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# Conflation, collocation and confusion

British press coverage of the sexual murder of women

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## ABSTRACT

Despite research to the contrary, a recent British Home Office report by Kelly et al. (2005) notes that in public consciousness a 'real rape' is perceived to occur in a public place, is perpetrated by a stranger and involves aggravating violence. Further, it notes that such skewed perceptions are implicated in the high attrition rate that this offence attracts in the United Kingdom. This paper suggests that a significant factor in the reinforcing of this skewed perception is the reporting of violence against women in the print media. It is argued that murders of women are regularly sexualized by journalists and conversely that sexual assaults of women are framed within a discourse of murder. Through a discourse analysis of six case studies of rape and/or murder of women by men between 2003 and 2004, this research contends that the habitual linking of the concepts of sex and death in such reporting, which in some contexts effectively produces a conflation of the offences of rape and murder, contributes to the way in which rape is received by criminal justice professionals, victims and the wider public.

KEY WORDS  
sex crime

criminal justice  
women

discourse

murder

public opinion

rape

## Context: sexed crime, public opinion and the media

Statistics tell us that most rape assaults in the United Kingdom do not end in the death of the victim and that the vast majority are committed by friends or acquaintances (Harris and Grace, 1999; Karlberg and Hackett, 1996; Kelly et al., 2005). However, a perception still persists in the public consciousness that a 'real' rape occurs in a public place, is committed by a stranger and involves aggravating violence. The latest British governmental research published by the Home Office (Kelly et al., 2005) suggests that these skewed perceptions of the offence have a very real impact on successful criminal convictions for rape in the United Kingdom, with high rates of attrition at all stages of the criminal justice process. The number of reported rape cases ending in a conviction has fallen in the United Kingdom from 33 percent in 1977 to 5.29 percent in 2004 (Office for Criminal Justice Reform [OCJR], 2006: 8). One explanation for such a dramatic fall in convictions is the rise in reporting of rape as a result of heightened awareness in women who are victims, but occurring alongside a persisting failure in criminal justice professionals and the wider public to recognize sexual violation when it occurs. Despite the advances achieved by the women's movement in reconstructing rape as violence and not sex, (Bevacqua, 2000)

this skewed perception of rape dominates and, as will be argued in this article, is linked to discourses of sexual murder, and in some contexts the two offences of rape and murder are often conflated.

## **Crime, gender and the news**

Perhaps we should not be surprised that, in public consciousness, rape is regularly conflated with potential or fatal violence. Violent offenders like the Yorkshire Ripper<sup>1</sup> and Jack the Ripper have often – inaccurately – been described both in the media, and in the wider public sphere, as rapists. Jack the Ripper has been deemed to be ‘the archetypal rapist’ (Frayling, 1986) and a killer who committed the ‘ultimate rape’ (Marriner, 1992). Yet Jack the Ripper was never suspected of raping any of his victims and there is no evidence to suggest that any attempts to rape the victims were made, or that the killer ejaculated over the bodies. These crimes, in this context, could be considered to exemplify a conflation of rape and murder. As Tatar notes, Jack the Ripper can persistently stand as ‘the most notorious example of male sexual violence’ (1995: 22), though why this violence is considered sexual is unclear. Experts on the phenomenon contend that male violence against women can be considered sexual whether or not there is a sexual assault or the violence appears to be concentrated on sexual organs (Gerberth, 1998; Schlesinger, 2003). Schmid considers that the FBI constructed a discourse of sexual murder based on Jack the Ripper’s ‘foundational place in the pantheon of serial killers’ (2005: 67).

The myths produced around Jack the Ripper’s crimes created evidence and ‘knowledge’ still drawn upon by contemporary media and in police responses to the murders of women. Walkowitz notes that ‘mythmaking of this sort had its material consequences. The murder hunt (for the Yorkshire Ripper) was hampered by the investment of police themselves in the Ripper fantasy’ (1992: 230). We would argue that the conflation of murder and rape, embodied by the myths of Jack The Ripper and present in our sample, have been reproduced with impunity by numerous powerful and diverse institutions and groups such as the police, politicians, authors, artists, filmmakers and, for our purposes here, journalists. The ‘knowledge’ produced by the discourse, as Foucault would contend, is perhaps best illustrated in law enforcement practice, as Schmid outlines in his discussion of the FBI’s treatment of sexual murder (Schmid, 2005). According to Schmid, the FBI have become central in producing the ‘official’ definition of serial murder and is the ‘pre-eminent source of expertise on the subject of sexual homicide’ (2005: 77). This followed a 1979 FBI-sponsored study into the problems of serial murder by such killers as Jack the Ripper. Their narrow and exclusive ‘definition’ of serial murder and their practice of investigating sex crimes and constructing ‘offender profiles’, coupled with their high profile status as ‘experts on the phenomenon’, has constructed an authoritative and dominant discourse which, to cite Schmid, reinforces an ‘extremely limited and distorted image of what serial murder is, who commits it, who is victimized, how they are victimized and why they are victimized’ (2005: 79).

