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Online News Representation of Missing/Murdered Indigenous Women in Washington, New Mexico, and Arizona

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Abstract

There is limited research on the rates of violence against the many missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) in the United States, especially in urban areas. There is also little news coverage given to women who are victims of this violence. The absence of research on this topic and the shortage of news coverage leads to a lack of understanding by the general public on the issue as a whole. This study is a qualitative content analysis of the representation of MMIW in Washington, New Mexico, and Arizona. I will analyze the newspaper reporting of MMIW in these states and the language used within them. Abigail Echo-Hawk and Annita Lucchesi (2018) found that many of the articles on MMIW had reference to the victim's use of drugs and alcohol or referenced the victim's criminal history. Additionally, they report the language used in past articles to describe MMIW in newspapers was degrading and violent. I will examine the language used in each online newspaper article by coding with qualitative software to determine if the negative patterns or distinctions in the wording are still occurring. This project is significant to the discipline of sociology because it points out the flaws in how media can unfavorably represent a vulnerable group of society, therefore perpetuating negative stereotypes.

Introduction

Government Accountability Office reported that federal courts declined to prosecute 67 percent of reservation sexual assault cases. It is no surprise that Native Americans and advocates feel as though the Indigenous population is not receiving adequate care and recognition for the crimes that are being committed against them. In a poll measuring discrimination in American

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from the experiences and views of Native Americans, Indigenous people believe they have been unfairly stopped or treated by the police, and 32 percent believe that have been unfairly treated by the courts because they are Native American (NPR 2017). Jasmine Owens explains that cases of violence that occur on reservations fall under federal jurisdiction, which the Assistant United States Attorney fails to prosecute the majority of the time (Owens 2012). While the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 aimed to reduce the amount of violence that occurs on Native American reservations, it fails to “recognize tribal authority to prosecute rape and other serious felonies and continues to restrict tribal courts’ authority to adequately punish tribal members” (Owens 2012:500). “The Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 originally limited the punishment of any crime on the reservation to a maximum of six months of incarceration or a fine of \$500, but it was amended in 1986 to increase the maximum sentence to one year of incarceration, a \$5,000 fine, or both” (Owens 2012:507). This limit on punishment for crimes committed by Native Americans on reservations leads most tribal courts not to prosecute the perpetrators. But what about in urban areas?

Little research is being done on the inflated violence against and the many missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) in the United States, especially in urban areas. This is especially important to note because over 70% of Indigenous people live in urban cities (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). There is also little news coverage given to the women who are victims of this violence. The lack of research being done on this topic, combined with the lack of news coverage leads to a lack of understanding by the general topic on the issue as a whole.

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Annita Lucchesi and Abigail Echo-Hawk, two Indigenous female researchers created their own database for missing/murdered Indigenous women in the U.S. across 71 cities to give a more accurate representation of how many Indigenous women are actually going missing/being murdered, since the few statistics that do exist are likely a severe undercount. They also do a content analysis of the news coverage of the cases they found.

I will be basing my research off of Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk's research. I will do a comparative analysis on the number of online news reportings of MMIW in Seattle, Albuquerque, and Anchorage, since according to Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk, these are the top three cities in which Indigenous women go missing/are murdered (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). I will analyze fifty four online newspaper articles, evaluating the way the journalists portray the events and the language they use within them.

Literature Review

Violence Against Indigenous Women

Indigenous women in the United States suffer the most from violence. According to the National Institute of Justice, more than four in five American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence at some point in their lives (Rosay 2016). This includes 56.1 percent who have experienced sexual violence, 55.5 percent who have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner, and 48.8 percent who have experienced stalking (Rosay 2016). Alaska Native women reported domestic violence rates more than ten times higher than the rest of the U.S. population (Stallbaumer 2018). They are at least twice as likely to be raped or sexually

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assaulted as all other races in the United States (Government Accountability Office 2011). The Department of Justice reports that 86% of reported rapes against Native American/Alaskan Native women are committed by non-Native men (Owens 2012). Additionally, but Native American women are murdered at more than ten times the national average (Brunner 2013).

Data Crisis

Indigenous women go missing at high rates in the United States. The problem is that the number of missing Indigenous women is likely extremely undercounted. Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk (2018) worked with the Urban Indian Health Institute conducted a study on this nationwide data crisis on murdered and missing Indigenous women in the United States. According to the National Crime Information Center, in 2016, 5,712 Native American and Alaska Native women and girls were reported missing (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). They also noted that only 116 of these 5,712 cases were reported through the US Department of Justice's federal missing persons database, NamUs (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). They contacted police departments in 71 cities, but more than 60% would show that they were tracking disappearances inaccurately, nor did they provide the researchers with comprised data (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018).

A variety of reasons exists for this lack of data, including underreporting, a lack of trust between Indigenous people and the government, institutional racism, lack of media representation, a lack of resources/funding in tribal governments, and unprofessional record keeping by law enforcement.

