, 2014). In the present analysis, we used a mix of qualitative and quantitative analyses, attempting to reach a deeper critical understanding of dominant discourses without losing track of the prevalence of these discourses. Accordingly, we began with a bottom-up process, in which we surveyed all articles in our sample looking for common themes. This initial survey generated a large number of themes, which we then collapsed into a smaller number of major themes: culture, religion, nationality, immigrant status, psychological factors, patriarchy, and male dominance. We analyzed the content of articles, as well as their headlines, by-lines, and photo captions, to identify and evaluate these central themes and the predominant norms and values of the authors.



**Figure 1.** Number of articles mentioning “honour killings” compared with number of articles mentioning “domestic” or “spousal homicide” in *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, and *Toronto Star*, 2000-2011.

## Findings

Canada’s spousal and family murder rates have been gradually declining since their peak in the mid-1970s (Beattie, 2008). Still, between 2000 and 2009, 35% of all homicides in the country were family-related (Statistics Canada, 2011). Out of these, only a handful has been labeled “honour killings.” According to Papp (2010), between 2002 and 2010, the murders of 15 females have received this label. And yet, Canadian politicians, journalists, and lay experts often warn the public that “honour killings” are on the rise (Muhammad, 2011), and some have named it “an epidemic” (Chesler, 2010, p. 3).

In Figure 1, we present our findings regarding the trends in reporting “family murders” and “honour killings” over the past decade. The figure shows that although the number of articles reporting on “family murders” has remained fairly stable (200-300 in most years), there has been a significant steady increase in reporting on “honour killings”—from virtually none in the early 2000s to nearly 100 in 2011. In other words, in recent years, close to a third of the mentions of murder inside the family in Canadian newspapers have been references to “honour killing” cases. It is thus clear that Canadian news media have been increasingly preoccupied with these cases, their victims and perpetrators, and the measures that should be invoked to prevent them from occurring. However, an examination of official statistics shows that the number of cases that most scholars in the field would consider honor killings is estimated at 12 or 13 between 2002 and 2011 (Jiwani & Hoodfar, 2012), or 16 between 1999 and 2009 (Khan, 2013). These figures represent about 1% of all family murders during this decade (Statistics Canada, 2011).



**Table 1.** Frequencies of Major Themes in Articles Labeled “Honour Killings” and those labeled “Family Murders.”

Themes	“Honour killing” articles (%)	“Family murder” articles (%)
Culture and/or religion	76	21
Nationality and/or immigrant status	84	20
Psychological factors	1	34
Patriarchy and male dominance	70	28
Other discourses	5	8

Why is it then that the so-called “honor killings” attract so much media attention? Which cases receive this label, and how do they differ from other family murders? Below, we outline the factors that guide journalists in their decision to label a given murder case as an honor killing versus a “standard” family or spousal murder. We then examine the discourse surrounding culture, ethnic origin, and religion in cases described as honor killings. Finally, we compare this discourse with the common discourse in cases described as domestic murders. Table 1 compares the prevalence of major themes found in articles using the label “honour killing” with the prevalence of the same themes in those articles using the label “family/spousal murders.”<sup>2</sup> Below, we elaborate on the findings presented in Table 1.

### *The Process of Labeling: Honor Killings Versus Family Murders*

Journalists tend to ascribe a few common characteristics to “honor killings.” These murders typically include a father (or brother) killing his daughter (or sister) who was “perceived to have brought shame upon the family” (Chung & Dale, 2009). The families implicated in so-called honor killing cases are typically Muslim and hail from Middle Eastern or South Asian countries. The female victims are said to have tarnished the honor of their families by wearing Western-style clothing, pursuing romantic relationships without the approval of their family, neglecting to acquiesce to the demands of their fathers, or simply seeking an independent lifestyle.

We should note here that at least in some cases, the fact that “honour killing” is a label rather than an objective real entity was discussed. For example, *The Globe and Mail* journalist Timothy Appleby (2011, p. A.5) wrote an article in which he stated that “[t]he phrase ‘honour killing’ is a misnomer that should be shunned because it emphasizes a twisted rationale for murder rather than the murder itself.” Still, most journalists and contributors posited that it is important to use the *honor killing* label to distinguish murders rooted in cultures of honor and shame from family murders that are not influenced by culture or religion. For example, columnist Margaret Wente (2008) wrote an opinion article in *Toronto Star* with the headline “To be specific is not racist,” in which she argued that the term “honour killing” is powerful as it gives a label to a murder that is perpetrated in an attempt to salvage a family’s honor. Similarly,

*The Globe and Mail* journalist Sheema Khan (2010) wrote that “[t]hese barbaric acts should be clearly designated as honour crimes, making it clear that such customs are unwelcome and will be severely punished.”

