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It’s All in the Words: Determining the Relationship between Newspaper Portrayal of Rape Victims and Reader Responses

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Abstract

In order to better understand the effect newspaper portrayal has on reader opinion, it is necessary to explore news framing and structure. This study investigated the relationship between newspaper portrayal, or framing, of rape cases and how that portrayal influences reader response and perception. To determine reader response, participants were asked to read one of three vignettes, each describing a rape with either a positive or negative description of the victim or assailant. This was followed by eight questions testing four factors: blame, responsibility, control and accountability. The results from the four factors illustrate the responses readers had for the story depending on the frame for the victim and the assailant. Ultimately, this study shows that portrayal does change reader response towards the victim and the assailant depending on the frame.

Introduction

Portrayal and description are part of the framing techniques used in news media. While news media must give all the facts in rape cases, an intentional news frame can have significant consequences on how readers perceive issues (Shen 401-402). A news frame is a structured description and portrayal of an event, which is created by the media with the intention of giving meanings to and shaping messages (Shen 400). This means that if a story is framed, the media has shaped the message, potentially changing the aspect or intent of the story. In rape cases, a frame that describes the victim unfavorably may cause readers to respond negatively toward the victim.

The purpose of this study therefore intends to determine if there is a relationship between newspaper portrayal of rape victims and readers response. When it comes to framing rape cases, newspapers must not only give all the facts for the story, but also portray the victim and assailant accurately. Framing becomes an issue because readers respond to the printed portrayal of the victim and assailant. If news media routinely portray rape victims negatively, it can results in readers misplacing blame and fault in the situation.

In reference for this study, rape is defined as a sexual violation, usually violent in nature and is committed against women. This study only examines women as the victim. Sexual violence includes unwanted sexual advances such as verbal, coercive, physical and sexual events (Young 41). The victim is defined as the woman claiming rape. Finally, the assailant is the person who is suspected of committing the rape.
To determine reader response, four factors, or variables, are tested: blame, responsibility, control and accountability. Through these factors, reader response is illustrated as these variables combine to show fault in the situation. Identifying a rape victim within a news frame associates her with a violent crime. Amy Wang explains that past newspaper portrayals of a rape victim caused one victim to become a gossip item rather than a true victim; reports on her numerous affairs caused a morality debate over whether or not she deserved her fate (12). When personal information becomes available, the news frame may reflect the impression that the victim said or did something to deserve the rape, resulting in readers attacking her character.

This research is important because it will show how framing in rape cases can change readers’ opinions of the victim. This change occurs more often when the frame interacts with a reader’s existing perceptions (Shen 402). When the frame includes a negative description of the victim, the more likely it becomes that reader opinion will also be negatively affected. This effect is that the reader no longer perceives the victim as a victim, but rather that she lied about being raped, secretly enjoyed it, or even “asked” for it (Buddie 140); the reader believes the victim is at fault and becomes the target of scrutiny.

These results are beneficial in learning how to give a balanced and representative coverage of rape in newspapers to inform the public about the issue (Berrington 318). In addition to this, rape stigmatization can be dispelled once it is understood how negative stereotypes and perceptions of victims and rape form and change (Nagel 735). The effects of news framing on reader response will allow for an understanding of how to accurately portray a rape case without misplacing fault.

**Review of Literature**

In order to further discuss news framing in the sense of rape cases, first framing must be discussed, and then previous studies determining the relationship between newspaper portrayal of rape victims and reader opinion must be examined. Newspaper framing and portrayal of rape cases can be influential in causing a reader to perceive the victim and the assailant in different ways. This means that it is the portrayal, not just the facts of the case that determine how a reader reacts to the parties involved. These portrayals can lead to reader bias for either the victim or the assailant; hence newspaper portrayal should accurately describe both parties to avoid inaccurate perception.

News frames suggest how readers should view events and issues; reporters frame news through a process of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration which results in narrowing the frame and thereby narrowing readers’ views of those events and issues (Hendrickson 39). The selection of certain facts and excluding other information creates a frame that impacts public opinion and reader interpretations of issues and events (Shen 400). Framing therefore is the process of selecting information in order to define issues for readers, rather than relying on a more detached model of journalism (Aday 769).

Newspaper portrayal of rape victims can lead to different perceptions of the event in the way that they are framed. Societal beliefs that men are supposed to be aggressive, while women are to be passive are furthered by media representations; according to Basile, “sexual attitudes, behavior, and expectations are also learned, and this dichotomy of male/female behavior is reproduced in the media, with books, movies and television programs that romantically depict these scripted relationships between the sexes” (1041).