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Lack of Trust and Institutional Racism

Trust is required for social change. It is an aspect of life that is necessary for people to believe in one another, and to work together for the advancement of society. This trust results in social and political institutions working more productively and the economy being more efficient, leading to growth in the social and economic aspect of societies (Nikolakis and Nelson 2018). However, for Indigenous people, trust is not something that comes easy. After centuries of colonization and marginalization by the United States government, it is not a surprise that Indigenous people are hesitant to work with the government on improving the disparities in their judicial system. Having the ability to self-govern effectively and increase their autonomy has been a priority for many Native American tribes, yet without trust, this likely will not happen.

Fukuyama (1996) observes that “trust arises when a community shares a set of moral values in such a way as to create expectations of regular and honest behaviour”(Fukuyama 1996:153). A major problem with this definition of trust amongst Native American communities and the U.S. government is that for centuries, the U.S. government did not have respect for the values of Native Americans. They forced their own belief systems onto the Indigenous people as to colonize them and strip them of their native culture and beliefs. This was done through policies such as the Dawes Act which granted U.S. citizenship to Native Americans if they took advantage of land allotments (that would later be taken/bought by white men) and assimilated to civilized life. Trust is established in collaboration between groups of people who wish to share mutual benefits that will allow for relationships to be formed (Nikolakis and Nelson 2018).

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Unfortunately, apologies are not enough to fix the issue of mistrust amongst Native American tribes. Regehr and Gutheil (2002) conclude that although “the current empirical evidence is insufficiently solid to support the proposition that apology by oppressors, perpetrators, and defendants is a panacea leading to healing of trauma under all circumstances...in particular situations, such as civil harm brought to bear on groups of people, apology may be a necessary if insufficient step toward some restitution for the injury” (Regehr and Gutheil 2002:429-430). While an apology is the primary step in healing the emotional trauma brought on by the U.S. government to Native American groups, it is not sufficient to restore trust (Goodkind et al. 2010). In order to see the number of murdered/missing Indigenous women, there must be changes in funding, policies, record keeping, and media representation of these women.

Annita Lucchesi, one of the researchers from the UIHI, stated “I wouldn’t say that we’re more vulnerable, I’d say that we’re targeted. It’s not about us being vulnerable victims, it’s about the system being designed to target and marginalize our women” (Golden 2019). Indigenous women are disposable in today’s society. They are not seen as a group that needs to be protected, they are seen as a group to be ignored. That is part of the reason why these women are absent from the mainstream media. Compared to other racialized groups, missing/murdered Indigenous women have much less media coverage.

MMIW in the Media

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Indigenous women are virtually invisible from the mainstream media in the United States. They go missing at much higher rates than other races of women, and yet they are absent from press coverage. This notion of invisibility is important because without news coverage, the rest of society is blinded from the epidemic of violence against these women. In turn the public is not able to see every life's true value due to the lack of media representation. When news coverage is limited, negative, or absent concerning these women's' lives, instead of being treated as victims, they are seen as disposable.

In most cases, “predominantly Western, White, heteronormative, middle-class” men decide what is newsworthy (Henry and Tator 2006 as cited by Gilchrist 2010:2). Newsworthiness is “what makes a story worth telling” (Jiwani 2006:38 as cited by Gilchrist 2010). People watch what they think to be interesting or unusual. A notable news story to an audience is one that happens in close spatial proximity to them (Greer 2003). Readers or viewers will have the strongest reactions to stories that happen near them (Greer 2003). This proximity adds to the shock factor of readers who fear these crimes are happening in their towns (Greer 2003).

Violent crimes such as homicides are normally shown on the news more often than minor crimes that are more common are ignored (Gruenewald, Pizzaro, and Chermak 2009). Even though the coverage on homicides has increased, there is a gap in the literature on the factors that contribute to decisions that go into how much and how to cover a homicide incident (Gruenewald, Pizzaro, and Chermak 2009). Mainstream news stations have clearly decided that

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missing/murdered Indigenous women are not a priority to show to the public, but missing/murdered white women are. Highlighting and giving more coverage to certain dominant racial groups and stereotyping others reinforces racist ideologies and social structures (Meyers 1997 as cited by Gruenewald, Pizzaro, and Chermak 2009).

Annits Lucchesi and Abigail Echo-Hawk (2018) found 5,712 MMIW reports in 2016 alone. Yet over 95% of cases were never covered in any national or international media. They created their own database of MMIW and found 506 cases of MMIW across 71 cities in the United States. Only 129 of the 506 cases were covered by any type of online news article. Only 25% of these 129 cases were covered by any local, regional, or national news media. Only 14% were covered in the news more than once. For the number of cases of MMIW in the United States, this is a very small amount of coverage.

Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk (2018) also found the language in the news reports to be very violent. The Urban Indian Health Institute defines violent language as “UIHI defined violent language as language that engages in racism or misogyny or racial stereotyping, including references to drugs, alcohol, sex work, gang violence, victim criminal history, victim blaming, making excuses for the perpetrator, misgendering transgender victims, racial misclassification, false information on cases, not naming the victim, and publishing images/video of the victim’s death” (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). They found that 31% of news outlets had violent language in their coverage (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018).

