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# Types of Intimate Partner Homicides Committed by Women: Self-Defense, Proxy/Retaliation, and Sexual Proprietariness

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## Abstract

Margo Wilson and Martin Daly began scientific work to explain intimate partner homicides (IPHs). Key to their work was women's increased risk of IPH victimization relative to men. In the 1990s, many U.S. jurisdictions implemented Domestic Violence Fatality Review Committees (DVFRCs) to improve responses to potentially lethal abuse. We report findings from 117 closed heterosexual IPH cases collected by the Denver Metro DVFRC 1991-2009. As expected, IPHs perpetrated by women against men are frequently motivated by self-defense. Although Wilson and Daly's "sexual proprietariness" is primarily characteristic of men killing women, we find it applicable to some women killing male mates.

## Keywords

intimate partner homicide, femicide, fatality review, practitioner–researcher collaborative research

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## Introduction

Between 1988 and 1998, Margo Wilson and Martin Daly published a book and numerous articles addressing the most serious form of intimate partner abuse (IPA); intimate partner homicide (IPH) (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988; Wilson & Daly, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1995). Since the late 1980s, in no small part due to Wilson and Daly's innovative, interdisciplinary, and careful scholarship, research has increasingly addressed IPH. Indeed, seven of the top 10 most cited articles in this journal, *Homicide Studies*, are about IPH.<sup>1</sup> In addition to increased scholarship on IPH, in the 1990s some local jurisdictions and states implemented Domestic Violence Fatality Review Committees (DVFRCs), a pool of diverse practitioners hoping, through detailed data collection on IPH cases, to improve services to IPA victims and offenders and decrease the likelihood of IPH.<sup>2</sup> The current study reports a gendered analysis of 117 IPH cases among heterosexual couples in the Denver, Colorado area over the period 1991-2009.

## The Gendered Nature of IPH and Theoretical Approaches

Six percent of all U.S. homicide arrests involve IPHs (Gauthier & Bankston, 1997), and research indicates that 28-63% of femicides (killings of females) in the United States and Canada are the result of IPH (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Dawson & Gartner, 1998; Glass, Koziol-McLain, Campbell, & Block, 2004), compared with only 3-8% of killings of males (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Smith et al., 1998). Indeed, the most salient aspect of IPH is the gendered nature of the crime: Men commit the vast majority of IPHs (e.g., Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Biroscak, Smith, & Post, 2006; Bossarte, Simon, & Barker, 2006; Campbell, Glass, Sharps, Laughon, & Bloom, 2007; DeJong, Pizzaro, & McGarrell, 2011; Gauthier & Bankston, 1997; Langford, Isaac, & Kabat, 1998; Serran & Firestone, 2004; Shai, 2010; Smith, Moracco, & Butts, 1998; Vittes & Sorrenson, 2008).<sup>3</sup> When women do kill, however, they are mostly likely to kill their current or former intimate partner (e.g., Block & Christakos, 1995; Browne & Williams, 1989; DeJong et al., 2011; Gauthier & Bankston, 1997; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999).

Not surprisingly, then, much of the theorizing about the etiology of IPH starts from a focus on sex and gender. In their early work, Wilson and Daly offered *male sexual proprietariness theory* to explain why men kill their current or former mates and *self-defense theory* to explain why women kill their current or former mates (see Serran & Firestone [2004] for an excellent review). Wilson and Daly's male sexual proprietariness theory is an evolutionary theory; it assumes the driving force of jealousy resulting in IPHs is a uniquely male sex trait whereby men kill their intimate women partners due to a real or imagined sense of the women's infidelity to them, or the women's efforts to end the relationship (Wilson & Daly, 1988, 1993a, 1993b, 1996). Moreover, Wilson and Daly (1996, p. 2) view this jealousy as a "sex" (as opposed to "gender")

characteristic, where “a satisfactory account of the psychological links between male sexual proprietariness and violence will depend on an understanding of the adaptive problems that men have faced in the course of human evolutionary history and the ways in which the psyche is organized to solve them.” Shakelford sums up Wilson and Daly’s male sexual proprietariness as “men who suspect or know that the relationship with their partner is not secure often take drastic measures to ensure that the relationship continues or, barring that, to ensure that their partner does not initiate or maintain a relationship with another man” (2001, p. 290). Notably, evolutionary psychology, with an emphasis on the biological differences between women and men, has grown as an explanation for IPA and IPHs being largely male-perpetrated (e.g., Buss, 2000; D’Alessio & Stolzenberg, 2010; Durrant, 2009; Goetz, Shackelford, Romero, Kaighobadi, & Miner, 2008; Sesardic, 2003).

Consistent with Wilson and Daly’s male sexual proprietariness theory, a number of male-perpetrated IPHs exhibit ownership, jealousy, and rejection as motives among the offenders. For example, Dobash and Dobash’s (2011) study of 104 male-perpetrated IPH offenders found a high intersection of jealousy, possessiveness, estrangement, and separation. “Men’s possessiveness and jealousy, as well as fears and anger about separation and abandonment, are often difficult to unravel and sometimes bear little relationship to the reality of their marital state or the behavior of their woman partner” (p. 124). Liem and Robert’s (2009) study of 341 man-perpetrated IPHs classified most of the male offenders with narcissistic rage motivation (42% of the offenders). That is, to protect his self-esteem, which he views as marred by his female partner who left or “wronged” him, the male offender’s “aggression arises as an instrument of recovery . . . [and] the victim is killed to restore the perpetrator’s sense of self” (p. 345). Liem and Roberts found that the second most common man-perpetrated IPH motive was fear of abandonment (26% of the perpetrators), in which the perpetrator feels a symbiotic relationship with the victim so that “when the victim threatens to end the relationship, a part of the perpetrator’s sense of identity is lost . . . When emotional dependency is not enough to convince the victim to stay, he kills her” (p. 248).