Seemingly then, and in line with the writings of some prominent scholars in the field (Chesler, 2009; Sen, 2005; Terman, 2010; Wikan, 2008), there is a clear and well-defined boundary line separating honor killings from other family murders. *National Post* journalist Barbara Kay (2009, p. A.16), calling for specific legislation against honor killings, summarizes what she (and many other journalists and scholars) sees as the key distinctive features of honor killings:

Honour killings target mostly daughters; normative DV [domestic violence] is bilateral between intimate adult partners. Honour killings are carefully planned; DV is spontaneous. Honour killings involve complicity with other family members; DV is a private affair. Honour killing is motivated by perceived family humiliation; DV is not about honour; DV springs from personal psychological problems. Honour killings are perpetrated with extreme ferocity . . . ; DV is hastily executed . . . Most important of all: Honour killings elicit approval in their communities; DV elicits disgust.

This quote appears to delineate a very lucid and clear-cut categorization. However, are these really the categories that journalists use to separate the two practices? Our examination of the newspapers’ coverage and labeling of cases as honor killings clarifies that quite often, the boundaries are in fact much more ambiguous. Let us examine Kay’s characterizations one by one.

First, honor killings are often said to be perpetrated by a female’s family of origin, as a means to protect this family’s honor. Indeed, the majority of the articles in our sample that adopt this term refer to such cases. However, there were also 15 articles in our sample (about 5% of the total number of cases) in which murder cases were labeled *honor killings* despite the fact that the victim was the perpetrator’s wife. One such case was the 2009 murder of Aasiya Hassan, who was decapitated by her estranged husband. In a *Toronto Star* article (Anonymous, 2009, p. IN.6), the journalist reporting on this case asked, “Was this an ‘honor killing’ linked to some barbaric interpretation of Islam . . . ?” In another case from 2011, 24-year-old Vancouver-native Ravinder Bhangu was murdered by her estranged husband, Sunny Bhangu. *National Post* journalist Tristin Hopper (2011) describes the case as “carry[ing] the distinctive marks of honour killings.” Hopper made sure to remind the readers of the couple’s South Asian heritage, but no evidence was provided that the perpetrator was motivated to kill to defend family honor. Clearly, then, the mere fact that the murder is perpetrated by a Muslim or South Asian may be enough to render it an honor killing, even when the victim is a spouse. Religion and ethnicity are often used as signifiers in addition to or instead of the identities of the victim and perpetrator.

Barbara Kay’s next contention is that honor killings are carefully planned whereas domestic homicides are spontaneous. This contention is also sometimes problematic. On one hand, clearly not all “spousal murders” are spontaneous. One case exemplifying this fact is the murders of Hoa Le Dong and her boyfriend by Dong’s ex-spouse, Thieu Kham. The journalist reporting on the event stated that there was

“nothing sudden” about the perpetrator’s discovering the two in bed together because he had suspected his ex-spouse of having an affair, tried to eavesdrop on her conversations, and told his godmother the night before that he knew who her lover was. (MacCharles, 2010, p. A.8)

On the contrary, not all cases labeled “honour killings” in our sample were in fact carefully calculated acts.<sup>3</sup> For example, an article written by Neco Cockburn (2009) in *National Post* was titled “Accused in ‘Honour Killing’ Lost Control, Court Told; Man Became Angry, Shot Sister, Fiancé, Witness Testifies.” This case exemplifies that murders that are executed in the heat of the moment can also be given the label “honour killing.”

Also questionable is Kay’s statement that honor killings are motivated by perceived family humiliation whereas domestic violence is the result of personal psychological problems. It seems that quite often this distinction is based on post-hoc subjective evaluations of motivations rather than the facts of the case. In fact, in contrast to this notion, psychology expert Amin Muhammad argues that “most cases of honour killings involve some form of mental illness, typically a personality disorder or some form of psychosis” (Allen & Friesen, 2010, p. A.1). We further expand on this issue in the “Conclusion and Discussion” section of our findings.

Finally, Kay’s assertion that honor killings are met with community approval is controversial. Many articles about cases labeled *honor killings* emphasize the disapproval with which the murders were met. For example, *The Globe and Mail* journalist Anna Mehler Paperny (2011) describes how the “honour killing” of 21-year-old Shaher Bano Shahdady “rocked the city’s [Scarborough, Ontario] close-knit Balochi community.” Other articles cite quotes from imams declaring that Islamic religious and cultural leaders condemn honor killings and violence against women. For instance, an anonymous article in the *National Post* (Anonymous, 2011, p. A.5) included a quote from Sikander Hashmi, an imam in Kingston, Ontario, stating, “We felt very strongly that we had a responsibility to make it very, very clear that honour killings—so-called honour killings; we don’t want to consider them anything honourable—have absolutely nothing to do with Islam.”