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Similarly, Paulina García-Del Mora (2011) did a comparative analysis on missing/murdered Indigenous women in Canada and Mexico in order to “analyze the relationship between the representation of violence and the violence of representation” (García-Del Mora 2011 pg. 33). She also first recognized that the murder and disappearance rates in both of these countries are also extremely elevated. At the time of her study, there were more than 600 women murdered in each of the Mexican and Canadian cities she was analyzing (García-Del Mora 2011). Just like Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk noticed, García-Del Mora noticed that most of these stories were ignored by Canadian and Mexican news outlets, or when they were covered, they were covered from a functionalist perspective in order to stimulate public interest instead of accurately portray these women’s stories or advocate for change.

García-Del Mora adds to this topic by suggesting that economic ties between Canada and Mexico through NAFTA have contributed to the violence that their Indigenous women suffer from. She argues that NAFTA brought about cultural changes that has led to the benefits of some and to the marginalization of other groups like these Indigenous women (García-Del Mora 2011). Violence is one of the biggest consequences of this economic change, and Indigenous women suffer the most from it. She also argues that the construction of these women as “social waste simultaneously organizes the narratives of Canadian and Mexican newspapers” (García-Del Mora 2011:36). Abjection of these women in the news stories is caused by graphic images of corpses that trigger people to feel fascinated, repulsed, or relieved they have not experienced such a situation (García-Del Mora 2011). She concludes that “still-pervasive

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discursive construction of these women as worthless and disposable is in fact remarkably similar in such vastly different contexts as Canada and Mexico” (García-Del Mora 2011:56).

Meghan Longstaffe (2017) also did a content analysis of articles published in major Vancouver newspapers from 1957-1970 in order to examine the historical marginalization of impoverished Indigenous women in this area through its negative portrayal of MMIW. Longstaffe suggests that these narratives serve as a historical framework for how MMIW are portrayed in the media today. They influence the attitudes of non-Indigenous readers toward Indigenous people in the city (Longstaffe 2017). She found that although three large Vancouver newspapers (*The Province, the Vancouver Sun, and the Vancouver Times*) did report on multiple murders of Indigenous women in the city, they also reinforced negative stereotypes “characterized by helplessness, loneliness, poverty, addiction, prostitution, and death in the ‘asphalt jungle” (Longstaffe 2017:233).

Just as García-Del Mora (2011) found, Longstaffe (2017) noticed that many of the headlines that journalists used were sensationalist and intended to shock audiences. Some of the headlines Longstaffe found were “Skid Road ‘Killed My Girls,’” “Irene Goes Home – In a Coffin,” and “Where Were You Going, Little One? Bubble of City Glamor Burst in Bundle of Death” (Longstaffe 2017:240). These headlines suggested that these Indigenous women were defenseless and vulnerable (Longstaffe 2017). Though some reporters did scrutinize the normalization of MMIW and their unfair/negligent treatment by police, their words still reinforced “harmful colonialist discourses that overshadowed their own social critiques and

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likely hindered a call for change” (Longstaffe 2017:241). For example, Holt, a news journalist, criticized society for ignoring MMIW by writing “The way she died is typical and so common, society has accepted it just as it does minor traffic accidents” or “[She] was drunk, just another cut and bruised Indian girl, and nobody took much interest in the complaint” (Longstaffe 2017:241). By drawing attention to the frequency and the detailed ways in which these Indigenous women were murdered, journalists normalized their deaths, deeming them unavoidable and expected (Longstaffe 2017).

Along with Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk’s (2018) research, Longstaffe (2017) found that many of the articles blamed the victim by bringing up the victim’s past. Reporters often noted if the victim had a previous history with alcohol, narcotics, or sex work. They often brought up the victims’ criminal histories, as if these played a part in their death. Holt, the same journalist mentioned earlier, even brought up a decision by the coroner’s jury that the cause of death of one Indigenous woman was ruled by excessive use of alcohol (Longstaffe 2017). Recurrently, when criminal history or brought into news stories, journalists seem to get lost in these details and end up minimizing or ignoring the evidence that these women were murdered (Longstaffe 2017).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains the phenomenon of this normalization of white supremacy through “racial grammar” in the 2011 keynote address at Duke University. He argues that the domination of white supremacy through racial grammar has created a “racial order” as “just the way things are” (Bonilla-Silva 2011). He claims that racial grammar helps to frame the way society thinks and look at racial matters (Bonilla-Silva 2011). Though he acknowledges we

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learn grammar in school, it is through social interactions and communication just as well that we learn and internalize racial grammar (Bonilla-Silva 2011).

Bonilla-Silva goes on to speak of many examples of racial grammar, including the exclusion of missing/murdered women of color in the news. He told of a specific example where TV host Nancy Grace broadcast a story about a murdered white woman on air. This was her monologue: “Breaking news tonight! At yet another college campus, a beautiful 22-year-old president of the UNC Chapel Hill student body, double major, biology, poli sci, last seen 1:30 AM doing homework, 5:00 AM, shots fired, 22-year-old Eve Carson found dead out in the intersection near campus, multiple gunshot wounds” (Bonilla-Silva 2011). Nancy Grace made sure to mention how “beautiful” and scholarly the woman was, listing both of her college majors. However, Bonilla-Silva points out that more often than not, women of color are not included in the news, and that if they are, the adjective is not there (Bonilla-Silva 2011).