Since the pivotal British studies of the 1970s (Chibnall, 1977; Cohen, 1971; Cohen and Young, 1973; Hall et al., 1978; Young, 1971), scholars of crime news media have pointed to the over-reporting of violent and sexual crime and the potential for increased public fear of crime and consequent public support for more draconian criminal justice measures (Ericson et al., 1991; Gillespie and McLaughlin, 2002, 2003; Kidd-Hewitt and Osborne, 1995; Mason, P., 2003; Reiner et al., 2003; Roberts, 2001; Surette, 1998; Wykes, 2001). More specifically, it has been repeatedly suggested that the news media misrepresent

sexual violence against women (Carter et al., 1998; Greer, 2003; Howe, 1998; Soothill and Walby, 1991). It is argued that much of the reporting is dedicated to apparently atypical events, and that the reports themselves are framed within a narrow patriarchal discourse (Caputi, 1987; Carter et al., 1998; Howe, 1998; Soothill and Walby, 1991). Such framing, and the disproportionate reporting of statistically rare crimes, are argued to be the result of 'event' based reporting practice. Greer (2003) notes that sex crime coverage is often case-based, with reports concentrating on single and related series of events, rather than on the discussion of wider social concerns.

Consequently, press reporting of gendered violence is limited to sexual violence against women occurring in a public place, and perpetrated by a stranger. By contrast, it is an academic contention that much gendered violence occurs in private, perpetrated by friends, acquaintances, relatives and intimates (Myhill and Allen, 2002). Stanko (1996) asserts that domestic abuse (of adult women) is perceived as 'ordinary', although not acceptable. It has long been established that women are more likely to experience violence in the domestic sphere (Dobash and Dobash, 1988; Lockton and Ward, 1997; Mooney, 1993), but much research suggests that 'the media consistently alert women to be particularly fearful of violence from men who are strangers to them' (Carter et al., 1998: 222). Crimes that occur in a public place and that are perpetrated by a 'psychotic stranger' form a definite 'event' in the eyes of the print media and lend themselves to sensational reporting of a story. It is because these crimes are not perceived as issues that a narrative is encouraged, which concentrates upon characters, locations, conflict and resolution. Carter et al. (1998) suggest such journalistic practice represents crimes as extraordinary and sensational, but because of the volume of such stories, the public perceive them as ordinary. As Chibnall (1977) has noted, crime news personalizes events, 'manufacturing' fame and infamy. In rape reporting, cases are individualized by the press constructing the binary opposition of 'her word against his word' (Carter and Weaver, 2003), leading to the questioning of the victim's honesty and sexual history.

This process of individualization distils the report to the principle characters, often employing durable stereotypes and popular 'moral geography' (Foster cited in Stabile, 2005). The perpetrators of the violence are regularly described as 'beasts' or 'perverts' and distanced from 'ordinary' men. It is also easy for journalists to create a female lead who can be characterized as contributing in some way to her own violation, which may distance her from 'ordinary' women and create a feeling of comfort and distance from the crime.

This article explores British print news reporting of violence against women, specifically rape and/or murder, through six case studies. We contend that the murder of women is regularly sexualized; and conversely that sexual assaults on women are framed within a discourse of murder. Consequently where one aspect of the attack exists, journalists will speculate about the existence of the other. We further suggest that this conflation between sex and death in news reports of male on female violence may contribute to the manner in which rape is perceived by criminal justice professionals, victims and the wider public. While we accept the ostensible diversity in print media, in our research we discovered remarkable consistency across publications in their representation of violence against females as sexual.

# Epistemological framework

The research is based upon British newspaper reporting of six case studies of violence against women which included rape and/or murder and appeared in national press between March 2003 and February 2004. News reports were collected using the Lexis Nexis database<sup>2</sup> of all 19 British national newspapers, including Sunday papers. We were forced to limit the search due to the number of articles Lexis Nexis found in this twelve month period. Using Tunstall's (1996) classification of newspapers, we selected two broadsheet, two middle range and two British tabloid newspapers. These were: *The Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, the *Sun* and the *Mirror*.