In conclusion, it is evident that the seemingly clear boundaries between “honor killing” and “family murder” are often ambiguous and arbitrary. In fact, it appears that the only consistent factor that all cases labeled “honor killing” have in common is that they involve Muslim, Middle Eastern, or South Asian perpetrators and victims. Therefore, when writers declare that “[l]et’s Admit It: Honour Killing in the West is by Muslims” (Chesler, 2012), one should acknowledge that by their very conceptualization, honor killings are rarely ascribed to groups of non-Muslim origin, regardless of the details of the case.

### “Shades of Foreign Evil”: Muslim Immigrants as Primitive and Violent

As noted above, the culture, religion, and country of origin of the family involved are the most consistent characteristics appearing in articles reporting cases labeled “honor

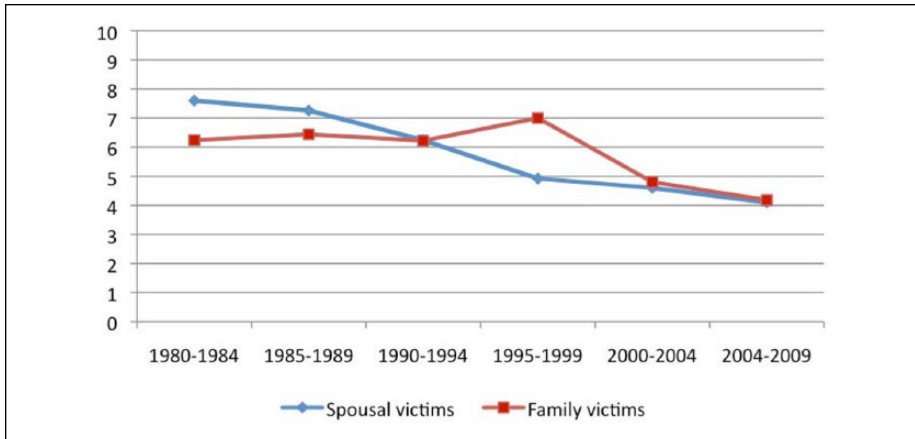
killings.” Seventy-six percent of the articles in our honor killings sample refer to these elements as factors influencing perpetrators to execute honor killings. In comparison, only 21% of the articles framing cases as “family murders” highlighted any of these factors. Journalists often present violence against women as a “barbaric” cultural practice that has “penetrated the West” (Chesler, 2011, p. A.28). For example, a *National Post* article describes the murder of 27-year-old British woman Surjit Kaur Athwal by her grandmother as “the latest case of what is known as an honour killing, the most extreme dignity-saving tactic by immigrant communities who increasingly find their cultural traditions being challenged by modern lifestyles” (Wordsworth, 2007, p. A.3).

The discourse of incompatibility between immigrants from South Asia or the Middle East and Western culture and society is also prevalent in articles reporting the murders of the Shafia sisters, an “honour killing” case that has attracted significant media attention. On June 30, 2009, Afghan Canadian Mohammad Shafia, his son Hamed Mohammad, and his second wife in a polygamous marriage Tooba Yahya, murdered Mohammad’s three daughters, Zainab, 19; Sahar, 17; and Geeti, 13; along with his first wife, Rona Amir Mohammed, 50. The Shafia women were allegedly murdered because their behavior brought shame to their family. The Canadian news media described the three sisters as rebellious and disobedient.

Most of the articles in our sample pertaining to the Shafia murder case included the term “honour killing.” Culture, religious background, and immigration status were commonly invoked as primary explanations for the murder, as in the following *National Post* headline: “In Ontario’s Heartland, Shades of Foreign Evil” (De Souza, 2009). Many other journalists writing about this case used it to assert the supremacy of Canadian culture, arguing that honor killings are a direct product of immigration from South Asian countries. For example, *Toronto Star* journalist Daniel Dale (2009, p. A.6) began his opinion article with the statement that honor killings “seem alien, inaccessible, at odds with everything we know about in our country. How could a primitive thing like that happen in a progressive place like this?”

This notion that honor killings (and sometimes family murders more broadly) are imported to progressive and civilized Western nations from archaic, stagnant, and misogynistic societies was a very common theme in the articles we examined. Such statements ignore the fact that barbaric family murders have always been a common practice in Western societies, including Canada, and in fact at even higher rates before the recent waves of immigration. There is no evidence that Canadian visible minorities or immigrants are associated with increased levels of spousal violence compared with other ethnic groups. According to Statistics Canada, in 2011, only 5% of visible minorities, versus 6% of non-visible minorities, self-reported experiencing spousal violence. In the same report, 4% of immigrants and 7% of non-immigrants reported being a victim of spousal violence (Statistics Canada, 2011).