Numerous other studies report the offenders’ extreme sense of *male entitlement* is a gender or cultural/sociological construction rather than a biological disposition (e.g., Adams, 2007; Elisha, Idisis, Timor, & Addad, 2010; Farooque, Stout, & Ernst, 2005; Leth, 2009; Moracco et al., 1998; Smith et al., 1998). Stated alternatively, male entitlement is “a natural outgrowth of patriarchal societies,” rather than a biological sex trait (Bouffard, 2010, p. 871). In addition, it should be noted that one such study including both male- and female-perpetrated IPH found that although men were more likely than women to kill due to their partners’ (victims’) threats or attempts to leave them, there were no gender differences in killing over sexual jealousies (Block & Christakos, 1995, pp. 505-506). In sum, although recognizing that IPH is strongly gendered in frequency, it is useful to entertain the perspective that sexual proprietariness, defined originally as a male phenomenon, might also play a role when women commit IPHs.

Just as a respectable body of research supports the male sexual proprietariness theory for most men who kill their mates, a considerable amount of research supports self-defense theory for most women who kill their mates (e.g., Browne, 1987; Ewing, 1987; Felson & Messner, 1998; Gillespie, 1989; Jurik & Winn, 1990; Leth, 2009; Maguigan, 1991). Campbell (2007) and her colleagues find that “the major risk factor” (p. 246) for IPH, whether a man or a woman is killed, is prior IPA (almost always directed at the woman by the man, even in cases where the man is killed). Similarly, Felson and Messner (1998) report that “men who are killed by their partners tend to have more violent records than men who are killed in other circumstances” (p. 405), and that “women are about 19 times as likely to commit IPH in self-defense than men” (p. 413). More specifically, women who kill their current or former mates often have a history of serious abuse victimizations by the men they later kill, often during a violent incident started by the man (e.g., Block & Christakos, 1995; Browne, 1987; Campbell, 1992; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Ewing, 1987; Jones, 1994; Wilson & Daly, 1992, 1993a, 1993b).

The current study explores IPH from a predominantly gendered perspective, analyzing sexual proprietariness versus self-defense motivations for IPHs in heterosexual couples.

## **Method**

### *Practitioner–Researcher Collaboration*

The Denver Metro Domestic Violence Fatality Review Committee (DMDVFR) started in 1996 after receiving funding from the US Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women, Encourage Arrest Grants.<sup>4</sup> Similar to other DVFRs started around the U.S. at about the same time, the goal of the DMDVFR was to reduce the number of IPA-related fatalities by collecting data on adjudicated or closed IPH cases in the 1st, 2nd, 17th and 18th judicial districts in the Denver, CO metro area. The DMDVFR consists of more than 20 members representing a significant cross-section of agencies (i.e., police, prosecutors, system and community victim advocates, judges, coroners, batterer intervention staff, and drug/alcohol counselors) to discuss, collect, and maintain a data base on Denver Metro IPHs, using a codebook developed by the committee that has been “tweaked” over time. The full review committee meets on a monthly basis to discuss an identified case, assisting the DMDVFR Coordinator in obtaining access to case-specific information. Information obtained about a specific case is confidential and each member signs a confidentiality agreement.

The DMDVFR, composed of criminal legal system practitioners, contacted the first author in 1999, shortly after she moved to Colorado, to help with statistical analyses and writing up reports of the data. Since then, the DMDVFR (practitioners) and first author (a researcher) have worked together on the research in using practitioner–researcher collaboration (see Block, Engel, Naureckas, & Riordan, 1999). Although the researcher rarely attends DMDVFR meetings, she works to clean the data, and often oversees data entry using some of her students. She also advises the group on

potential changes to the codebook. Although there has been a fair amount of turnover in DMDVFRC membership, the first, second, and fourth authors have worked collaboratively in the DMDVFRC since 1999. The first author was responsible for analyzing the DMDVFRC data and summarizing the results for this article, but she communicated regularly with the practitioner coauthors. These communications occurred as questions arose in analyzing and writing the article, and the communications occurred fairly equally in person, on the phone, and by email. This article and its underlying study are truly practitioner–researcher collaborations (see Block et al., 1999).

### *Definitions and Case Identification*

The DMDVFRC includes any fatalities or attempted homicides that occur during the commission of a domestic violence incident. The intimate partners in the cases can be married, divorced, dating, or breaking or broken up. Most cases these are men killing their current or former women partners, but the fatalities also include a range of people under a variety of circumstances (e.g., a child or other family member, neighbor, stranger, police officer, and so on). The DMDVFRC also includes cases where the “only” fatality or attempted killing is suicide (or attempted suicide) by the perpetrator. Collateral homicides are also included, such as when the perpetrator kills the victim’s new intimate partner, a child, a stranger, or a police officer present or responding to the event. These cases are often complex, where sometimes the person who became the homicide offender, was originally a victim of abuse in the intimate relationship.