The sample was generated using the search terms 'rape', 'sexual assault', 'murder' and 'killed', and we specified that these words appeared in the headline or what Lexis Nexis defined as a 'major mention' in the news stories of the six newspapers. This generated over 3000 articles. From this initial database of cases we selected the six individual case studies. These case studies were generated using two variables. First, we categorized all news reports in the sample into three distinct offences: rape without murder, rape with murder and murder without rape. Second, adopting the offence classification used by Polk (1994), Innes (2002) and Dawson (2003), we classified news stories by using the relationship of the offender to the victim; either as a stranger or as a domestic assault. These two variables provided a matrix, within which we chose one case study per category. This is illustrated in Table 1 below.

The selection of case studies was based upon the amount of news coverage generated by each event, and thus the most high-profile cases were chosen in our time period. Under the Sexual Offences Act 1976 rape victims are granted anonymity, hence in the two rape/sexual assault categories the victims are not named. One difficulty arose in the domestic rape/sexual assault category, where no single event generated more than one or two reports. Consequently, we widened our time period to 1995, the earliest date covered by Lexis Nexis, but this still did not generate any single event with enough coverage to warrant a case study. For this reason we decided to collapse all reporting of spousal rape into one single case study. There were 486 news reports in total for our six case studies.

We decided to use a mixed methodology, complementing a simple content analysis with a finer grain discourse analysis to investigate the ways in which newspaper reports produced a particular discursive regime of sexual murder. The content analysis was undertaken to establish the frequency with which rape and murder were associated or linked within the news reports, regardless of whether both were present in the case. In the

**Table1** Categories for analysis

	<b>Murder without rape</b>	<b>Murder with rape or sexual assault</b>	<b>Rape or sexual assault</b>
Stranger assault	Margaret Muller	Hannah Foster	Victim X
Domestic assault	Vicky Fletcher	Louise Beech	Spousal rape since 1995

initial search, we found that the word 'rape' was often avoided in news reports in favour of terms such as 'serious sexual assault' or 'sexual assault'. The term 'murder' was similarly regularly replaced by more specific terms like 'strangled' or 'stabbed to death' in many reports. Consequently, we chose to code the 486 reports for the existence of the concepts of 'sex'<sup>3</sup> and 'death' to allow for their rate of co-existence to be assessed. This was achieved by constructing translation codes to specify what could be considered 'sex' or 'death' related content.<sup>4</sup>

For the discourse analysis, we find Foucault's work around discourse persuasive (Foucault, 1970, 1972/2004, 1980). He contends that discourse produces the things of which it speaks, such that although all kinds of reality may exist, it is only through discourse that knowledge and meaning are produced. Thus, as Hall has suggested, discourse 'governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about' (Hall, 1997: 15). Foucault contends that there are simply histories of the present which reinterpret the past. These 'genealogies' (Foucault, 1972/2004) exist within socially, culturally and politically situated discourses; a slippage between historical moments that emphasize the discontinuity of historic events. Hence, in Foucauldian terms, 'homosexuality' (Foucault, 1973), 'madness' (Foucault, 1978) and 'criminality' (Foucault, 1979) are historically and culturally specific.

The Foucauldian discourse analysis we use here is consequently concerned with how the British press construct discourses of rape and murder, and how sex and death are collocated and employed interchangeably. We have also incorporated elements of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Fairclough and Chouliaraki, 1995; Wodak and Meyer, 2001), based upon Fowler's position that:

News is a representation of the world in language; because language is a semiotic code, it imposes a structure of values, social and economic in origin, on whatever is represented; and so inevitably news, like every discourse, constructively patterns that of which it speaks. (Fowler, 1991: 4)

## **Conflation and co-existence: constructing sexual murder**

### **Content analysis findings**

In the content analysis of news reporting of the six case studies, we sought to establish whether concepts of sex and death existed simultaneously in the sample, irrespective of whether there had been a rape *and* a murder to justify such reporting. In the coverage of all six cases, the concepts of 'sex' and 'death' were present, ranging from a mean of 48.6 percent of reports in the case of Margaret Muller (where there was no sexual assault) to 100 percent of reports on the murder of Louise Beech.

The concepts of sex and death appeared together in 65 percent of all 486 reports in the six newspapers analysed. If we discard reports of less than 200 words, their co-existence rises to 82 percent. This is a very surprising finding as in four of the six case studies there was no co-existence of the two; these cases concerned either rape or murder, but not both. Thus, whether or not a death or a sexual assault was present in the case, journalists chose to speculate about its existence. Where there was a death of a woman in the sample, as represented by the murders of Margaret Muller, Louise Beech and Vicky Fletcher, there was, in the majority of the reports in the six newspapers analysed, conjecture and supposition in the report that the attack was sexually motivated. Conversely, where a

woman had been sexually assaulted or raped, represented in our sample by the case studies Victim X and Spousal Rape Cases, there were press inferences that the victim's life was threatened. What emerges here is a dominant sexual discourse in the news reporting of violence against women, and it is this discourse to which we now turn.