These statistics should be approached carefully, as there may be differences in levels of self-reporting among victims, with minorities perhaps being less willing or less able to report violent crimes. In addition, lumping together all visible minorities may obscure differences between minority groups.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that at least in those cases that are reported and become publicly known (and therefore are more



**Figure 2.** Spousal homicides and family-related youth (0-17) homicide, Canada, 1980-2009 (average yearly rate per one million people).

Source: Statistics Canada (2011).

likely to receive media coverage), immigrant and minority groups do not suffer from higher rates of spousal violence.

The common media and public imagery about immigrant groups being responsible for Canada's supposed influx in family murder thus seems farfetched. Statistics on domestic homicide in Canada further reveal that despite increasing numbers of immigrants from South Asia and the Middle East, family and spousal murder rates have not increased (Statistics Canada, 2011). In fact, as demonstrated in Figure 2, the overall rates for spousal homicides in Canada have declined over the last three decades.

### *“Foreign Barbaric Practices Are Infiltrating Canada”: The Dichotomization of East and West*

Many journalists reporting or commenting on murders framed as “honor killings” imply the superiority of Western “modern” society over the traditional, misogynistic values supposedly inherent in Muslim culture. For example, Phyllis Chesler (2011) states,

It is rare for a domestically violent Western father to routinely batter, stalk, patrol and murder his own daughter, and to be assisted in this gruesome task by his entire family. In the West, the majority (91%) of honour killings are Muslim-on-Muslim crimes. While Hindus and Sikhs do honour murder, they do so mostly in India, not in the New World.

This article, like many others, presents a binary discourse between Muslim and Western cultures. In this binary, Western or Canadian culture is portrayed as diverse, superior, civilized, modern, and glorifying gender equality, whereas Muslim culture

is portrayed as homogeneous, unchanging, barbaric, and misogynistic. Chesler includes a statistic to support her assertion that Muslims execute the vast majority of honor killings. However, given the tendency described earlier to ascribe this label to various family murders in which Muslims are involved, one may question how this statistic was calculated (Chesler based it on media reports). Later in the same article, Chesler further develops her clash of civilizations argument. She asserts that “[h]onour killings also are distinguished by their barbaric ferocity. The female victim often is gang-raped, then burned alive, stoned or beaten to death, cut at the throat, decapitated, stabbed numerous times, suffocated slowly, etc.” (Chesler, 2011). The assertion that honor killings are especially “exotic” and “barbaric” helps to perpetuate the common view that Muslims are more violent and ruthless than other people and cultures.

The binary between East and West was especially salient in the murder of Mississauga teen Aqsa Parvez. On December 10, 2007, 16-year-old Aqsa Parvez was murdered by her father and brother in her Mississauga, Ontario home. According to journalists, the murder was motivated by the family’s disapproval of Aqsa’s adoption of Western-style attire and behavior, including her repudiation of the hijab, a head cover worn in public by some Muslim women. The Parvez case garnered international media attention and was presented as an honor killing in nearly all of the articles in our sample that covered it.

Most of the articles covering the Parvez case blamed Islam for the murder, citing the assumed dichotomy between Muslim and Canadian cultures. An opinion editorial piece in the *National Post* exemplifies this tendency:

Whenever a girl dies at the tender age of 16, it’s a tragedy. But the death of . . . Aqsa Parvez, many fear, may represent something more: a sign that the loathsome and barbaric practice of Muslim “honour killings” is making its way from South Asia and the Middle East to Canada. (Anonymous, 2007, p. A.26)

Associating Islam, South Asia, and the Middle East with “barbaric” honor killings suggests that, unlike Canadian culture, Islamic culture is uncivilized and backward. The quote instills in the reader a sense of uneasiness: The peaceful and gender-equal Canadian way of life is being invaded by a violent, intolerant, and barbaric Muslim culture. Such notions ignore the fact that “barbaric practices” of femicide have always been a part of Canadian society, and many of these murders have been (and remain) motivated by ideologies of honor, shame, and patriarchal control (Baker et al., 1999; Papp, 2010).

Some journalists explain that honor killings are a South Asian or Middle Eastern practice, because although Western societies see individuals as autonomous, the East views humans as agents of a family. For example, Jonathan Kay (2007, p. A.18) of the *National Post* writes,

Individualism has become so fundamental to the Western world view that most of us cannot imagine any other way of conceiving human existence. . . . In most of South Asia

and the Middle East, humans are not viewed primarily as individuals, but as agents of a family, tribe, clan or sect.