It is important to note this racial grammar not only for people of color, but because it affects white people even more deeply (Bonilla-Silva 2011). It prohibits white people from truly empathizing with people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2011). These acts that are committed against people of color are invisible and unprocessed by whites (Bonilla-Silva 2011). “In short, these things are, for whites, *ungrammatical*” (Bonilla-Silva 2011).

Missing White Woman Syndrome

Of all the missing persons in the United States, very few of them receive news coverage. Sommers (2016) notes that certain characteristics are more likely to receive this coverage,

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specifically white women (Sommers 2016). This hypothesis came to be known as “missing white woman syndrome” (Sommers 2016). Sarah Stillman (2007) explains that “certain subgroups of women—often white, wealthy, and conventionally attractive—as deserving of our collective resources, while making the marginalization and victimization of other groups of women, such as low-income women of colour seem natural” (Stillman 2007). The silence around missing/murdered women of color and the prioritized proaction for missing/murdered white women make up the missing white woman syndrome (Patton and Ward 2016).

Heterosexual, middle class, attractive white women have become the definition of pure and innocent in media coverage and in society as a whole (Jewkes 2004 and Wilcox 2005 as cited by Gilchrist, 2010). The white woman’s body has become the “ epitome of purity, cleanliness, vulnerability, and virginity” (Dyer 1997). He argued that their white bodies have been historically compared to the heavens and are forbidden and therefore superior (Dyer 1997). They are the literal childbearers of the white race, responsible for the continuation of the the hierarchy of whiteness (Dyer 1997). They are privileged in relation to white power in the world (Dyer 1997). Therefore, they are more protected and prioritized within violent crimes. Perhaps this is one of the underlying reasons why these white women are disproportionately shown in news media- so that people can be more aware of this violence against them so as to try and protect them from it happening in the future. Since Indigenous womens’ bodies do not carry on this hierarchy of whiteness and power, their disappearances and murders do not matter as much in the eyes of the media.

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The white women shown in the media are given a story- an individual narrative containing their background information, their picture, their hobbies, their occupation, etc, glorifying them for all they did. The Chris Watts story comes to my mind first- the man who killed his wife, Shannah, and their two daughters, Bella and Celeste. Their story stayed as a spotlight in the media for months. Stories covered included countless pictures of Shannah and their daughters, memoirs, and an ample amount of details on how perfect a wife and daughter Shannah was. They were a seemingly perfect and happy family.

And they were white.

I am not discounting the horrific event that occurred with the Watts family. I am, however, hoping to point out the invisibility of individual stories in the media on MMIW. By excluding individual stories of Indigenous women and girls, they are essentially erased from society. Their calls for help are not met with solutions because the world does not see that these extremely disproportionate acts of violence against Indigenous women are not being broadcast to the world. People seem to care more when there is an individual story with details of the person- it humanizes them. It gives them life. When these women are turned into simple statistics, they become faceless, nameless.

Symbolic interactionism helps to explain this phenomenon. “Developed primarily by Herbert Blumer using the previous work of George H. Mead (1930), symbolic interactionism posits that humans use socially constructed symbols to attach meanings to objects, other humans included” (Hewitt 1994 as cited by Joseph 2006:3). Symbolic interactionism can define the

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social construct of race in general. Physical features such as skin tone have historically been used to categorize people into groups (Joseph 2006). Therefore, racial identity is connected to how people attach meaning to themselves and others in regards to these physical features (Joseph 2006). Since, for centuries, white men in power have idolized white women's bodies, they have become a symbol of purity and importance in the world whereas Indigenous women's bodies have historically been abused by many white men in power.

Though missing white woman syndrome is well-known, there is little evidence to prove that it is scientifically true. Matthew Sommers did an empirical investigation into this theory. He first broke up his analysis into gender. He debunked the idea that men would be more represented in news media when he found that women and girls are overrepresented in 4 of the 5 sources he used. He also found that black people are significantly underrepresented in the news coverage on the websites when compared to the number of black missing persons on the FBI database (Sommers 2016). These findings provide a basis for more studies on missing white woman syndrome.

Law Enforcement

These statistics are overwhelmingly startling, especially because the protection of these women by law enforcement is inadequate. Annita Lucchesi recalled that during her creation the first MMIW database, law enforcement officers would sometimes try to give her missing persons data from memory. To Lucchesi, it was "unacceptable that law enforcement feel recalling data from memory is an adequate response to a records request. In the one instance where this

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occurred and the officer searched their records after, several additional cases the officer could not recall were found. This highlights the need for improved records provision standards and shows that the institutional memory of law enforcement is not a reliable or accurate data source” (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018:13). Not only did many law enforcement agencies have inadequate data storage and retrieval, some (18%) also failed to respond whatsoever to Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk during their hunt for data (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018).