### *Data Collection*

The method used by the DMDVFRC is known as “retrospective surveillance” or “retrospective case review,” identifying and characterizing IPH cases through newspaper articles, medical examiner records, police reports, and court documents, when any of these are easily available (e.g., Biroscak et al., 2006; Farooque et al., 2005). At the beginning of each year, the prior year’s closed IPH cases are randomly selected and ordered and the DMDVFRC compiles information on as many as they could handle given their time constraints for the year. Every year, this procedure is repeated: Randomly number the IPH cases closed in the prior year, and compile information on as many of these that the committee can in that year, given the time available.

DMDVFRC data collection was completed for 119 cases, of which two were same-sex homicides (1.7%), both male couples, a representation of same-sex IPHs very consistent with other studies in both percent and male-on-male (e.g., Leth, 2009; Lund & Smorodinsky, 2001; Puzone, Saltzman, Kresnow, Thompson, & Mercy, 2000). Given our focus on IPHs of men against women, in this article we chose to exclude these two same-sex IPHs. The 117 cases included in this article, then, were IPHs in different-sex (heterosexual) couples, closed between 1991 and 2009, and randomly selected by the DMDVFRC from a total pool of 283 (41.3%) Denver Metro IPH cases.

The DMDVFRC Coordinator is responsible for gathering a majority of the case-specific information and providing a case chronology for presentation to the full committee, who works to fill in missing data by asking the members from the various agencies represented if they might have access to the missing information. This information is quantified and entered into a paper copy of the DMDVFRC Codebook, and then entered into an SPSS file.

## Hypotheses

Given the research reviewed on IPH, we hypothesized that among these heterosexual IPH cases:

*Hypothesis 1:* Women victims of IPH by a man would have less extensive histories of domestic violence than women perpetrating IPH against a man.

*Hypothesis 2:* The primary motivation of IPH by a woman against a man would be consistent with self-defense theory.

## Analytic Strategy

We used the DMDVFRC quantitative data to examine the first hypothesis. The second hypothesis is more exploratory in nature. To examine it, we used the qualitative data in the original DMDVFRC files of the IPHs perpetrated by women. When the qualitative data did not fit with self-defense, we attempted to find other categories.

In the quantitative analysis, we used Fisher's Exact Test to conduct significance tests to examine gender differences, and made  $2 \times 2$  tables of nominal variables (gender by a dependent variable). "Fisher's exact test is more accurate than the Chi-squared test or G-test of independence when the expected numbers are small."<sup>5</sup> We report some findings that are tendencies ( $.05 < p \leq .10$ ) in the text. Whether there were cell size problems (cell sizes with an expected frequency of less than 5) or not, the Pearson Chi-Square is reported. For those cases where there was a cell size problem, the Fisher's Exact Test significance is also reported (in the text). Missing data were excluded from the analyses; no mean or other estimates were used.

In addition, the first author went through the hard copies of the files of IPHs perpetrated by women, which had been used to complete the codebook for coding the quantitative data, to determine if there was information in case files that might more validly answer the research question regarding whether the motivations were self-defense. Given that the first author rarely attends the DMDVFRC meetings, and was never present for any of the discussions of any of the IPH cases of women against men, she read the files looking for evidence of self-defense. The coauthors, however, were quite familiar with these cases and had been present for all or most of the female-perpetrated IPH committee discussions. For cases that did not fit the self-defense classification, other classifications in the existing literature were considered, including sexual proprietariness (Wilson & Daly, 1988, 1993, 1996) and proxy/retaliation (Perilla, Frndak,

Lillard, & East, 2003; Richie, 1996). After conducting qualitative coding of each of these cases, the first author met with the second and fourth authors, to go over these cases and see if these coauthors agreed with the first author's coding and categorization of these women's motivations for committing IPH. There was complete agreement between the first author's qualitative coding for motivation and the coauthors' assessments of these cases.

### *The Sample*

Table 1 provides a demographic description of the sample. Because the focus of this analysis was on the fatalities, "offender" and "victim" designations refer to the homicide, as determined by the official criminal legal system records—"murder-suicide" designations were made by prosecutors and/or the police, and most other designations were made by the courts. The official designation by the courts does not necessarily mean that the identified "offender" was the primary aggressor in the relationship or in the fatal event.

Consistent with existing research, most of Denver Metro IPHs were intraracial (75.2%; e.g., Krulewitch, 2009; Moracco et al., 1998; Smith et al., 1998; Vittes & Sorrenson, 2008), and were disproportionately among lower socioeconomic status (SES) individuals (e.g., Campbell, 2004; Campbell et al., 2007; Dawson, Bunge, & Balde, 2009; Farooque et al., 2005; Gauthier & Bankston, 1997; Liem & Roberts, 2009; Smith et al., 1998). Also consistent with other research, these IPH offenders had high rates of alcohol and drug abuse (e.g., Block & Christakos, 1995; Campbell, 2004; Dawson & Gartner, 1998; Leth, 2009; Moracco et al., 1998; Rosenfeld, 1997; Smith et al., 1998) and histories of suicide threats and attempts during the relationship (not counting the day of the IPH; e.g., Block & Christakos, 1995; Bossarte et al., 2006; Lund & Smorodinsky, 2001). Consistent with McFarlane and colleagues' (2002) findings, 5% of the women victims in the current study were pregnant at the time of the incident (4.9%,  $n = 5$  of the 102 cases that included victim pregnancy tests).