Such explanations for family murders (those focusing on cultural differences and Western individualism) must be carefully examined. Baker et al. (1999) argue that the salience of honor as a major motivating factor behind family murders is not at all unique to Eastern cultures. Whereas in the East, honor codes are based on shame that is brought on the whole family, in Western society a man's perceived inability to control a woman in his life often causes him feelings of shame and inadequacy and leads to violence. This insight was lucidly expressed by Afghan Canadian actress Nelofer Pazira in an interview for *The Globe and Mail*:

When we think about the question of honour, we often think it's related to the Eastern world. But the concept of honour is prevalent in all of our lives, all of the time. Nobody wants to be embarrassed in front of others. (Bradshaw, 2010, p. R.1)

This dissenting voice demonstrates that although the dominant discourse on honor killings either explicitly or implicitly blames the culture, religion, or nationality of immigrants, a minority among the writers does recognize that Canada too has its own culture of patriarchy, honor, and misogyny. Hence, the assimilation of immigrants is not likely to eradicate violence against women and femicide. Another example for this alternative discourse comes from *National Post* journalist Kathryn Blaze Carlson (2009, p. A.4), who argues that using the term *honor killing* "becomes a way of saying 'those barbaric practices' done by 'those barbaric cultures,' as if the West's hands are somehow clean." This realization echoes the academic understanding that the media's focus on culture and Islam (rather than, for example, on the role of socioeconomic status, minority status, or one's position in relation to the state) in relation to "honor killings" contributes to a distorted public image of Muslims in the West and to their ongoing demonization (Michaels, 2010).

Only rarely do journalists acknowledge that conflating Muslim culture and patriarchy serves to obscure the issue of gender-based violence. This rare realization is present in an article by *Toronto Star* journalist Antonia Zirbisias (2008, p. L.2), who explicitly compared the journalistic framing and reporting of honor killings and other domestic homicides: "We don't report domestic homicides with phrases like, 'It was a she-talked-back-at-him-once-too-often-killing' or 'She wanted to leave him killing,' do we? . . . Indeed, it distracts from the real issues of patriarchy and control." This rare quote illustrates that focusing on the religious (Muslim) and cultural aspects of the act of murder diverts attention from the fact that the main theme behind the majority of family killings is one of gender relations and male domination.

Our findings also show that religion and pioussness were much more commonly invoked in articles covering cases in which Muslims were involved. These cases were often presented as "a battle between Islam and Christianity" (Kay, 2007), perpetuating the common notion that Islam by its nature is a violent and primitive religion. In articles pertaining to the murder of Aqsa Parvez, Islam was often singled out as the

only religion encouraging family murder. For example, *The Globe and Mail* journalist Doug Buchanan (2007, p. A.24) writes, "Aqsa Parvez's death is not allegedly the result of 'religious extremism.' Call it what it is: 'Islamic extremism.' This kind of death is unthinkable to most other religious groups." As evidence that the presumably violent nature of the Islamic religion is entrenched in religious doctrines, Philip Giurlando (2007, p. A.21) wrote in his *National Post* article, "Verse 4:34 of the Koran tells believers that 'men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one excel the other. . . . As for those for whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and scourge them.'" Similarly, other journalists cite the Koran to "prove" that honor killings are an Islamic practice.

Such statements and excerpts ignore the fact that Judeo-Christian scriptures (including the Bible) are also mired with misogynistic quotes and with stories and passages that assert men's superiority and their undeniable rights to punish women for transgressing sexual norms or for failing to defer to the males in their society (Dunn & Rogerson, 2003; Frymer-Kensky, 2004). There is also evidence that powerful notions of family honor exist in Latin American and Mediterranean peasant societies, nomadic people in Southwest Asia and the Middle East, and among many Indian castes and Chinese upper classes (Ortner, 1978, in Baker et al., 1999; Reimers, 2007; Volpp, 2001). Indeed, scholars have argued that oftentimes, the public discourse surrounding Islam accentuates the patriarchal values and gender inequalities attributed to this religion to emphasize the perceived differences between Western and Muslim societies (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2009; see also Zolberg & Long, 1999). In fact, the notion that Islam by its nature condones honor killing is a misconception, and many reputable Islamic scholars and religious leaders (including conservative ones) have spoken against the practice (Terman, 2010).

### *When Non-Muslim Canadians Kill: Pathologizing Murders*

Whereas most of the articles framing cases as honor killings focused on the culture, nationality, religion, or immigrant status of the perpetrators and victims, many of the "family murder" articles invoked the personality or psychological condition of the perpetrators to explain the murder. Journalists tend to refer to the personality of the perpetrator in one of two ways. First, many journalists attribute perpetrators' actions primarily to mental or personality disorders. An article on Robert Dean May, who repeatedly abused and threatened women with whom he had been romantically involved, illustrates this tendency: "His personality became dominated by traits such as narcissism, recklessness, extreme self-centredness and a complete lack of remorse for any of his many acts of deceit and violence" (Makin, 2007, p. A.11).