### **The discourse of sexual murder**

The content analysis illustrates that news reports collocate sex and death in the reporting of the rape and murder of women, even when the two events are not present in an attack. In the discourse analysis that follows, we explore how this discursive regime of sexual murder operates in British newspapers.

**Collocation 1: the sexual discourse of murder** The reporting of violence against females in the six case studies relied upon gendered subjectivities that stereotyped both genders, and prioritized sexual motives or aetiology for the violence carried out on the victim. For example, the murders of Margaret Muller and Hannah Foster were perpetrated by strangers to the victim. Margaret Muller was not sexually assaulted, and although it was later revealed that Hannah Foster had been, this was not released to the press in the early stages of the investigation when the news reports were first published (personal communication with investigating officers, 26 October 2004). Both murders were committed in public places and were described in the *Times*, the *Sun*, the *Mirror* and the *Daily Express* as 'random':

It now seems likely that 4ft 11ins Margaret was a random victim as she exercised in East London's Victoria Park. (Sullivan, 2003)

Scotland Yard says the promising artist was the victim of a 'random stranger attack' and warns the maniac could strike again. (*Daily Express*, 2003)

Yesterday Det Insp Tony Adams said: 'There is every chance this was a random killing'. (Riches, 2003)

There was nothing to suggest that the victims were chosen *because* they were female, yet the news reports construct 'random' to mean 'random female' and not 'random person':

It looks like there is every chance this was a random killing. We are looking at records of flasher-type offences upwards committed close to Hannah's home. We would advise women living in this area to exercise extreme caution and not to walk alone in the dark. (Bird, 2003a)

These attacks are all about power and control over women. This is someone who has a grudge against women and wants to stab them. (Edwards, 2003)

Consequently, the articles serve to gender the assault, making explicit the assumption that both Hannah and Margaret were killed *because* they were female. This kind of assumption so early in the reporting of the case negates, or at least marginalizes, the perception that adult males can be victims of 'random killers'. In the data analysed, adult heterosexual males were not considered by British newspapers to be victims or potential victims of 'thrill killers', 'random killers', 'serial killers' or 'stranger killers'. In a leader article in the *Daily Express* (Mason, G., 2003a), journalist Gary Mason laments the problems the police had with detecting 'stranger murders'. At no point in the report, even though the word 'random' is used five times, was an adult male victim named or referred to. The murders of Margaret Muller, Marsha McDonnell<sup>5</sup> and Hannah Foster are

given as examples, as well as the crimes of Peter Sutcliffe, Patrick Duffy<sup>6</sup> and Robert Black,<sup>7</sup> who exclusively targeted females. The report clearly limits the term 'stranger murder' to the killing of women and children. Notwithstanding that terms such as 'stranger murder' are not gender specific, they were used almost exclusively in our sample with reference to females. The reporting of the killing of Margaret Muller and Hannah Foster in several newspapers exemplifies our argument here:

Police are stepping up patrols in the area and warning women not to go jogging alone. Common factors to the two attacks include the facts that both victims were petite with brown hair, both were stabbed repeatedly and neither was sexually assaulted or robbed. (Wright et al., 2003)

This is the route taken by tragic Hannah Foster on the night she became victim to a random killer...police, who have warned women in Southampton to avoid going out alone at night... (Palmer, 2003)

But detectives are investigating the possibility that there may be a link between the killing and the rape of a woman in nearby London Fields, Hackney, at 5pm last Thursday. Officers have warned women to be cautious if they were visiting the park or the surrounding area. (Morris, 2003)

Gender is made both explicit and integral to the narrative in these reports. It is not merely joggers who were deemed to be at risk, but specifically female joggers. Margaret and Hannah's gender is central to the discourse, which the print media appear to make a central aspect of the case. Margaret's murder was a particularly stark example of gendered reporting of stranger assaults. This is illustrated further in comments made by British television celebrity gardener Tommy Walsh, who was jogging with his wife in the park at the time of the assault. At about the time Margaret was killed, Walsh and his wife had become separated and both were running alone. Speaking to the press on the anniversary of Margaret's death, Walsh is quoted as saying, 'it could quite easily be the first anniversary of my wife's death but the killer was looking for a woman on her own' (*Mirror*, 2004a). The *Daily Express* ran a similar story with the headline 'Star's Wife Escaped Park Killer' (*Daily Express*, 2004), while the *Daily Mail* noted that '(Tommy Walsh) revealed how his wife nearly fell victim to the killer of American artist Margaret Muller' (Taylor, 2004). No one, not even Walsh himself, speculated that, as a male, he could have been the victim of this assailant. The gendered discourse present in press coverage of these cases constructs women as the natural target of stranger killers.