### *Limitations*

In the 15 years in which the DMDVFRC has been active, it passed through three coordinators and different agencies housing the committee. Unfortunately, this resulted in some loss of the records regarding information on the IPH cases that were not included in the sample, so we are unable to compute the selection bias regarding many of the variables of the cases for which we collected data. Overall, the number of IPHs in the Denver Metro area ranged from 21 to 37 a year, with a mean of 29.6. The average percent of male-perpetrated IPHs over this period was 86.3%, thus our sample of 104 men in the total sample of 117 (88.9%) very slightly overrepresented male perpetrators. Another limitation is that there tended to be less information on the cases where the homicide offender committed suicide, as there was no need to collect data for a court case. Moreover, there were varied levels of staffing at the DMDVFRC

**Table 1.** Victim and Offender Characteristics in IPH<sup>a</sup>

Characteristic	Female victim/male offender						Male victim/female offender					
	♀ Victim			♂ Offender			♂ Victim			♀ Offender		
	N	%	(n)	N	%	(n)	N	%	(n)	N	%	(n)
Age <sup>b</sup>	101			103			13			13		
25 and younger		22.8	(23)		10.7	(11)		30.8	(4)		30.8	(4)
26-40		47.5	(48)		51.5	(53)		15.4	(2)		30.8	(4)
41-55		25.7	(26)		30.1	(31)		46.2	(6)		30.8	(4)
56+		5.9	(6)		7.8	(8)		7.7	(1)		7.7	(1)
Ethnicity	94			98			13			13		
White		47.9	(45)		35.7	(35)		23.1	(3)		38.5	(5)
Latina/o		24.5	(23)		31.6	(31)		7.7	(1)		0.0	(0)
African American		20.2	(19)		24.5	(24)		53.8	(7)		30.8	(4)
Asian American		6.4	(6)		5.1	(5)		0.0	(0)		23.1	(3)
Native American		1.1	(1)		2.0	(2)		7.7	(1)		0.0	(0)
Other		0.0	(0)		1.0	(1)		7.7	(1)		7.7	(1)
Employment status	84			97			12			13		
Employed		75.0	(63)		60.8	(59)		58.3	(7)		38.5	(5)
Unemployed		16.7	(14)		25.8	(25)		25.0	(3)		30.8	(4)
Retired		3.6	(3)		3.1	(3)		8.3	(1)		7.7	(1)
Disabled		2.4	(2)		5.2	(5)		0.0	(0)		7.7	(1)
Student		1.2	(1)		1.0	(1)		0.0	(0)		15.4	(2)
Underemployed		1.2	(1)		4.1	(4)		8.3	(1)		0.0	(0)
Education	43			40			4			9		
Some high school		23.3	(10)		37.5	(15)		50.0	(2)		33.3	(3)
Grad. high school		34.9	(15)		25.0	(10)		25.0	(1)		33.3	(3)
Technical school		9.3	(4)		5.0	(2)		0.0	(0)		11.1	(1)
Some college		14.0	(6)		17.5	(7)		0.0	(0)		11.1	(1)
College graduate		11.6	(5)		10.0	(4)		25.0	(1)		11.1	(1)
Post graduate		7.0	(3)		5.0	(2)		0.0	(0)		0.0	(0)
Defendant history <sup>c</sup>												
Alcohol abuse				90	46.7	(42)				12	33.3	(4)
Drug abuse				88	31.8	(28)				12	16.7	(2)
Suicide threats				90	41.1	(37)				12	8.3	(1)
Suicide attempts				43	25.6	(11)				6	0.0	(0)
Pregnancy status <sup>d</sup>	102											
Pregnant		4.9	(5)									
Not pregnant		95.1	(97)									

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Percents may not add up to 100.0 due to rounding. <sup>b</sup>In regard to cases with men offenders, their ages ranged from 18 to 80; their mean age was 38.9; their median age was 37. The IPH male victims' ages ranged from 13 to 75; their mean age was 36.4; their median age was 35. In regard to cases with woman offenders their ages ranged from 17 to 29; their mean age was 35.6; their median age was 32. The IPH female victims' ages ranged from 18 to 85; their mean age was 39.0; their median age was 41. <sup>c</sup>Alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and suicide threat and attempt history data were collected only for offenders, not for victims. Also, unlike the previous variables in this table, the Offender History data are all dichotomous yes/no variables and not mutually exclusive (e.g., an offender could abuse alcohol and drugs, and have a history of suicide attempts and/or threats). Only the "yes" responses are reported in the table as the "nos" become self-evident. <sup>d</sup>Pregnancy tests/reports were conducted only on women victims.

over the years, so some years the committee was able to get through more cases than other years. Clearly, the lack of sampling consistency is not ideal, but the data still provide useful information, appear fairly reflective of the populations by perpetrator gender, and contribute to the current understanding of IPHs.

A more important limitation, however, is that the quantitative data do not contain the information necessary to analyze the key variables of this article—male sexual proprietariness and male sexual jealousy. The quantitative codebook developed by the DMDVFRFC did not code for “motivation.” For that, we had to rely on the qualitative analysis. However, even with the 13 female-perpetrated cases used for the qualitative analysis, one file was quite bare and we were unable to use it, which left 12 cases, and two of these defied any classification determination.