Many other articles similarly refer to the psychological history of perpetrators. When writing about the murder of Natalie Bobeika by her estranged husband, Iouri Bobeika, *National Post* reporter Courtney Pasternak (2003) focuses on "his history of depression and drug use." In another article in *Toronto Star*, the authors note that Peter Islamkin, a Russian Jewish immigrant who murdered his estranged wife, "had battled depression, and one [neighbor] said he had in the past threatened to kill his wife"



(McCabe-Lokos & Gwolinski, 2002, p. A.19).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, when Bill Luft killed his wife and four children, his actions were ascribed to “bipolar disorder and depression” (Daly, 2005, p. A.20).

Alternatively, some journalists contrast the murderers’ seemingly sane personalities with the heinous crimes they committed. For example, *The Globe and Mail* journalist Justine Hunter (2008, p. S.3) writes, “He was Mr. Average. . . . There were no warning signs that . . . Doug Holtam would murder his pregnant wife and six-year-old daughter with a hammer, then beat his eight-year-old boy nearly to death.” This description implicitly presents a psychological explanation of the murder, as the perpetration of the act is attributed to an unforeseeable psychological breakdown.

Similar descriptions are invoked repeatedly, emphasizing the reporter’s surprise at the perpetration of family murders by seemingly normal, Average Joe, Canadian men who turned out to be “mentally unstable.” For example, an article in *The Globe and Mail* presents the case of a man who, following an altercation with his ex-girlfriend, murdered her and two other individuals. The article includes a quote from an acquaintance of the perpetrator who describes him as “an ordinary guy with good grades, not a gun enthusiast, as indicated by his Facebook page” (Maki, Moore, & Mickleburgh, 2011, p. A.3). Similarly, *The Globe and Mail* journalist Tracy McLaughlin (2000, p. A.14) reports about David Rawlings, a man who killed himself during a domestic altercation with his wife, who fled their house in terror: “[Rawlings] liked to play his guitar around the campfire, never had a violent incident in his marriage, had no history of mental illness and was known as a ‘nice guy’ by his neighbours and close friends.”

Hence, regardless of whether perpetrators are described as seemingly regular or as overtly dangerous, the frames and terminology used by reporters draw attention to the murderers’ personality, mental instability, or surprising mental breakdown, rather than to their social background, culture, ethnicity, or religion. Although perpetrators of “honor killings” are typically (in nearly 80% of the cases) described as being motivated by their culture, religion, and sense of honor, virtually all perpetrators of “regular family murders” are said to have reached a point of mental breakdown or psychosis that propelled them to commit murder.

This focus on personality and the psychological state of the perpetrators was common in articles that reported on the highly covered murder case of Gillian Hadley. On June 20, 2000, estranged husband Ralph Hadley broke into his matrimonial home and murdered his ex-wife, Gillian Hadley, before he turned the gun on himself. The couple shared a tumultuous marriage in which Ralph was controlling and abusive, repeatedly expressing jealousy regarding his wife’s alleged affair with another man. The media discourse surrounding this murder presented domestic violence as a psychological issue. Hadley was commonly portrayed by journalists as obsessive, controlling, and psychologically unstable: “[Police officer Cheryl] Carter quickly saw the signs of obsession and Ralph Hadley’s panic at losing control of his wife. . . . She knew he’d been violent in the past. . . . Hadley should have been detained and psychologically assessed” (Coyle, 2005, p. A.23). Another journalist noted that “[t]he jury heard conflicting testimony during the inquest about his state of mind. He had been on antidepressant drugs” (Abbate, 2002, p. A.11).

Interestingly, this report ignores an alternative interpretation, one that is readily invoked when Muslim or immigrant killers are involved: the fact that Hadley's acts were spurred by a sense of entitlement to his wife and a perceived loss of control and ownership over her sexuality, which provoked feelings of shame and humiliation. Psychological problems may have played some role in the murder. However, the elements of policing the sexual behavior of female family members and the sense of shame felt when control is perceived to be endangered are central to understanding family violence in every society, including Western societies (Papp, 2010). Indeed, news reports often ignore an important fact: The vast majority of family murder perpetrators are men (Statistics Canada, 2011). One may ask why is it that when women experience a "mental breakdown," they rarely lash out and kill their partners.

The loss of self-control, commonly presented as stemming from psychological reasons for perpetrators of family murders, is depicted as a cultural factor in cases labeled "honor killings." For example, in the case of a Muslim man who murdered his wife, journalist Janice Tibbetts (2006, p. A.6) writes,

Humaid was provoked by his wife's claim she cheated on him, an insult so severe in the Muslim faith it deprived him of self control. The concept of "family honour" in the Muslim culture means a man is disgraced if his wife had an affair.