Some law enforcement agencies failed to provide the ability to even search for Native Americans in missing persons databases. One Santa Fe policeman told Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk “[Many] Native Americans adopted Hispanic names back during colonial times...Our crime systems are not flexible enough to pick out Native Americans from others in the system...it would be impossible to compile any statistically relevant information for you” (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). In Seattle, Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk noticed that police reports provided only an “N” from the 1960’s-1980’s when reporting missing persons, which confused many people because it stood for “Negro” not “Native American,” but contained many people with Native American last names (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). They also found cases in which they were given names of victims with obvious Indian-American last names, such as Singh. When they asked law enforcement agencies about this, they claimed those victims must be biracial instead of attempting to sort misclassified data into correct racial categories (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). Sometimes, MMIW were not recognized as Native American whatsoever,

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because their tribe might have been terminated at the time of their disappearance/death and then later restored (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018).

In another study done by Josephine Savarese (2017), she followed the stories of two Indigenous women who went missing and were later found deceased. One of the women, Amber Tuccaro, was staying overnight at a hotel in Alberta, Canada with her friend and fifteen month old son. The next day she hitched a ride to Edmonton with a stranger who took her to an isolated recreation area and murdered her. When Amber's family reported her disappearance to law enforcement, they did little about it. They said she was "likely out 'partying'" (Savarese 2017:167). Law enforcement suggested that Amber's disappearance resulted from her individual choices, not by criminal intent (Savarese 2017). And even though Amber was still missing, officers removed her name from the missing persons list and took and later destroyed her belongings from the hotel she was staying at (Savarese 2017). Her family worried that these items taken by law enforcement could have contained valuable clues and aided in finding her (Savarese 2017). They took her name off the missing persons list because they claimed someone sighted her in Edmonton after her disappearance.

These law enforcement officers treated Amber as if she were disposable to society- that her life did not matter enough to even investigate the situation (Savarese 2017). That officer's immediate response to a "sighting" of Amber resulted in them taking her name off the missing persons list so soon highlights the idea that Amber was indistinguishable from other Indigenous women and unimportant to the officers (Savarese 2017). After years of pushing law enforcement

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officers to further investigate Amber's case, justice has not been served. The perpetrator was never found, remaining unknown.

In Canada, some law enforcement agencies created DNA collection programs to raise awareness and investigate violence against MMIW. They target women with "vulnerable lifestyles," such as sex workers, or women whom police think have more of a chance of going missing (Bailey and Shayan 2016). Police teams in unmarked vans influence women to participate by offering them condoms, water, and provide them with knowledge of services in the community (Bailey and Shayan 2016). They then take DNA samples of their hair, next-of-kin information, and other personal information (Bailey and Shayan 2016). They sign a piece of paper that states the information being taken from them is private and will only be used to identify them if they were to be murdered/go missing (Bailey and Shayan 2016). However, the way police have gone about this is extremely unprofessional and has the potential to exploit the personal information of these women. While it is true this information could potentially help to identify women who have been murdered or gone missing, it does nothing to help them ahead of time (Bailey and Shayan 2016).

Methods

As a sociologist, I am reminded by Longstaffe that I must be attentive to my own "discursive and representational practices" when reporting on Indigenous matters (Longstaffe 2017:259). As found in numerous newspaper articles, language used to address Indigenous populations has been notoriously harmful by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, reporters,

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and those alike. It is important to know how to write about Indigenous peoples' lives in a responsible and respectful manner. As Longstaffe said, "We must continually reflect upon how to write against violence, poverty, racism, and colonialism without naturalizing or reproducing it or further stigmatizing or marginalizing those we wish to advocate with and for" (Longstaffe 2017:259). I in no way want to overstep any boundaries or disrespect any person whom I will discuss in my analysis. For this reason, I will take this advice from Longstaffe as well as pull from "Indigenous Methodologies," a book written by an Indigenous scholar, Margaret Kovach (2009) on Indigenous approaches to research and to ally them with Westernized qualitative approaches.

This study contains an extensive content analysis of the language used in online newspaper articles of MMIW in New Mexico, Washington, and Arizona. I chose these three states specifically because according to Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk, these are the states with the most cases of MMIW. In their study, they found that New Mexico had seventy-eight cases, Washington seventy-one, and Arizona fifty-four (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018:10). I chose the two top circulating newspapers in each of these states because they are being read by the largest audiences. For New Mexico, I examined ten articles from the *Albuquerque Journal* and ten articles from the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. For Washington, I examined ten articles from the *Seattle Times* and ten articles from the *News Tribune*. For Arizona, I examined ten articles from the *Arizona Republic* and only four from the *Arizona Daily Star*. My goal was to analyze ten articles from each newspaper, but the *Arizona Daily Star* had a lack of data on the subject. The

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articles examined were a mix of stories about individual Indigenous women who have been murdered or gone missing and also of broader stories about the MMIW movement and issue as a whole.

As Lucchesi and Echo Hawk found, newspapers often come out with articles that use “language that could be perceived as violent and victim-blaming in their coverage of MMIWG cases” (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018:18). I created this study to determine what type of language the states with the highest MMIW cases use in their portrayals of Native American women. I looked for the types of violent language used, which I defined as referencing trauma/domestic abuse, poverty, family issues, criminal history, substance abuse problems, sex work, and gruesome details of the crime scene. I also looked to see if the news outlets gave the women individual stories and characteristics like they did with Shannor Watts and other white women who have gone missing/been murdered.