Reports of fatal domestic violence are also significantly gendered, using constructions of heterosexuality and stereotypes of masculine and feminine roles. Press narratives in our sample concentrated upon the heterosexual relationship between the victim and the assailant. Further, the assaults were constructed through the discursive frame of the sexual relationship between the two, and not as a phenomenon of violence. Our case study for domestic murder without rape was Vicky Fletcher. She was shot in a pub car park by her estranged partner while out with friends. She was not sexually assaulted. However, in our six newspapers, coverage of the case introduced sexual elements. Vicky was described as a 'lover' of her assailant, Thomas Shanks, a description that sexualizes their relationship, thus shifting the discourse from one of murder to a murder with sexual motivations:

Four years later, his affair with Miss Fletcher, Shanks, then 18, started at Yorkshire's Pontefract General Infirmary, where she worked as a nurse. By 1998, however, their relationship was over and she began seeing a former patient. (Cameron, 2003)



A Gulf War veteran who killed his ex-lover with an assault rifle yesterday lost his murder appeal...Shanks was consumed by jealousy when the 21-year-old dumped him and started seeing former patient David Griffin. (Storror, 2003)

The last point in the *Mirror*'s 20th March report notes that the man Vicky was seeing was a former patient she had nursed (Storror, 2003). This was picked up in other reports in our sample (*Sun*, 19 March 2003; *The Times*, 2003). There was an implication in these narratives that their relationship, between a professional (Vicky as nurse) and (former) patient (David Griffin), was less morally acceptable than Vicky's previous relationship with Shanks, who was a doctor. When re/presented alongside the construction of Shanks as a medal-winning war hero, who appealed against his conviction on the grounds of Gulf war syndrome, Vicky's behaviour could appear to lack integrity and be called into question. In an earlier court report the *Guardian* noted that:

Shanks, who was mentioned in dispatches, broke down in tears while giving evidence. The attack followed his former girlfriend having a relationship with a patient she had nursed at Pontefract. (Wainwright, 1999)

The centrality of Vicky's sexual behaviour in the news reports from our sample not only gendered but also sexualized the account. The discursive regime at work in this case places Shanks' behaviour (shooting Vicky) as a *reaction* to Vicky's *action* (rejecting him, the doctor, for a former patient). This removes some of Shanks' agency as a violent individual, and foregrounds both sexual behaviour, and the victim's own sexual conduct as causal in this fatal assault.

Similarly in our other domestic case, the defendant's knowledge of his wife's affair was offered as his motive for killing her. Shaun Beech, found guilty of killing his wife Louise, was quoted in the *Daily Mail*:

He said Beech told officers: 'She said, "I have been seeing Stephen Walton and I'm going to stay with him".' Beech then went downstairs, searched around for something to attack his wife with, and found a rolling pin in a kitchen drawer, went upstairs and attacked her with it, he told detectives. 'I put my hand around her throat to stop her screaming. I just kept my hand there until she stopped screaming. I knew she was dead. I checked her heart.' (*Daily Mail*, 2004)

We contend here that where the murder victim is female, and the offender is speculated or known to be male, the relationship between them is emphasized as sexual along with the motivations for the violence.

While there appeared to be no reason to think that Margaret Muller was killed because of her gender, the press construction of the attack – emphasizing the victim was a woman and issuing warnings to other females – suggested that it was the relationship between victim and offender that was pivotal in making meaning of what may have happened. The *Guardian*, for example on 5 February 2003, speculated in its headline that 'Jogger's Murder May Be Linked To Rape' (Morris, 2003), and following the arrest of a suspect, the *Mirror*'s headline read 'Boy Held In "Park Ripper" Attacks; Jogger Murder Quiz' (*Mirror*, 2004b). Notice here how Margaret's assailant is linked to previous notorious killers the Yorkshire Ripper and Jack the Ripper, both perceived, albeit incorrectly, to be serial rapists as well as murderers. There were copious examples of this sexualized discourse in newspaper coverage of our other cases, such as the *Daily Mail*'s description of the Louise Beech murder: 'Rolling pin horror of love cheat Navy wife' (*Daily Mail*, 2004).