It is interesting to contrast this description with the discourse surrounding Ralph Hadley's murder of his ex-wife. Although both perpetrators were said to have killed their wives due to infidelity, when the killer was Muslim, culture and religion, rather than individual psychological problems, were quickly invoked.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Our study of Canadian newspaper articles labeling murders either "honor killings" or "family murders" showed that the distinction between the two categories is often based on the identity of those involved rather than the facts of the case. Our findings support Letti Volpp's (2001) contention that culture is readily invoked to explain violence against Third World or immigrant women, but is only rarely invoked to explain similar forms of violence and femicide against Western women. Indeed, we found that cases treated as honor killings were associated with Muslims or other immigrants from South Asia and the Middle East, and described as motivated by religion, culture, and a sense of honor and shame. Conversely, in cases of family murders committed by non-Muslim Canadians, culture and religion were rarely mentioned. Journalists writing about these cases typically invoke psychological and personal explanations. They ignore the fact that the perceived transgression and preservation of honor and attempts to avoid shame are at the root of many family and spousal murders in a variety of social and cultural contexts (Baker et al., 1999; Narayan, 1997).

Following Korteweg and Yurdakul (2009), we believe that the dominant discourse over honor killings is part of a larger discourse seeking to draw and redraw "bright boundaries" between outsiders and insiders through the construction of sharp

distinctions between immigrants and majority society. The culture of the outsiders (immigrants from South Asian and Middle Eastern countries, especially Muslim ones) is depicted as one that is founded on primitive, irrational, immutable, and ahistorical notions of patriarchy, misogyny, and aberrant violence (Volpp, 2001). In contrast, Western (Canadian) culture often is not even mentioned and is treated much more as a set of values that contains a unique commitment to democracy, human rights, and gender equity. This media distinction demonstrates the arguments of critical race theorists, who maintain that we tend to highlight racial differences while ignoring the fact that these differences “are dwarfed by how much we have in common, and have little or nothing to do with distinctly human, higher-order traits, such as personality, intelligence, and moral behaviour” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 8-9).

One likely result of such depictions is anti-immigration sentiments and policies. The disproportionate coverage dedicated to cases of “honor killings” and the common tendency to highlight the religion or culture of the perpetrators in such cases lead readers to associate Islam and immigrants from South Asia and the Middle East with crime and violence, overlooking other aspects of these cultures. Thobani (2007) argues that such stigma often lead to anti-immigration sentiments and to policies that impede settlement and integration. According to Razack (2008), anti-immigration sentiments have already been supported by legal sanctions against immigrants and refugees in various Western nations. For example, in 2002, the Denmark federal government passed strict anti-immigration laws. Since 9/11, similar discriminatory bills have been passed in Canada, and in 2012, a range of amendments have been made to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Critics argue that these amendments are unfair and damage the process of selecting refugees and immigrants to Canada (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2012).

A second common result of the dominant media discourse over honor killings is the demand that South Asian and Muslim immigrants conform to Canadian values and assimilate. These immigrants are expected to give up their cultural and religious uniqueness, as these are often considered to be the source of the problem (Moller Okin, 1999). Because the common perception is that South Asian culture and Islam are immutable and that values of honor and misogyny are inherent to them, the only solution remains total abdication of this culture and religion in favor of the modernized (and superior) Canadian culture, which is based on Judeo-Christian values.

There are multiple problems with such demands. First, they depict a timeless, ahistorical, and essentialist picture of Third World cultures, one in which women are invariably cast in the role of victims. This view leads many to deny the existence of agency within patriarchy, ignoring the fact that Third World women are capable of emancipatory change on their own behalf (Volpp, 2001). Further, such perceptions serve to obscure violence at home and fail to recognize the extent to which, as the present study demonstrates, domestic violence and honor-induced femicide remain a problem for all Canadians. As noted by various scholars, the high rates of domestic violence and femicide experienced by women in virtually *all* Western societies call into question the assumption that immigrant Muslim women would be safer if they (or their families) only changed their culture or religion (Bhabha, 1999; Korteweg & Yurdakul,

2009; Narayan, 1997). Finally, as Volpp (2001) astutely observes, “[t]he negative image of ‘other’ women is used as a mirror, so comparisons between women, as opposed to comparisons between men, become the relevant frame of reference” (p. 1214). Thus, the attention of many Western women is diverted from the fact that they continue to be subordinate to men in their own culture. They feel as if they have autonomy and agency in contrast to Third World women, and cease to conceptualize themselves as victims of subordinating practices and patriarchy.

What should we do then with the label “honor killing”? Recognizing the serious problems outlined above, some activists and scholars have called for its complete abdication. They contend that it is nothing more than a misleading and Islamophobic phrase and argue that it should be integrated into the wider framework of domestic violence (Siddiqui, 2005). Others, however, maintain that the term must not be avoided, as it is crucial for prevention efforts. In some cases, the media coverage of “honor crimes” has allowed subordinated women’s voices to be heard, and has therefore served as a form of resistance to oppression (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003). Adopting a color-blind conception of equality, or treating all murder cases as one and the same, may hinder these achievements. Furthermore, such a tactic may prove to be counterproductive in practical terms, as it does not acknowledge that there can be specific factors that are more likely to contribute to the so-called honor killing murder cases.