When starting to collect my data, I first found that there has been a surge in articles concerning the issue of MMIW in the past few years. It is clear that since 2016, there has been an increase in consciousness over the issue in communities that have high populations of Native Americans. In all six of the news outlets, there were almost no newspaper articles talking about MMIW in these highly populated areas before 2016. It was not until the Urban Indian Health Institute conducted the study with Abigail Echo-Hawk and Annita Lucchesi that scholars started to recognize the severity of the issue, and it was not until Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, a

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pregnant twenty-two year old Native American woman was brutally murdered in 2017 that the issue of MMIW escalated in the media.

Upon collecting the data, I had a specific mechanism I used to find the articles. I bought unlimited online access to all articles on the websites for these newspapers. I started by setting the “advanced search” from January 2017-September 2019. The search terms I used were different combinations of “murdered,” “killed,” “lost,” “missing,” “Indigenous,” “native,” “American Indian,” “woman,” and “girl.” I first picked out all the articles about individual women and their cases first, and after those ran out, I picked the articles about the issue as a whole, which often times contained snippets of individual stories. My study aims to answer three questions:

RQ1: How do journalists explain what happened to the victim?

RQ2: What type of language do journalists use when presenting the victim?

RQ3: What solutions, if any, do journalists provide for the problem of MMIW?

To answer these questions, I coded the articles with the qualitative software program MAXQDA. I copied and pasted the articles from the online newspapers into MAXQDA. I first went through all of the articles, coding each line for different possible themes. After I coded all of the articles the first time, I went through and coded again looking for themes and patterns, placing these subcodes into larger categories. Eventually, all of the subcodes fit into four main categories- individualization of the issue, generalization of the issue, individual blame, and structural blame. These four main categories helped to answer my three research questions.

Analysis/Discussion

This research project aimed to holistically and respectfully analyze online news representation of MMIW as well as traced causes for the issue of the misrepresentation of MMIW and pinpointed potential solutions to the problem of both the media representation and the issue as a whole. Kristen Gilchrist (2010) said that in order to analyze the data with a holistic approach, we must “seek to understand the subtle meanings and implications of the text(s)... as well as content” and not just quantify the data (Gilchrist 2010:7). I analyzed not only the number of articles that MMIW appeared in, but dug deeper into the nuances of the content, such as the headlines, photos, and overall language of the articles. I framed these findings with three research questions. I also analyzed the type of language used within the articles, the journalists’ explanation of the event, and any solutions they provided to the issue.

To assess how journalists explained what happened to the victims, I decided whether the authors individualized or generalized the issue of MMIW as a whole. They either presented the woman individually- with a story, a name, a face, a photo, or they presented the issue broadly without mentioning the woman. Sometimes the journalists presented the women both individually and the issue broadly within the same article. While the overwhelming majority of the articles (81%) do somewhere mention a specific MMIW in the article, only three of the fifty four articles (5%) mention the victim’s name in the headline. Only nineteen out of thirty five (54%) of the articles show a picture of the victim. It is important to note that since the journalists are not mentioning the names of the women in the titles, nor illustrating their lives through

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photos, these women become invisible- each victim is lost in the statistics and generalized headlines.

Some examples of generalized headlines include:

- The Seattle Times: “Why are Native American women vanishing? And who’s looking for them?”
- The Seattle Times: “Canada has launched an inquiry into a series of murders, mostly of aboriginal women, in British Columbia. It is part of a promise to renew the country’s relationship with its indigenous “citizens.”
- The News Tribune: “Tacoma has high number of missing and murdered Native American women, report says.”
- The Albuquerque Journal: “Senate panel hears of Native women’s deaths, disappearances.”
- The Albuquerque Journal: “Navajo activist celebrates attention for dead, missing women.”
- The Arizona Daily Star: “Why do so many Native American women get murdered or disappear? Congress is aiming to find out.”

As Longstaffe suggested, with headlines that do not individualize women, their deaths become normalized, deeming them unavoidable and expected (Longstaffe 2017). The headlines are what grab the audience’s attention- they draw readers in. If the readers see the same generic headline over and over again, it is likely that the individual women will get lost in the bigger picture. If their lives are not depicted through the use of images, they are dehumanized. These women had lives, children, and hobbies. They had smiling faces that with the permission of the families should have been shown to the public just like Shannon Watts and her two daughters. This disregard for individuality causes for the disposability of these women by the general public. If audiences are not recognizing these women as individuals, their disappearances and murders ultimately go unsolved and no justice is brought to them or their families.

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However, there were a few times where the victim's personal stories were mentioned inside the article. Of course, these stories had less of a chance of being read by the audience if the headline did not provoke enough emotion or thought for the reader to continue with the article. Nonetheless, these instances helped humanized the victims. Article from the Arizona Daily Star brings up the personal characteristics of Leona LeClair Kinsey, a forty-five year old Indigenous mother who went missing in October 1999.

“Leona LeClair Kinsey was a fiercely independent woman who could go pheasant hunting, serve the bird for dinner, then take the leftover feathers and turn them into an artistic gift. Her daughter, Carolyn DeFord, remembers how they'd also hunt deer, elk and antelope and pick mushrooms and huckleberries near their home in La Grande, Oregon, a rural community in the eastern corner of the state. ‘She was confident in her ability to not need people to do simple things for her,’ DeFord says, recalling how her mother would chop firewood and change her own tires.”