There are many aspects journalists need to consider when reporting rape victims, such as truth telling responsibilities, keeping professional standards, whether or not the right intentions are behind the story, and if the story will cause harm (Brislin 213-214). It is not only the legal liability that determines the structure of the story, but also from the need to sell papers: “For example, decisions about what to include on local television broadcasts emerged from an intersection of traditional news values and a need to earn profits in competitive industry” (Worthington 12).

News framing for the purpose of selling a story ultimately shapes reader response. In a study conducted by Nancy Worthington, she concluded that “the framing of the nine stories about campus sexual assault scandal demonstrates how journalistic and market priorities often intersected to create constraints” (8). Her study shows that framing can often limit how much information a news source will or can use; in rape cases this become influential because those constraints may lead a reader to a perception that was unintended. The media indeed influences perceptions of society in the ways that certain themes, such as rape are depicted, while other themes are marginalized (7). It is through these representations of women and sexual violence that negative views of women are constructed and reinforced (Berrington 309).

The problem with newspaper portrayal of rape victims continues in that “reporters may construct accurate and...sound articles but still miss the point of the event, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and public misunderstanding” (Byerly 62). In addition, crime victims faced social stigma caused partly by the perception “that victims did or said something that in some sense contributed to their being harmed” (Johnson 209). These constructed views of women lead to reader perception that she herself is the cause of the harm; her behavior was the reason she was raped.
Specific discourse used to describe events is the basis for news framing. Rape depictions in media show that the specific “rape discourse in news often suggests that such crimes are culturally appropriate gender behavior, often precipitated by female provocation” (Worthington 6). Careful consideration must be placed on discourse when framing a story. The meaning of words and language is highly influential when describing a rape case. According to Berrington, language is central in defining violence and cannot be underestimated; the need to be critical of the language describing male violence against women because the male perpetrator remains hidden, and the language fails to identify the consequence of violence and oppression for women (308).

Newspapers, as a medium for public information, must make sure the public understands the situation in a rape case, and avoid inaccurate portrayals. When newspapers print victims’ names, there is often a negative stigma associated with the crime, where blame is placed on the victim (Lake 111). The personalization of naming the victim only increases the focus on behavior and past experience and suggests that “some are ‘innocent victims’ while others precipitated their own attacks through their choice of attire or behavior” (Worthington 8). These two instances illustrate that newspapers must be critical in framing stories in order to avoid misunderstandings about the victim.

Much of the perception comes from previous false beliefs about rape and rape victims. The beliefs become accepted rape myths, where “a victim is blamed more for her victimization when she has had previous sexual experiences, which seems related to the stereotype that certain types of women ‘ask for it’ by being promiscuous,” (Buddie 140). The suggestion by journalists that women provoke rape by dressing or behaving in certain ways illustrates that the organizational constraints and journalistic values interact with each other, causing news that perpetuates rape myths, instead of eliminating them (Worthington 6). These false beliefs are significant because if readers believe rape myths, and newspapers highlight promiscuity or unacceptable behavior, can result in readers perceiving the victim inaccurately.

Even while “feminists have insisted on dismantling the categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ victims that have dominated common sense (and media) definitions of crime” (Cuklanz 308), it is the description of the victim’s history that influences the story and the consequent perception. “Women who reject patriarchal norms around ‘appropriate behavior;’ find themselves blamed if they become victims of male violence. By stepping outside their prescribed role, they place themselves at risk” (Berrington 309); their move outside social or feminine “norms” are the root cause of their victimization (309).

Readers tend to view rape cases based on circumstances, and “in conceptualization, it also seemed likely that the form of victim identification would affect readers’ views” (Johnson 68). The result from these different depictions is that readers don’t have any consistent negative or positive opinions of rape victims, since reader perception is based on how newspapers portray individual victims. However in a study examining ten rape cases, “the nature of media coverage of rape cases that occurred between 1980 and 1996 blamed the victims for the rape more often than the offender” (Ardovini-Brooker 13). This is mostly because newspapers depict female victims “in extremely negative terms: as sexually available, not respectable and not believable” (Los 309). So even while stories may be constructed based on individual circumstances, blame is more often placed on the victim rather than the perpetrator.

Newspaper portrayal of rape victims should be more consistent and depict the case without causing undue and unnecessary harm to the victim. News representations of rape victims should refrain from portraying the victim as though she were to blame for her attack. This is not to say that the perpetrator should be depicted as a monster, but that news stories should be accurate and fair in the portrayal of both parties. “Individual journalists may find opportunities to exercise agency in ways that can produce progressive news representations” (Worthington 12); being progressive and avoiding framing that causes the victim harm can still accomplish a fair and accurate story.