Opponents of uniform terminology argue that feminist groups often utilize the term because they recognize that honor-related crimes carry particular characteristics that call for a unique course of action (International Campaign Against Honour Killings, 2008; Terman, 2010; Wentz, 2008). For example, if we acknowledge that perpetrators of honor killings rarely work alone and that they often enjoy the approval of families or communities, we may be able to invest more efforts in appropriate education initiatives and special legislative procedures that would target co-conspirators. Police, courts, youth services, and social welfare agencies must also acknowledge the unique traits of these killings to offer special protection and assistance to potential victims.

Recognizing these issues, we agree that the phenomenon often referred to as “honor killings” indeed exists and should not be ignored. However, we would like to emphasize two important points. First, we suggest that the label itself is misleading and harmful and that a different label should be adopted. One reason for this is that there is nothing honorable about these killings. The British press recognizes this point, often referring to these acts as “‘honour’ crimes” or “so-called ‘honour’-based violence”). Following Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2003), we feel that adopting a new political language that challenges dominant power relations in mainstream society might help minority groups in constructing a more positive identity in Western societies. Furthermore, as our study demonstrates, feelings of honor, shame, and the entitlement to police women’s bodies and (sexual) behaviors are not at all unique to those cases labeled “honor killings.” The label therefore serves to stigmatize Islam and exonerate Western cultures, associating family killings involving Muslims with cultural or religious motives, whereas other family killings are largely attributed to individual and psychological problems.

Our second contention is that even if one chooses to continue singling out the practice of “honor killings,” special care should be taken not to essentialize it. Our analysis showed that many of the characteristics that are associated with these cases (feelings of honor and shame as the major motivating factor; killings prompted by suspicion alone; killings that are well planned) often exist in other family murders. The boundaries between honor killings and other family femicides are thus more blurry than some writers suggest. We therefore contend that if a certain label is maintained for practical reasons, it must be used with special care by journalists, academics, advocacy groups, and policy makers.

One possible approach would be adopting Gayatri Spivak’s (1996/1985) concept of *strategic essentialism*: “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (p. 214). Adopting strategic essentialism suggests that we can recognize the challenges in using the label “honor killing” without completely abdicating the distinction and thus undermining efforts to fight the practice. However, in adopting such a strategy, one runs the risk of playing into the hands of powerful political groups, who fail to make the distinction between the strategic and the essential. These groups may then use these essentialized labels to stigmatize, redraw boundaries, and maintain support for anti-immigration or anti-Muslim policies.

In conclusion, the importance of our study lies primarily in the adoption of a novel comparative framework, which highlights inconsistencies between the coverage of murders given the “honor killing” label and those labeled “spousal/family murder.” We believe that understanding how cultural and religious backgrounds shape the portrayal of minority groups in the Canadian news media constitutes an important first step in the integration process of minority and immigrant communities. The growing tendency in the media to focus on “honor killings” and present these as “their (i.e., immigrants’ and Muslims’) problem” deflects attention from the real problem: namely, the patriarchal idea that men have the right, or even the obligation, to police the (sexual) behaviors of their female family members, be it daughters, sisters, or wives. Only with the realization that this is an endemic cultural problem, prevalent in virtually all groups within Canadian and other Western societies, can we truly address the serious problems of violence against women and femicide.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. As of 2010, *The Globe and Mail* was the second-highest circulating newspaper in the country (first among national newspapers), with a weekly circulation of approximately

1,900,000 newspapers. *National Post* was the ninth-highest circulating newspaper (second among national newspapers), with a weekly circulation of approximately 950,000 newspapers. Although *Toronto Star* is mainly distributed in Ontario, it is included in the present analysis because it is Canada's highest circulating newspaper, with a weekly circulation of approximately 2,044,000 in 2010.

2. One should note that the distinction here is somewhat arbitrary, as we argue throughout the article. In other words, the fact that a certain article uses the label "honor killing" does not mean that the case in question is widely regarded as such. Furthermore, journalists often refrained from naming a case an honor killing, aware of the various implications and problems associated with the label. Hence, many of the articles in the "family murder" pool that talk about culture, religion, nationality, and immigration status actually refer to murder cases by immigrants, which some would call "honor killings."
3. Due to the lack of sufficient details and the questionable coverage patterns described below, it is hard to assess the exact number of cases for which this applies.
4. In the name of political correctness, the Canadian federal government often conceals statistics on crime rates by race and ethnicity (Gabor, 1994).
5. This case, like many others, describes a man who was clearly meditating on killing his wife for a long time and has used this threat to try to discipline her. It puts into question the common claim that family murders are almost always spontaneous "crimes of passion."

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