By individualizing Leona's story, the author captures the livelihood of a vivacious woman who did not deserve to be the victim of such a heinous crime. Readers know her personality- they can imagine her family, her friends, her daughter. In this case, Leona is not rendered invisible. She is a human with value. It is possible that by doing including these types of personal stories, the readers can connect with the victims or their families on a personal level, and they will be more likely to care about finding solutions or advocating for change. Unfortunately, later on in the same article, the author mentions Leona's criminal history. I will

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not quote what the newspaper says because I do not wish to perpetuate any harmful stereotypes in my work. They essentially blame her for what happened to her, erasing the humaneness they provided earlier when including her familial story and personal characteristics.

When addressing the aspect of blame, I coded for either “structural blame,” “individual blame,” “both,” or “does not address.” I found twenty-six of the articles (48%) focused solely on structural blame, five articles (9%) solely on individual blame, eleven articles (20%) contained both structural and individual blame within the same article, and twelve articles (22%) that did not blame anyone for the problem.

When the journalists addressed the issue as a structural problem, the overwhelming majority of times they addressed the issue of the criminal justice system on Native American reservations and the lack of media representation on the issue. Journalists often reported disagreements between police and the victim’s family, unprofessional record keeping/data collection, and tribal jurisdiction issues on who can be prosecuted on reservations. In this excerpt from the Seattle Times, Roxanne White, an activist for MMIW spoke about structural concerns accounting for the disappearance of Rosenda Strong, a 31 year old mother of four from the Yakama reservation, along with many other MMIW.

“White spoke to long-running concerns about institutional racism and poor relationships between police and Native communities that have created gaps in understanding the scope of violence against Native-American women. A recently released report by Seattle-based Urban Indian Health Institute points to a troubling lack

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of quality data about missing and murdered indigenous women. The report identifies 506 cases across the nation, 45 of them in Seattle, the most of any of the 71 cities studied.”

White mentions multiple structural issues here: institutional racism, the criminal justice system, and widespread violence against Indigenous women. She never mentions individual blame in this article. These articles are the most beneficial to the problem of MMIW because they are only addressing the societal forces that contribute to the issue. The report she mentions is that of Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk (2018). In mentioning this study, she only further stressed the fact that the growing issue is occurring due to structural discrepancies. No one in particular is blamed, so it is easier to take an objective approach to solving the issue.

In another article in the News Tribune, the chairman of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, Tim Davis, suggested that it is not poor relationships between police and Natives, but instead the police’s lack of resources.

“We need more resources. That's the bottom line here, is we don't have enough officers to cover the entire reservation," Davis says. Currently, only 17 officers police the 1.5 million acre reservation, and all are stationed in Browning. The tribe is currently asking the Bureau of Indian Affairs for funding and training resources for 23 additional tribal officers. The tribe is also supporting calls to restore some of the FBI's services in the state, which were recently cut.

This is another structural issue. Funding and geographic isolation contribute to the lack of resources that officers must deal with on a day-to-day basis. Reservations are some of the poorest

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places in the nation, and many simply cannot afford to pay more officers to patrol. Since this is not a serious issue to the general public, federal funding is not focused and allocated to this issue with the severity it should be. On top of this, the police officers that are responsible for patrolling have so much land to cover that it overwhelms them. This might be a reason for their insensitive treatment of victims and their families. Though it is not a justification for the victim blaming that often occurs by police, they cannot be expected to alleviate an issue that they do not have the resources to fix.

In addition to these social structures, many journalists report the lack of media representation as a problem. In this article by the Santa Fe New Mexican, Makayla Manygoats, a senior at Santa Fe Indian School mentions the lack of stories in the news containing MMIW.

“It’s never gone over five minutes [of coverage] when it is brought up on the TV news... I never see any person help or put in the effort to at least spread [awareness of] the issue... Native American culture revolves around native women. ... When a Native woman has gone missing, the circle of life is incomplete,” she said, adding that because Native women are birth givers and healers, to lose them is to lose an important aspect of Native culture. ‘We have to fight for our rights,’ she said. ‘It’s like we don’t exist in our own country’”

She mentions the factor of invisibility. She notes the importance of Native American women, and how their disappearances/murders are being dismissed by the media and the rest of the nation. Because these women are going missing/murdered at such high rates, the Native

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American culture is being sacrificed. Since they are seen as the “healers” in society, their communities are forced to move along without them or any explanation of their disappearances. In turn, there is no one to heal the wounds that are left. Structural forces like the media are choosing to turn a blind eye to these populations, even though these structures have the power to reform.

When journalists addressed the issue as individual, the wording about the victims’ lives was always very minimal and placed the blame on the victim. To answer the question, “What type of language do journalists use when presenting the victim?” I coded for violent language, which as I defined above as referencing trauma/domestic abuse, poverty, family issues, criminal history, substance abuse problems, sex work, and gruesome details of the crime scene. Twenty-one of the fifty-four articles (38%) still used violent language when describing the women, their pasts, and what happened to them. My finding is very similar to that of Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk, who found that 31% of their forty-six news outlets used violent language when reporting on the victims. While it is good that news outlets are starting to individualize the issue of MMIW, journalistic best practices need to be updated to account for demeaning language that perpetuates negative stereotypes of Indigenous women.