The female gender of the victim acts as a catalyst for journalist's assumptions of the *presence* of sexual motivation or assault in news reporting of violence against women. This appears to be an a priori assumption, not so much established in news reports as *re-established*. For example when Hannah Foster's body was found in undergrowth by the side of a road the state of dress of her body was the subject of much comment in the print media coverage: 'Miss Foster's body was found fully clothed' (Tendler and McGreevy, 2003), and further:

Sixty officers were making house-to-house inquiries yesterday when the walker found Hannah's fully-clothed body next to Allington Lane in West End, Southampton. (Pyatt, 2003)

A passer-by out walking found her fully clothed body in the undergrowth of a country lane. (Allison, 2003)

Notice here how the newspapers do not simply report that Hannah's body was found, but that it was *fully clothed*. Here, the discourse of murder of women becomes a sexualized one, through the mention of her clothing despite its apparent irrelevance to the story. The reference to the victim's body as 'clothed' is built upon the assumption that this is unusual, important or un- common: an inference that readers would expect the victim to be naked, partially clothed, or that her clothing would appear disturbed. Several reports went further, making overt references to the absence of evidence that Hannah has been sexually assaulted (Riches, 2003; Bird, 2003b). Ostensibly, this kind of reporting serves to discount sexual motivation in such murders, but several reports continued to speculate that a sexual motive was or could be present:

There were no signs that she had been sexually assaulted but police have not ruled out that the killer's motive was sexual. They have contacted known sex offenders in the area. (Bird, 2003a)

Similarly, this construction of Hannah Foster's murder was also used in that of Margaret Muller:

Even though there was apparently no sexual motive behind either attack (Margaret Muller and another female jogger) experts believe the killer might indulge in sadistic sexual fantasies. (Wright et al., 2003)

The *Daily Express* too speculated upon the possibility of a sexual assault having taken place in Margaret Muller's murder, but were then quick then to shift away, reporting that 'Investigators say it is possible he was disturbed early in the attack and fled' (Chapman and Twomey, 2003).

**Collocation 2: the murderous discourse of sexual assault** In the news reporting of sexual assaults in our sample there remained speculation by journalists that the victim could have been killed. In our two case studies of rape or sexual assault, Victim X and Spousal Rape, threat to life was regularly mentioned. Clearly, there are occasions where the reporting of violence in rape cases is legitimate, and we are not suggesting that such coverage is, *prima facie*, un- justified. However, we would suggest that it is those cases of violent rape or sexual assault which appear the most newsworthy. Consequently, those sexual assaults that are less overtly violent are under-reported. This obscures the fact that not all rape assaults are potentially fatal, raising the bar for what can be considered a 'real rape', and reflecting the skewed public perception as noted by Kelly et al. (2005).

In the case of Victim X, *The Times* carried the judge's comments on the conviction of Victim X's assailant: 'You overwhelmed your victims with brute force. Most thought that they would die by your hands.' (Smith and Tendler, 2004); while the *Sun* reported the victim's own account of the attack: 'He hit me with his fist and took hold of my throat. He told me if I screamed he would kill me and he had a knife.' (Hughes, 2004). *The Times* also allowed itself to speculate on possible killings: 'Police admit that he could be responsible for more attacks and may have killed' (Smith and Tendler, 2004).

In the reporting of spousal rape across our sample, potentially fatal brutal violence was mentioned, for example being strangled or beaten senseless:

After she said she would not sleep with him (her husband) that night, he began to strangle her. He ripped off her underwear and raped her. (Fagge, 2003)

He also subjected his wife to a violent rape and beat her senseless. (Foster, 2003)

It is also interesting to note that during the trial of Victim X's assailant, the *Mirror* reported that the prosecution barrister referred to the defendant, Antoni Imiela, as 'a serial killer'. The paper noted that Imiela was incensed:

During his questioning of Imiela at Maidstone Crown Court, Mr Dennis had referred to the attacks as being the work of a serial killer. Mr Dennis said it was a 'slip of the tongue' and told the jury: 'There is no suggestion that Mr Imiela has killed anyone'. Imiela flanked by four guards, mouthed the word b\*\*\*\*cks and then leaned forward and yelled: 'why don't you tell them I have no sexual offences either you b\*\*\*\*\*d'. (Shaw, 2004, omissions as original)

This confusion and conflation between rape and murder in the court was repeated by the British crime-solving TV show, *Crimewatch*. In its reporting of our victim X case, a stranger rape, which the programme helped to solve, it specifically refers to the defendant's crimes on its website:

In October 2002, following one of the biggest hunts for a serial rapist since the Yorkshire Ripper, police appealed on *Crimewatch* for help to catch a man who became known as the M25 rapist. (*Crimewatch*, 2006)

Here we see the enmeshing of rape and murder not only within the reporting of our domestic cases – Victim X and Spousal Rape, but also across cases in our other categories. The discursive regimes at work in the reporting of rape and murder of women in the British press regularly conflate and limit the meaning of the two offences. Hence the stranger murder of a woman becomes the work of a serial killer who, as Knox suggests, is constructed by the media by 'casual cruelty and an explicit or implicit sexualization of the crimes' (Knox, 2004: 3). In both of our cases where the assault was carried out by a stranger, press coverage was framed by the (incorrect) embodiment of sexual murder: Jack the Ripper. We have shown how Victim X's assailant, Antoni Imiela, was mistaken for a serial killer in court reports and compared to the Yorkshire Ripper by a TV crime show. In our other stranger assault, the murder of Margaret Muller, the *Sun*, the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and the *Mirror* all referred to her assailant as 'The Park Ripper', locating reporting of her murder within a sexualized discourse, where murder is collocated with rape.

