COMMENT – Language and Reporting Styles for Discussing Violence Against Women

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Violence against women encompasses various forms of abuse, including physical and sexual violence from intimate partners, non-partner sexual assault, rape, and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by individuals outside of romantic relationships. Despite increasing awareness of this issue, the portrayal of this violence in the U.S. mainstream media remains problematic. The media's use of biased language, victim-blaming, and isolation reinforce myths regarding sexual assault, contributing to this concern. Concepts such as hegemonic masculinity and "doing gender" help uncover the social shortcomings that allow this problem to persist. Fortunately, strategies exist for improving how the media reports on violence against women, especially by sharing resources and training stakeholders.

Language is powerful. How people choose their words can impact others tremendously, so paying attention to what you say – and how you say it – is important. With this in mind, I examined recent media publications to see how violence against women is reported. According to World Health Organization (2013), the term "violence against women" refers to a wide range of violent acts, including intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, rape, sexual assault, and other types of sexual assault committed by individuals other than romantic partners. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that 43.6 percent of women (almost 52.2 million individuals) in the United States have at some point been victims of sexual violence (Smith et al., 2018). Also, research links intimate relationship violence and depressive symptoms in women (Devries et al., 2013). Anxiety, fear, depression, sexual dysfunction, substance abuse, and posttraumatic stress disorder are among the most prevalent psychiatric aftereffects of sexual assault (Goodman et al., 1993). Researchers have also found that experiences of rape and physical abuse lead to serious medical issues and are linked to lower self-perception (Goodman et al., 1993).

Violence against women is a pervasive issue that goes beyond just physical attacks; it also includes the use of hurtful words and demeaning language. With this knowledge, we must acknowledge that violence against women is a pervasive societal issue – and the language we use to talk about it should be used to uplift, rather than degrade, survivors. It is important to recognize how the media weaponizes language through reporting styles and uses it to control the narratives and portrayals of victims. Survivors are frequently held responsible, scrutinized, and interrogated while their offenders are shielded and protected. Moreover, media coverage can make it difficult for victims to report assault or seek the help they need.

This essay analyzes the reporting of violence against women in the mainstream U.S. media to consider how journalists frame cases of violence against women and how those reporting styles can be improved. For instance, the media's use of biased language, victim-blaming, and isolation reinforce myths about sexual assault and contribute to problematic reporting. Concepts such as hegemonic masculinity and "doing gender" help uncover the social shortcomings that allow this problem to persist. Fortunately, strategies exist for improving how the media reports on violence against women, such as sharing resources and training stakeholders.

Portraying Violence Against Women

The media has the potential to sway public opinion through its word choices (Boegli, 2020). By framing, which is the process of selecting and emphasizing specific aspects of perceived reality, media can persuade audiences to view certain issues, behaviors, and events in a certain manner while ignoring others (Easteal et al., 2015). There are three major frames when reporting violence against women: (1) The use of detachment and indifference, such as framing domestic violence as instances of simple disputes or as one-off incidents that can easily be fixed (rather than an ongoing societal problem that has led to many deaths). (2) Victim-blaming and isolation, which involve holding women accountable for the violence they experience, making light of it, or implying that the issue is being overblown. (3) Reinforcement of myths regarding rape and sexual assault, which involves focusing heavily on the victim's actions as an explanation for the assault (Easteal et al., 2015).

Among the issues associated with the media's portrayal of violence against women is the debate about what constitutes a "real" victim, particularly in relation to sexual assault and rape. Misconceptions perpetuate the damaging belief that to be taken seriously, one must fit into the narrow mold of a "perfect victim" or experience what is deemed as "real rape." This flawed thinking often leads to victims being labeled as "whores" or "attention-seeking" (Easteal et al., 2015). In addition, the use of the word

"alleged" in cases of violence against women can indicate how society questions the credibility of victims who do not conform to traditional gender roles or norms. In these cases, the validity of survivors' experiences is often called into question, further perpetuating harmful stereotypes and societal expectations (Boegli, 2020). One of the factors that contributes to this harmful mindset is the acceptance of nonconsensual and sexually aggressive behavior in certain environments, such as bars. Researchers found that victims who do not resist, who dress provocatively, or who consume alcohol are often blamed for their own assault as if they "wanted it" (Easteal et al., 2015). These disturbing findings are further supported by a study of college students who had experienced gender-based violence. Researchers discovered that despite experiencing sexual aggression, many college-aged survivors did not consider it as such (Tinkler et al., 2018). This is particularly prevalent in drinking environments, where sexual harassment between young men and women is commonly overlooked. This raises the important question of how different settings can greatly impact the way sexual violence and other forms of violence against women are perceived and treated.

Paying attention to language used by the media helps us understand how violence against women is viewed by the U.S. public. For instance, researchers have studied how often attribution was assigned to or minimized in news stories about sexual assault and found that the way a news article is phrased has a significant impact on how readers perceive the people involved, possibly taking responsibility away from the person who committed the abuse (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2018). Although most reports analyzed in that study used language supporting victims, about 40 percent used words that cast doubt on them (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2018). In another analysis of how sexual harassment is portrayed in the media, 57 percent of the articles surveyed highlighted the perpetrator's account of events (Easteal et al., 2015). Conversely, the lives and achievements of men are seen as something to protect; journalists tend to highlight the perpetrator's accomplishments and athletic success. Journalists may even give the offender a "relatable breadth of character" that readers can empathize with (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2018, p. 8). By presenting the perpetrator in a favorable light, journalists ignore how their actions could potentially affect victims. This phenomenon is connected to "himpathy," a term recently coined but backed by extensive research in psychology and sociology that highlights the disproportionate amount of sympathy given to privileged men accused of sexual assault or harassment (Rogalin & Addison, 2023). Himpathy demonstrates the societal tendency to excuse male perpetrators and shift blame onto the victims, taking sympathy away from survivors and putting it toward their male victimizers (Rogalin & Addison, 2023).