**Method Participants**

Participants consisted of 127 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in summer session courses at a mid-sized northeastern college. The classes were randomly chosen core requirement courses. This convenient sample was selected because it gave a broader participant base which allowed for a wider sampling of media consumers.

**Design**

An experimental survey design allows for the survey to have specific parameters and to limit readers’ responses. The survey was comprised of three separate vignettes with eight questions responding to the vignettes. Half of the questions test responses for the victim, and the remaining questions test responses for the assailant. The responses were coded using a Likert-scaled with degrees of “Not at all,” “Very little,” “Somewhat,” and “Very much.” For each vignette four factors were tested: blame, responsibility, control and accountability.

The first vignette is the control variable describing the events of the rape and supplying relevant and balances information about the victim and assailant. Only facts from the rape and some character
quotes were included. This control focuses on the actions and outcome, instead of the two people involved. The second vignette only has unfavorable descriptions of the victim. This vignette discredits the victim by making her appear provocative; according to one study, credible rape victims appeared clearly upset (Buddie 143), rather than calm and in control of her emotions. Finally, the third vignette has an unfavorable description of the assailant. The victim is described more favorably than in the second vignette. The negative description and portrayal of the assailant indicates that he already has a violent history and makes the victim appear even more innocent in the situation.

These vignettes are used to evaluate how rape differs in attributions of blame and responsibility (Simonson) according to reader response. Additionally, this study evaluates control and accountability in the situation. The vignettes are coupled with eight questions and are called Survey 1, Survey 2, and Survey 3. The questions for each survey remained the same, regardless of the vignette being used.

Procedure
Surveys were distributed, with permission from the class professor, to students at either the beginning or end of class time. After informing students that the survey was voluntary and confidential, informed consent was obtained by students’ willingness to take the survey. Participants were told that the study involved news portrayal of rape and how readers respond to the portrayal. They were asked to read the vignette and answer the eight questions that followed. Each class had only one of the three surveys distributed; participants only saw one survey. Once participants completed the surveys, they were collected.

Results
Survey 1
The victim has a 59% “Not at all” blame score, while the assailant has a 61.5% “Very much” blame score. The victim’s responsibility scores sloped down from 46.2% (Not at all), 33.3% (Very little), 12.8% (Somewhat), and 7.7% (Very much). The assailant however, has a 69.2% “Very much” responsibility score, which is more clearly defined. Only 15.4% of the readers feel the victim had no control over the situation. Continuing, the victim has scores of 46.2% (Very little), and 35.9% (Somewhat) for control. The assailant has a 73.7% “Very much” control score. The assailant has an 88.1% “Very much” score for accountability, and 44.7% indicated the victim was “Not at all” accountable for her actions. The scores continue with a downward trend of 23.7% “Very little,” 18.4% “Somewhat,” and 13.2% “Very much” (13.2%) scores.

Survey 2
The results for Survey 2 are spread out across all four values. The first factor, blame, has a 31% “Very little,” and a 42.9% “Somewhat” blame score for the victim and only 16.7% “Not at all”. The assailant has a similar “Somewhat” responsibility score of 48.8%, although the “Very little” score of 14.6% is much lower. The responsibility score peaks and dips for the victim moving from 26.2% (Not at all), down to 16.7% (Very little), up towards 47.6% (Somewhat), and then back down to 9.5% (Very much). Once again, the assailant’s responsibility score is 45% “Somewhat,” but only 32.5% “Very much.” The control factor for the victim is focused in the middle values with 33.3% “Very much” and a 42.9% “Somewhat” score. Meanwhile the assailant has scores focused on the last two values, “Somewhat” (34.1%) and “Very much” (53.7%). The accountability factor for the victim is focused on the final two values with 39% “Somewhat” and 26.8% “Very much” score. The assailant’s score is also focused on the last two values of “Somewhat” (28.2%) and “Very much” (53.8%).

Survey 3
Results for Survey 3 have mostly opposing scores for victim and assailant. The blame score for the victim is 62.2% “Not at all,” but also has a 20% “Somewhat” score. The assailant has a similar “Somewhat” score (20.5%), but a 77.3% “Very much” score. Continuing with responsibility, the victim had a 68.9% “Not at all” score, while the “Somewhat” and “Very much” scores for the assailant were exactly the same (20.5% and 77.3%). The victim’s scores for control are closer towards the middle values with 44.4% “Very little” and 28.9% “Somewhat.” The assailant however, has a high “Very much” score (65.9%) for the control factor. Finally, the accountability scores show the most opposing scores for victim and assailant with 64.4% “Not at all” for the victim, and 88.6% “Very much” for the assailant.