## Conclusion/confusion

The links and comparisons made by British journalists in our cases are a powerful way of re/establishing the links between murder and sexual motivation. Press reporting of offences against women that include no sexual assault are nonetheless compared or linked to offences where sexual assault was present. These links are frequently mere supposition, rarely confirmed and, consequently, unjustifiable. Such discursive practices by crime journalists in Britain serve to constrain the murder of women within a sexual framework. Hannah Foster's murder for example, was linked to the murder of 13 year- old Milly Dowler in 2002.<sup>8</sup> The *Daily Mail* headline asked 'Was Strangled Girl Victim Of A Serial Killer?' (*Daily Mail*, 2003a), repeating two days later 'Has Milly's Killer Struck Again?' (*Daily Mail*, 2003b). Margaret Muller's murder too was compared to a previous crime, but it was not to a murder, but a gang rape.

It was such shocking crimes as the 'wilding' gang rape of a jogger in Central Park in 1989 that resulted in a wave of public support for zero tolerance. The comparisons between that crime and the murder of a woman jogging in a London Park are uncomfortably clear. (Mason, G., 2003b)

The comparisons in this latter case are uncomfortably erroneous. Margaret Muller was stabbed to death by a lone male stranger, while in the other case, the victim was gang raped by a number of males. Here the *Daily Express* re/constructs two different crimes into one conflated similar one, where the female victims are merged together, their individual fates blurred and glossed over. Such reporting resonates with film director Brian De Palma's comment on the use of women victims in cinema: 'using women in situations where they are killed or sexually attacked is nothing more than a genre convention...like using violins when people look at each other' (cited in Tatar, 1995: 8).

But this is not fiction and the interchangeability between murder and sexual assault resonates beyond film and news reports. We wish to make two points here. First, the sexualizing of domestic and stranger murder of women in news reportage enables the blame to be shifted from the male killer to the female victim. For example, in the case of Vicky Fletcher, her 'affair' was cited as the cause of her murder, as if this were an adequate explanation for the violence. Similarly, Louise Beech's 'affair' was cited as the cause of her murder and was utilized with some success by Shaun Beech's defence team. In November 2004, Beech was found not guilty of murder, but convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to seven years imprisonment. This explanation for the use of violence in both these cases was presented in news reportage, and at the trial itself; the news reporting reproducing narratives produced by the police and legal personnel that were used to rationalize the violence in a court setting. In this way sex is presented as the reason for violence against women and male responses to that 'sex' represented as natural or biological. In the case of domestic murder, uncontrollable sexual jealousy is 'understood' and explained as a normalized reaction to the female's action. In the case of stranger murders this 'defence' relies upon a notion of uncontrollable, biological sexual impulses in males, which at the very least seeks to offer explanation, mitigation and reason.

The dominant discourse in press reporting of violence against women has made the terms 'rape' and 'murder' synonymous in many ways. As we stated above, there are current concerns expressed by the Home Office about the decreasing number of rape cases that end in a conviction, and the high attrition rate. The recent Home Office consultation

document notes that only 15 percent of rapes come to the attention of the police (OCJR, 2006: 8). Walby and Allen (2004) suggest that only 43 percent of women who have suffered an assault that would be classified as rape under the 1994 definition, actually thought of their assault as rape (cited in Kelly et al., 2005). The inability not only of the majority of rape victims, but also professionals and the public, to identify a rape when it occurs is clearly a fundamental problem, and one that we suggest British press reporting exacerbates.

Fear of rape appears, from previous research (Gordon and Riger, 1989), our personal experience and this research, to be almost universal amongst women. As Lees (1997) has argued, women are taught to fear rape from childhood. MacDonald (1991) interviewed convicted female terrorists about their experiences of incarceration. All the women interviewed had murdered and were used to extreme violence. What was interesting in the context of this research was in a quote from one of the terrorists:

Of course the police use the fact that we are afraid of rape, and threaten us with it. Unfortunately it is not simply a threat, women have been raped during torture, even raped with a truncheon. (MacDonald, 1991: 27)

Even though this woman had experienced and witnessed brutal acts of torture and had committed acts of violence herself, a significant fear for her was the threat of rape. In a news report of the trial of Bradley Murdoch, the man charged with killing backpacker Peter Falconio in the Australian outback in July 2001, Joanne Lees, Falconio's girlfriend who was also attacked by Murdoch, stated, 'When I asked him if he was going to rape me, I was just so frightened. I was more scared of being raped than I was of dying and being shot by the man' (*The Times*, 2005). The power that the threat of rape has over women is clearly significant.