## Findings

### *Quantitative Findings: Significant Gender Differences in IPH*

Table 1, briefly discussed in the methods section, describes the demographic characteristics of the quantitative sample. Given the small number of cases ( $n = 13$ ) perpetrated by women, and some missing data among these cases in our sample, the analyses resulted in few significant gender differences. Among the offenders, men were about five times as likely as women to have made suicide threats during the relationship (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 3.88$ ,  $p = .03$ , Fisher’s Exact Test  $p = .03$ ).

Most of the significant gender differences in the quantitative analysis addressed the official domestic violence history of those in the sample. First, men designated as victims of IPH perpetrated by women ( $n = 4$ , 44.4%) were three times as likely to have a prior domestic violence arrest than women designated as victims of IPH perpetrated by men ( $n = 7$ , 13.0%) (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 5.31$ ,  $p = .04$ ). This gender difference increased to more than seven times as likely when looking at domestic violence conviction ( $n = 4$ , and 44.4% of men victims, and  $n = 3$ , and 5.8% of women victim of IPH, Pearson  $\chi^2 = 11.30$ , Fisher’s Exact Test  $p = .01$ ). Likewise, among the IPH offenders, the men ( $n = 33$ , 36.3%) were more likely than the women ( $n = 1$ , 7.7%) to be on probation at the time of the IPH (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 4.22$ , Fisher’s Exact Test  $p = .03$ ), and there was a tendency for the men (18.2%) to be more likely than women offenders (0.0%) to have a prior restraining order arrest (Pearson  $\chi^2 = 2.81$ , Fisher’s Exact Test  $p \leq .05$ ).

About 5% of women killed by a man intimate partner were pregnant at the time of the homicide (Table 1). Similar results have been found elsewhere (e.g., Krulewitch, 2009, McFarlane, Campbell, Sharps, P., & Watson et al., 2002). Burch and Gallop (2004) found that, among male intimate partner abusers, those men who abuse their mates when they are pregnant report higher levels of sexual jealousy, and they report that both the frequency and severity of their abuse escalates during their partners’ pregnancies (Burch & Gallop, 2004). Unfortunately, the data analyzed here do not contain enough information to examine the relationship between the man’s sexual jealousy and the woman’s pregnancy in IPH.

## Qualitative Overview of IPH Cases of a Man by a Woman

In an effort to better understand the dynamics behind the thirteen IPH cases in which a woman killed a man, we reexamined the paper files of these cases, initially to determine the role of self-defense. One of the files had almost no information, and so the focus was on the remaining 12 cases. Five fit best with the self-defense theory. Two additional cases had strong components of self-defense, but were more complicated than simple self-defense and we classified these as *proxy/retaliation*. In these cases the women were in “mutually combative” couples, but were also noted to have numerous prior domestic violence victimizations that may have motivated their anger and violence toward these men they killed. Surprisingly, three cases were most consistent with Daly and Martin’s sexual proprietariness theory, which heretofore has been applied solely to IPHs perpetrated by men. The remaining two IPH cases perpetrated by women did not fit into the other groups (self-defense, proxy/retaliation, and sexual proprietariness), and we could not find another category that adequately described their motivation for the killing.

For the remainder of this section, we describe in more detail these categories of IPH perpetrated by women. But first it is useful to note a pattern regarding the weapons. In the 12 cases, the weapon used was a gun in eight of the cases, and in six of these (gun) cases, the guns belonged to the (male) victims. Guns were used in four of the five self-defense cases, all three of the sexual proprietariness cases, and one of the unclassifiable cases, but neither of the proxy/retaliation cases. Knives were used in one of the self-defense cases and both of the proxy/retaliation cases. The only weapon that was not a gun or knife was a telephone used in one of the two unclassifiable cases.

*IPH cases perpetrated by women, indicating self-defense.* As previously stated, we were able to classify the motivation of the killing in 10 of the cases and half of the cases fit the self-defense classification. One of the women who was an IPH defendant had the charges dropped because the killing was later determined to be self-defense (which also seemed very clear in the file). The man she shot was her ex-husband for whom she had a restraining order and he had broken into her house and she shot him with her own gun. Four additional cases had some overall IPA history, with the man being the abuser and the woman the victim, consistent with self-defense theory. The second self-defense case involved a couple who were both very intoxicated returning from an event to their motel; the man had a gun, had struck her (her face was bloodied), and threatened suicide. They fought for more than 4 hours before the homicide. In the past he had been very violent toward her (including setting her hair on fire at one point), and had made her quit her job because he was jealous of the men she worked with being around her. She shot him in the back of his head with his gun.

The third self-defense case involved a man who had threatened his ex-wife with a gun to her head. On the day of the IPH, he got out knives and a loaded gun, and then they both went drinking at a bar. He punched her in the eye with a closed fist, and was then kicked out of the bar. Other patrons told her not to go home because he was too

dangerous, but she had nowhere else to go. She kept calling home and there was no answer, so she eventually went home, whereupon he told her she was “really going to get it.” He grabbed two knives from the couch; she got his loaded gun from their bedroom, he said “why don’t you go ahead and do it?” He grabbed one of the knives he had, and he kept telling her “do it” (meaning to shoot him). She said she kept telling him to “shut up.” He kept daring her to shoot him, and she claimed she “snapped” and stabbed him in the shoulder area. He died from this wound.