Discussion Overview
These results show that while readers felt the assailant was overall at fault in each vignette, the portrayal, or news frame, changed the degree each of the four factors were chosen. This is true not only for the victim but the assailant as well. By first looking at each survey individually and then in comparison to one another, the connection between news frame and reader response becomes clear.

Survey 1
Survey 1 is the control survey, and as such is balanced in favor for victim and assailant. More than half believe the victim should not be blamed, and even more believe the assailant should be blamed. None of the responses indicate the assailant to be blame-free, further showing that readers believe the assailant to be at fault, rather than the victim. Responsibility is slightly different however, in that there is a staggered score for the victim, and a more clearly divided score for the assailant. Responsibility is a more difficult measure in rape cases, since readers indicate that the victim, although not to blame, shares some part of the
responsibility. The results for the control factor are similar to responsibility in that there is a clearly defined one-sided score for the assailant, and a more varied victim score. Readers feel the victim had some degree of control over what happened, even if only a small degree; the victim could have done something to avoid being raped. Responsibility and accountability scores for the victim are similar which implies that readers associate these two values with one another.

Survey 2
Survey 2 is more favorable in description for the assailant and discredits the victim. One noticeable aspect was that for each factor, the scores for both victim and assailant fell more towards the middle values of “Very little” and “Somewhat” rather than the opposing “Not at all” and “Very much” values. Reader response therefore indicates that both the victim and assailant are equally blamed; the victim is as much to blame as the assailant. Responsibility also has similar scores for both the victim and the assailant; there is an equal amount of responsibility for both victim and assailant.

Results for the control factor again illustrate a significant indication that the victim had control in the situation. Responses for the victim fell in the “Very little” and “Somewhat” values, with a higher “Very much” score compared to Survey 1. Readers believe the victim had a significant degree of control over the situation.

Survey 3
Survey 3 was written to show a clear bias against the assailant. Subsequently, the results show a polar difference in the scores for the victim and assailant. The portrayal is therefore influential in that reader response reflects a clear bias between the victim and assailant. More than half the readers feel that the victim should not be blamed at all, and more than three quarters felt the assailant was very much to blame. More than half the readers feel the assailant was very much in control, but the victim placed herself in the situation and therefore had some degree, even if a very small degree, of control. The majority of readers feel that the victim should not be held accountable for her actions. While the victim is not blamed, responsible or held accountable, readers feel as though she was able to control the situation.

Reader Comments
Throughout the survey period, comments that had been written or stated verbally about the surveys were examined. Some of these comments were directed at the vignette itself, while other focused on the questions. Most comments pertained to there not being enough information included about what had truly happened to make judgments. The comments that were left mostly pertained to the assailant’s role, indicating that there was enough information to make a decision and judgment for the victim, but not for the assailant; if more information were available, the answers may change. More information could change the reader’s response in either direction for this survey.

The control factor had the most varied responses however. Regardless of the situation, readers felt the victim had some degree of control. The description each time placed the victim voluntarily at the party where the rape occurred, indicating that she chose to be at that location. While she may not have had direct control over the assailant, she could have avoided the situation, being at the party, and therefore have avoided the outcome.

Conclusion
The results of this survey indicate that newspaper portrayal, or framing, of rape cases does affect reader response. In each survey, the assailant continuously had a higher rate of blame, responsibility, control and accountability. However, response was still affected by the portrayal as reflected through the diverse victim scores. When the victim was portrayed negatively, her scores were higher for each of the four factors in comparison to the control survey. The same is true for the assailant; his scores were also higher when he was portrayed negatively in comparison to the control survey. These results are consistent with previous studies stating portrayal and framing influence reader response. News framing is effective in being able to persuade readers to respond in different ways. In rape cases, the framing should reflect the material facts of the case. The control survey had the most readers responding that they needed more information in order to make a decision; an unbiased frame allows media to further investigate and provide evidence on rape cases.

Newspaper portrayal of rape victims does affect reader response. Being able to understand how the framing of a story causes the response will help to more accurately describe a story without misplacing fault. Accurate and unbiased stories are more effective because they engage readers to prompt for more information before making blanket judgments on the situation. This study can be furthered by breaking down participants into more specific groups such as gender, and age. Also, making the vignettes more closely aligned to each other and focusing on specific words instead of adding additional information for each one will further show the nuances of framing and portrayal.
**Works Cited**