In the majority of reports of sexual assaults across our entire sample, the press focus was on attacks carried out by strangers, or there was speculation that the perpetrator was a stranger rather than an acquaintance. This would appear to be borne out by the few news stories we could find for our Spousal Rape category. As Kitzinger has noted:

The hidden dangers in our private lives are thus all but obscured...When a woman is raped or murdered (by someone other than her male partner)...news reporters flock to the scene. Descriptions of the place from where the victim was taken, or where the body was found, play upon and play out ideas about how safety and danger can be mapped against the world around us. (Kitzinger, 2004: 104)

However, a woman is in most danger of being raped by friends, acquaintances or partners (Myhill and Allen, 2002). Women appear not to perceive male intimates and friends as potential 'rapists', or perhaps the fear that a rape could be life threatening is far more pressing and this is perceived as more likely to occur at the hands of a stranger.

One thing is clear, the fear women have of rape is complex, but the fear may be more clearly linked with fear of death than sexual vulnerability. The conflation of rape and murder in British newspaper reports has, then, significant repercussions for women. When protecting themselves from rape, women adopt procedures and behaviours that will protect them from rape by a stranger (Scott, 2003). This protection from stranger rape but apparent disregard or ignorance of the threat of acquaintance or intimate rape suggests that news coverage may play a significant part in perceptions of rape and sexual assault. This is underscored by a recent British Crime Survey which reported that 75 percent of the

public stated their information about crime and criminal justice came from the media (Mason, P., 2006). Further, looking at what we may call the discursive formations of sexual murder, we would consider news reporting to be one such discursive practice and the behaviour by women that sees them avoiding being alone at night as part of that practice too. Edley (2001) has noted that discursive practices etch themselves on the body in such a way that they become normalized, routine and taken for granted. Men, for example, will perform 'masculinity' as if it were completely natural. Likewise women will perform femininity, however the avoidance techniques employed by women to protect themselves from sexual assault by strangers are more than a performance of femininity, they are a performance of the potential 'female victim' produced by the dominant discourse of sexual murder.

## Notes

1 The Yorkshire Ripper was the name given to serial killer Peter Sutcliffe, who was convicted of the murder of 13 women in the north of England between 1975 and 1981.

2 By using Lexis Nexis, we recognize our research is partial: that we have limited ourselves to an analysis of the text rather than the photographs which accompanied these stories. Such analysis will prove a valuable intervention in this research field, but it falls outside the parameters of this article.

3 It is acknowledged that the crime of rape is argued to be unrelated to sexual motivation or sex more generally, but this position is rarely reflected in news reporting and for this reason the concept of 'sex' will be used to represent rape and sexual matters in general in relation to news reporting of the crime.

4 The translation codes were constructed thus: sex related content – positive or negative reference to sexual assault, reference to sex offenders, sexual motivation, reference to sexual acts or affairs, sexual jealousy, sexual language e.g. perversion, gratification, sadistic fantasies, comparisons to sexual assaults, specific warnings to women regarding their safety. Death related content – death related term e.g. strangled, stabbed, killed, reference to fear of death or serious injury, threats to kill or seriously injure, speculation of death or serious injury, reference to lifethreatening weapons.

5 Marsha McDonnell, a 19 year-old student, was murdered in London in February 2003 while walking home from the bus stop. She was hit around the head with a blunt instrument and she was not sexually assaulted. Her murder was regularly linked with that of Margaret Muller and others in news reporting and for this reason, because she was mentioned in news reports that were included in the sample, her case is referred to.

6 This is an error and actually refers to *John* Duffy the so-called 'railway rapist'. Although Duffy is referred to as the 'railway rapist', he was convicted of murdering three women in his attacks with accomplice David Mulcahy. Patrick Duffy is an actor, best known for his portrayal of Bobby Ewing in *Dallas* (!).

7 Robert Black was convicted of three murders of young girls in 1994, but he is suspected of many more. He only targeted female victims.

8 Amanda (Milly) Dowler, went missing while walking home from school in Walton-on-Thames on 21 March, 2002. Her remains were found in Hampshire in September 2002. Her murder was linked to the murder of Hannah Foster in news reporting and so some comment appears.

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