Similarly, the fourth self-defense case involved a 32-year-old man and 28-year-old woman who had been dating for a few months. The man had two prior domestic violence arrests. The woman, a community college student, was described as a “caring mother” who spent “quality time” with her 6-year-old son. The child, prior to the homicide, had told neighbors he “couldn’t play” because his mom’s boyfriend was “angry.” An 11-year-old neighbor later saw the man armed with a gun pushing the woman against the door of the truck they were in and not letting her get out. Her son was next door playing with another child, whose mother described both the man and the woman as intoxicated. She shot her boyfriend in her house, then called 911 and said she had shot him after he gave her his loaded gun. After she called 911, she shot and killed herself.

The fifth self-defense case was one of the most violent cases of self-defense. It involved a 195-pound 23-year-old man with a significant domestic violence history, a “no contact” order in effect, and on probation for a felony conviction for menacing against the woman who later became the homicide offender. In this case, the man had always been very psychologically and verbally abusive with some physical abuse, but the abuse had sharply escalated, becoming far more violent, including very sexually violent, when she was pregnant with their daughter. They were in a three-year relationship and their only child, their daughter, was a year and a half old at the time of the homicide. In addition to extreme physical and sexual abuse of the woman by the man she killed, the man’s stalking and psychological abuse was severe and included threats to kill both the woman and their daughter. On the day of the IPH, the man violated the order to stay away from her and came over to her house and started threatening and verbally and physically abusing her. She got their baby and ran out of their house and he was chasing her so she went to his car to get a gun she knew he kept in it. He slammed her head against the steering wheel ripped a chunk of hair out of her head, and she was yelling for help. She got his gun and threatened to kill herself and he kept saying “why don’t you do it?” (kill yourself). She turned the gun and shot him in the head.

It might appear a little confusing to identify these last two cases as “self-defense” given that the women had their abusers’ weapons and the abusers were daring them to kill them or themselves. However, in reading the file it was clear that these were men who had terrorized these women for years, and it seemed realistic that these men might kill them if they did not kill themselves or the men.

*IPH cases perpetrated by women, indicating proxy/retaliation.* Two of the 10 classifiable cases had some components of self-defense, but also had strong components consistent

with proxy/retaliation, a motive classification for women's use of IPA identified by others (Perilla et al., 2003; Richie, 1996). Richie's study (1996) of incarcerated battered women identified a group of women whose motives for harming male partners employed a process of "projection and association" whereby they committed violent offenses against men other than their batterers, using the new men as "proxies" for the batterers who victimized these women in the past. In short, these women projected onto a new man symbolic retaliation for past abuse by a different man. Similar to Richie's (1996) projection and association, Perilla and colleagues (2003) identified three components to explain IPA perpetrated by women: learning, opportunity, and choice. Women learn about IPA by experiencing it then retaliate for their past victimizations when they encounter opportunities to be abusive toward a new man (who may or may not have abused them). Perilla et al. (2003) conclude that IPA perpetrated by women occurs when learning, opportunity, and choice converge. Taking Richie and Perilla together, we label this motive "proxy/retaliation."

In the current study, of the 10 IPH cases committed by women where we could classify the motive, we classified two as "proxy/retaliation." In both of these proxy/retaliation cases the women had extensive and severe histories of having been abused by previous male partners, and there were other striking similarities, as well. In both cases the women (a) were severely mentally ill (one with bipolar and one with paranoid schizophrenia); (b) had been abusive to male partners in the past; (c) were transients, as were the men they killed (one couple lived with the murder victim's mother and the other lived together in a motel); (d) had serious substance abuse problems; (e) had numerous police encounters (as offenders for vagrancy, public drunkenness, domestic violence, etc.); and (f) were both in their forties.

In the first proxy/retaliation case in our study, the file stated: "She had a history of pulling her knife on her partners either in self-defense or in retaliation for past abuse." In this case, the couple was in an argument in a motel they were staying in and she stabbed him in the heart. The couple in the other (second) case we classified as proxy/retaliation were living with his mother, who had told them they needed to move out because she was tired of them acting "crazy" when they drank too much. Both members of this couple had extensive adult and juvenile criminal records and serious drug problems. The woman in this case had threatened to cut the victim's throat in the past. She stabbed him in the chest and killed him.

*IPH cases perpetrated by women, consistent with sexual proprietariness theory.* Although we focused on IPH cases with women perpetrators and men victims, three of the 10 IPH cases that we were able to classify closely resembled Wilson and Daly's sexual proprietariness theory. There was no domestic violence history found for either the man or the woman in two of these three cases. The first sexual proprietariness case was a homicide-suicide where the couple had been married for 30 years. The woman had just found out her husband had a current 10-year relationship and children with another woman in another city, and shot her husband. When her grown daughter ran upstairs after hearing the gun shot, the woman-perpetrator shot and killed herself in front of this daughter. There was no prior evidence of IPA and no record of domestic violence

arrests, but one of the grown sons said he was always afraid “this would happen” when his mother found out about the other intimate relationship and children.