Some examples of victim-blaming that reference trauma and/or substance abuse are as followed. Again, I will not be using any specific names as to not perpetuate harm to any of the victims or their families.

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- The Arizona Daily Star: “...wonders if things would have been different for her sister if she had found more support to deal with her trauma and addiction.”
- The Santa Fe New Mexican: “She ran away from an abusive home at the age of 17, she said, and for a time afterward lived on the streets and was addicted to drugs. She found herself in another abusive relationship and became a young mother.”
- The Seattle Times: “...grew up surrounded by domestic violence, alcoholism and trauma.”
- The Albuquerque Journal: “ had been in and out of treatment for her alcohol use and later got involved with a man who was using methamphetamines.”

It is important for readers of these articles to remember that the victims should not be shamed for participating in these harmful activities. Many times these women are victims of assault, or they are in a cycle of abuse. Though people do make individual choices, these choices are affected by historical policies and forces like the Dawes Act mentioned before. These women have been marginalized in society for hundreds of years, constantly being stripped of their dignity, spiritual freedom, and ability to self sustain in a capitalistic society. Victim blaming simply places fault on the most vulnerable person in the situation. Not addressing any blame whatsoever might have been less harmful to the victims and their families because blaming does not help the public to identify solutions to the issue.

Policies/Recommendations

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To answer my final question, “What solutions, if any, do journalists provide to the problem of MMIW?” I coded for the solutions that journalists suggested, which coincided with the structural issues mentioned previously. The most common solution stated in the articles referenced Savannah’s Act- it aims to “direct the Attorney General to review, revise, and develop law enforcement and justice protocols appropriate to address missing and murdered Indians, and for other purposes.” Other articles mention that more funding to public safety programs would help can help raise awareness to the issue and initiate change.

In order to see a change in the way these MMIW are reported and recognized, there needs to be policies that include urban MMIW, not just federal bills. Federal bills may protect those MMIW on reservations, but as stated earlier, over 70% of Native Americans live in urban areas, which are not federal jurisdiction (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk make a valid argument that tribes should have the authority to advocate for members of their tribe who have gone missing while off of the reservation (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). This way, even though the disappearance might not have happened on the reservation which the victim is a citizen of, tribes can still advocate for them. This concept of Indigenous Data Sovereignty is defined as “the right of a nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data, including any data collected on its tribal citizens” (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018:22). Tribal nations deserve the right to be a part of the data collection of missing citizens from their nations, regardless of where they reside. Currently, tribes are not notified, nor are they allowed access to information on missing persons from their tribe if the

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incident did not happen on tribal land (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). In Arizona, Governor Doug Doucey recently signed House Bill 2570 into law requiring a task force to investigate and better gather data on MMIW. With hope, his bill will set a more replicable example to the rest of the U.S. on taking action against the issue.

Funding

Funding is still an issue in order for these policies to be implemented since there are fees that come along with data retrieval. Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk were charged fees from 13% of all the agencies surveyed for their data retrieval (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). Even after paying the fees, some police stations like the Portland police, never provided the data that Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk requested. Many advocates blame the lack of funding in police departments that do not have the resources to accurately investigate crimes. However, in October of 2019, the Department of Justice awarded over \$273.4 million to improve public safety in American Indian and Alaska Native communities

Conclusions/Future Research

While news outlets can be used as valuable tools for addressing the MMIW crisis and spreading awareness, they can also be very harmful and raise serious issues in the Indigenous communities relating to racism, privacy, and dignity of the women (Bailey and Shayan 2016). If news outlets are over-generalizing the issue, they are in a sense recognizing these MMIW as disposable both literally and physically. They are seen as nameless and faceless, and there is no personal connections or stories to go along with the statistics. These stories could create narrative

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that, if used in the right way, could provoke thought and emotion from readers to promote change. At the same time, if news outlets are individualizing the issue while at the same time victim blaming with violent language, they are perpetuating harmful stereotypes and causing harm to the victims' families by suggesting these obscene acts could have been avoided if the victim wouldn't have "found more support to deal with [their] trauma and addiction" (The Arizona Daily Star 2019). In either situation, the media is exposing these women to vulnerabilities that could affect themselves and their families for years to come if they portray the women's situations damagingly.

In the future, researchers could expand upon my study by including a wider range of newspaper outlets. Since I only used six newspaper outlets, all within the states with the highest numbers of MMIW, there could have been some bias on how much coverage the women were receiving. I hypothesize it may be lower in areas with lower cases. Future researchers might also want to include more national news coverage to see how much exposure the general public has to the issue, not just areas with high Native American populations. This future research could focus on how news outlets could conduct more private and respectful investigations of the women's stories. This is especially important so that the integrity of the women and their families are protected during such a disastrous time in their lives. In the future, I would like to better research the data collection process by police and law enforcement agencies on and off reservations, and focus on how that can be improved.

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