Research also reveals the damaging effects of masculine language styles in legal settings. This "reality" has allowed victim blaming to turn the stories of victims against them (Easteal et al., 2012). In the courtroom, the use of language can play a crucial role in the outcome of sexual assault cases. Unfortunately, the manipulation of language often shifts the focus onto the victim's actions rather than holding the perpetrator accountable for their crimes. This perpetuates a harmful narrative that places blame and responsibility on the victim, making it easier for the courts to dismiss their cases or hand out lighter sentences. The implicit biases embedded within language can also sway the perceptions of those involved, leading to a lack of justice for survivors of sexual assault (Boegli, 2020). According to Patricia Easteal, Lorana Bartels, and Sally Bradford (2012), "men have created the legal world in their own image, confusing it with the absolute truth" (p. 325). Despite strides towards gender equality, the fact that the judicial system was once a male-dominated institution remains a hindrance. Since the "voice" of the law is male, there is the possibility that how victims experience and interpret violence does not match social and legal definitions (Easteal et al., 2012).

Two sociological concepts provide insight into why violence against women is depicted the way it is: Hegemonic masculinity and "doing gender". Hegemonic masculinity theory relates to the ideal version of masculinity, which upholds masculine superiority and contributes to the dominance of men and the subordination of women. This may explain why issues impacting women are not seen as important in our society and are often tossed aside. According to researchers, masculinity requires "doing gender," which means continuously proving and seeking validation of one's manhood (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). When men's masculinity is questioned, they may engage in aggressive behavior, alcohol abuse, objectification of women, and sexual pursuits to look more manly (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). Due to the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity and "doing gender," men are often excused on the grounds that they are men and cannot control themselves.

Improving Media Coverage

Despite these challenges, some journalists and media organizations are adopting strategies to improve how violence against women is reported. Providing resources to journalists that promote fair representation of survivors, for instance, is a tactic being used in Australia. The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (now known as the Australian Institute of Family Studies) developed a website that includes examples of media reports that perpetuate misconceptions and provides information about support services and additional online resources (see Australian Government, n.d.). The Centre provides journalists with access to statistics, information about the impact of sexual assault, and

guidance on language use. By equipping journalists with accurate information that challenges harmful stereotypes, this tactic may begin to shift the narrative surrounding violence against women.

Another approach is the creation of specific guidelines for reporting on violence against women that encourage objective reporting. The International Federation of Journalists – the largest organization of journalists globally, with a representation of 600,000 media professionals from 187 trade unions and associations in over 140 countries – recognizes the importance of this. In line with their objective to promote gender equality in all aspects, the organization developed *10 Guidelines for Reporting on Violence Against Women*. The guidelines include accurately identifying violence against women using the internationally accepted definition in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. These guidelines also emphasize the importance of using non-judgmental language and sensitive reporting, ensuring that media interviews are conducted with the needs of the survivor in mind, treating survivors with respect, telling the entire story, and providing statistical and social background information (International Federation of Journalists, 2014). By adhering to these guidelines, journalists can play a crucial role in raising awareness and advocating for the rights of women who have been victims of violence.

Lastly, training for members of the media and law enforcement – including teaching them how to talk about sexual violence – can foster more accurate media reporting. End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI) is an organization that implements this strategy. This program was created in 2003 after Sergeant Joanne Archambault of the San Diego Police Department in California noticed professionals lacked the resources and training necessary to investigate sexual assault and domestic violence (End Violence Against Women International, n.d.). Indeed, research demonstrates that law enforcement officials (and specifically police officers) think false accusation rates are higher than they actually are (McMillan, 2016). Based on these findings, there seems to be a systemic problem surrounding police organizational culture; officers' attitudes about victims reflect broader negative social views (McMillan, 2016). Thus, it is necessary to have organizations like EVAWI to provide a setting where state officials and advocates can collaborate to effectively assist victims. "We specialize in trauma-informed law enforcement responses – from the first interaction with a victim through the investigation and potential prosecution," notes EVAWI (End Violence Against Women International, n.d.). "Positive outcomes for survivors require everyone working together, so we also champion collaborative practices, with multidisciplinary training for health care providers, prosecutors, advocates, and others who respond to survivors."

Conclusion

Despite the increasing awareness of violence against women, there is not enough attention to the role of language in stigmatizing survivors and impeding justice. It is only recently that researchers have begun to investigate the specific language used when discussing violence against women, and their findings point out shortcomings with existing media strategies. The development of informational resources and training programs are an important first step in educating the media and law enforcement on the realities of violence against women, including how to accurately talk about it. I'd like to see this go farther, such as having credentials that journalists can earn (or lose) for reporting instances of violence against women. More awareness of hegemonic masculinity and "doing gender" needs to also happen – not only in newsrooms and police stations, but in public schools and other social spaces. Organizations that facilitate collaboration between survivors of violence and journalists might also help ensure that victims' stories are accurately and ethically portrayed.

It is important for the media to take responsibility for the power they hold and use it to accurately report on violence against women without perpetuating harmful narratives and stereotypes. Mainstream media outlets are the primary source of information about sexual assault in one's community, granting journalists a significant amount of power in shaping our understanding and perception of these sensitive issues (Boegli, 2020). The media can therefore play a crucial role in raising awareness, promoting understanding and empathy, and ultimately creating a safer and more inclusive society. The way that victims of violence are portrayed in the media needs to change.

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