The second case classified as sexual proprietariness was of a 17-year-old woman who asked her male friends to shoot an 18-year-old man she had very briefly dated and broken up with her. Her motivation to ask her friends to kill him and his new girlfriend was finding out that the new girlfriend (also 17 years old) was pregnant. The perpetrator’s friends described her “obsession” with her former dating partner as a “fatal attraction” (making reference to the Hollywood film) and reported that he had tried to end the relationship numerous times. She had repeatedly threatened to kill the victim over the six months prior to the murders, with such threats as “If I catch you with another bitch I’ll kill you and the bitch you’re with.” She admitted she treated the victim “bad” and “talked down to him,” and had previously assaulted the collateral victim at a night club. She was sentenced to 96 years.

In the third case we classified as sexual proprietariness was unlike the other two cases and those described in previous research in that there was some indication of prior IPA, both by the victim and the offender. The woman had a dismissed domestic violence charge from a relationship with a former husband (not the victim in the IPH). In addition, the woman claimed her victim had threatened her with a gun a couple of weeks before she shot him (but she had not reported it to the police), however, it was finding him in bed with another woman that resulted in the fight where she killed him. There was some evidence that he was quite violent toward her during the encounter where she ultimately killed him with his gun, when she found him in bed with another woman. This couple was in their forties and had been dating for two years at the time of the IPH.

*Two IPH cases perpetrated by women that did not fit in the three categories.* The remaining two cases did not have sufficient information or defied the existing categorizations we used. There was no record of IPA for either of these cases. One of the women had severe Alzheimer’s, and the other had severe depression although the courts found her sane. In the first case, the woman was in her late seventies and killed her husband in his eighties, where they lived at an assisted living facility, by hitting him on the back of his head with a phone during a fight. The doctor said she had Alzheimer’s, “irrational behavior,” and was “incapacitated and incompetent.” She was deemed mentally ill. The other case was described in one of the reports as “out of the blue, where a woman in her mid-twenties shot her husband who was in his early forties. They had started dating when she was in high school (he was a friend of her father’s), had been married three years, and had an infant. The woman was upset about having to leave her baby to go back to work, her mother-in-law living with them, and financial problems. She shot her husband in his sleep, drove her infant to a relative’s, and then turned herself into the police. She was deemed mentally competent by the court psychologists. Although we were not confident in classifying these two cases, it is possible that mental illness was a factor with Alzheimer’s in one and even though the court did not find the second woman mentally incompetent, she appeared to be very seriously depressed.

## Summary and Conclusions

Margo Wilson started the research on IPH and made a profound impact on our understanding of the dynamics behind these killings. Her legacy is not only the immense amount of superb interdisciplinary research she published; her body of work inspired additional research and the implementation of domestic violence fatality review committees. It is our hope that Dr. Wilson would find our application of her work through the DMDVFRC a contribution to the current understanding of IPH, as we are grateful for the trail she blazed.

Our study is an example of practitioner–researcher collaboration, using a convenience sample of 117 IPH cases collected by the DMDVFRC for the period 1991–2009. We presented the research from a gender perspective, asking whether the homicides with a man offender and a woman victim would be more typical of male sexual proprietariness and whether cases with a woman offender and a man victim would be more typical of self-defense. Unfortunately, the quantitative data do not contain the information necessary to examine the former question. For that, we were dependent on the qualitative data. Both the quantitative and the qualitative data, however, contained information on the criminal histories of men and women who became a victim of IPH.

The most predominant quantitative finding was that among both IPH offenders and victims, men had more extensive domestic violence perpetration histories than women. This finding is consistent with existing research showing that prior abuse by the IPH offender toward the victim is often the most important difference between IPHs perpetrated by men and IPHs perpetrated by women (e.g., Block & Christakos, 1995; Farooque et al., 2005; Rosenfeld, 1997; Smith et al., 1998; Vittes & Sorrenson, 2008), and also consistent with prior research reporting the strong likelihood of violent and other prior arrests and convictions among men who are offenders in IPH (Block & Christakos, 1995; Dawson & Gartner, 1998; Dobash & Dobash, 2011; Eke, Hilton, Harris, Rice, & Houghton, 2011; Farooque et al., 2005; Liem & Roberts, 2009; McFarlane et al., 1999; Moracco et al., 1998; Smith et al., 1998). In the IPH cases presented here, men killed by women were more than seven times as likely to have a prior domestic violence conviction, and more than three times as likely to have a prior domestic violence arrest, compared with women killed by men. The quantitative analyses also indicated women's pregnancy as a risk factor of IPH victimization, consistent with prior research (see Burch & Gallop, 2004; McFarlane et al., 2002) and sexual proprietariness. Finally, the quantitative findings indicated that among IPH perpetrators, men are more likely to have a history of making suicide threats in the relationship, which is also consistent with prior IPH research (see e.g., Block & Christakos, 1995; Bossarte et al., 2006; Cohen, Llorente, & Eisdorfer, 1998; Lund & Smorodinsky, 2001).

Now turning to the qualitative findings, we also combed through the paper files of the 13 IPH cases perpetrated by women to determine motivation. (One was too vague to be usable, and two we were unable to classify.) Although we had expected the

primary motivation to be self-defense when we went through these cases, only five of the 12 usable cases was the information consistent with self-defense theory. Indeed, in one of these five cases the women had the charges dropped because the legal system determined she had acted in self-defense. In four more there was a strong history of IPA offenses committed against the woman defendant by the man she killed including at the time she killed him, although all four women were convicted. Consistent with Wolfgang's (1967) classic "victim precipitation" (see Felson & Messner, 1998), two of the four had been dared by the man to kill him.

In addition, the qualitative analysis found two cases consistent with a combination of self-defense and proxy/retaliation, in which a woman has experienced serious IPA victimization in the past, and then becomes abusive to subsequent partners who were also abusive to her (see Perilla et al., 2003; Richie, 1996). Both cases also indicated a pattern of mutual combativeness between the couple.

In three of the 12 IPH cases perpetrated by women, the woman's motive was sexual jealousy. It would seem, therefore, that these women were following the *sexual proprietariness* pattern that Wilson and Daly, and many others have found in men. This last finding is the most surprising, that Wilson and Daly's sexual proprietariness motivation can possibly be applied and expanded to some women who kill their current or former male partners who rejected them (by breaking up and having a new relationship or "cheating" on the women with another woman).

Future research needs to continue to examine the gendered nature of IPHs, but also needs to broaden perspectives through which IPH perpetrated by women may occur. Our findings indicate that improved responses to women abused by their intimate partners will likely save men's as well as women's lives. More specifically, it is reasonable to assume that women who have access to and receive adequate services and support are likely less likely to be in a position of having to kill in self-defense or to kill a future partner as a proxy for a past partner's abuse.

But it is also useful to acknowledge that some women may commit IPH for sexual jealousy and ownership motives, like men who are motivated by sexual proprietariness. Thus, although self-defense can explain many cases of IPH perpetrated by a woman, future research and policy needs to acknowledge the issue/problem that prior victims of IPH may be at risk of killing future partners, especially if these partners are at all abusive, and that sexual proprietary killings of mates are not restricted to men.

It is necessary to address both the difficulty of and need for domestic violence fatality review committees to include a measure of "motivation" for IPH in their codebooks. In their review of male proprietariness theory, Serran and Firestone (2004, p. 5) note the difficulty in this task when measuring sexual proprietariness:

Despite the value of this theory when conceptualizing homicide by male intimate partners, there are a number of constraints. One difficulty in interpreting the research according to the male proprietariness theory results from complications associated with definitions of relevant terms. 'Proprietariness' as a motive

is difficult to measure quantitatively or qualitatively and whether 'jealousy' is deemed to be a motivating force depends to a great extent on the interpretation of the police investigators or the researcher.

Yet, the authors of this article were in complete agreement that three of the 10 woman-perpetrated IPH cases we examined (where we could designate the motivation), were sexual proprietariness (although one appeared to perhaps have had self-defense aspects, as well).

To date, the research on men who perpetrate IPA and IPH has not identified proxy/retaliation as a motive, and perhaps it has not been a motive in these cases. We recommend that IPH research, particularly fatality review committees, attempt to code for motivation (where there is sufficient information), and determine whether categories such as self-defense, sexual proprietariness, proxy/retaliation, and perhaps other categories, can be coded. At the same time it is important to remember that motivation can be challenging. For example, all of the cases of proxy/retaliation had strong components of a history of IPA victimization by the IPH perpetrators, but the homicides were more consistent with "getting even" for these past abuses than with self-defense. It is our hope that the research reported in this article advances the understanding of IPH, particularly those perpetrated by women and contributes to the contexts of IPH that Margo Wilson raised.

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## Notes

1. The *Homicide Studies* website accessed February 6, 2011, with their ranking in the top 10 ever cited in the journal, the following were about IPH: 1. Dugan, Nagin, & Rosenfeld, 1999; 2. McFarlane et al. 1999; 3. Rosenfeld, 1997; 5. Moracco, Runyan, & Butts, 1998; 6. Dawson & Gartner, 1998; and 7. Langford, Isaac, & Kabat, 1998. Notably, the three published in 1998 were from a special issue Jacquelyn Campbell and Carol W. Runyan guest edited on "Femicide."
2. Most of the states and other jurisdictions with DVFRCs also include goals of examining "risk factors" for IPH (including the Denver Metro DVFRC). However, to our knowledge none of them (including Denver Metro DVFRC) collects data on domestic violence cases that are not homicides for comparison. Thus, it is a bit of a methodological stretch to claim the data can do so.
3. An exception is Block & Christakos study of 29 years of IPH Chicago data that found no gender differences in IPHs, but the authors note in this article that Chicago is unique in this finding (1995, p. 517).
4. *National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative*, Funded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice, Grant No. 86604788, www.ndvfri.org.
5. Handbook of Biological Statistics <http://udel.edu/~mcdonald/statfishers.html> downloaded April 29, 2011.

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## Bios

**Joanne Belknap** is a professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado-Boulder. She is the author of numerous articles and the book, now in its third edition, *The Invisible Woman: Gender, Crime, & Justice*. Dr. Belknap is the President-Elect of the American Society of Criminology.

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**Margaret L. Abrams**, a co-founder of the Denver Metro Domestic Violence Fatality Review Committee, has an M.A. in Counseling Psychology, is the Program Director for domestic violence intervention programs at the Denver District Attorney's Office. Ms. Abrams's decades

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**Kelly Anderson-Block** has a master's in Public Affairs with a focus on domestic violence and is the Advocacy Services Manager for the District Attorney's Office in Adams County, Colorado. She is a past Coordinator of the Denver Metro Domestic Violence Fatality Review Committee. Ms. Anderson-Block previously worked as a legal advocate for abused women, co-chaired a county-wide domestic violence task force, and has been a member of the conference committee for Colorado Organization for Victim Assistance.