

Incorporating Intersectionality into Intimate Partner Violence Research

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This paper explores the existing research regarding intimate partner violence myths in a variety of forms of media (magazines, news stories, and reader comments to online news stories), identifies major problems within the body of research, and makes suggestions about how to improve this area of study. Intersectionality is a somewhat new movement in teaching and research circles surrounding questions of difference and inequality, such as sociology and women's studies. This perspective would enhance any sociological research, and it is the primary improvement proposed in this paper. The current body of research ignores many of the most salient social identities, including sexual orientation and ability. In doing so, the academic community is not recognizing or validating the experiences of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) population or people with disabilities. In studying the media's use of intimate partner violence myths, the researchers themselves are perpetuating the myths by not complicating their reading of the media artifacts they studied.

Of all the problems raised in the conversation about media coverage of intimate partner violence, the most pressing is the lack of specificity in the conversation. Current research focused on different marginalized groups and how this issue affected them in relatively general ways. If they had all designed their research around a context of interlocking systems of privilege and oppression, they may have been able to achieve greater depth in their analyses of various media artifacts. Intersectionality provides this context, as it is a way of conducting research, teaching, and/or seeing the world that views people for their entire social identities, which are made up of these interlocking systems of privilege and oppression. These systems are constantly working together to privilege some and oppress others, and it is difficult to gain proper understanding of the world without this perspective. Media scholars studying the media's usage of, and impact on, intimate partner violence myths should incorporate more intersectionality into their work. These myths have different effects on different groups of people based on their social locations; while these effects can be either positive or negative for particular groups, they are always harmful to society at large.

Media portrayals of intimate partner violence tend to rely on myths about intimate partner violence, which can be defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs, prejudices or stereotypes about" intimate partner violence, perpetrators of that violence, and victims of that violence (O'Hara, 2012, p. 247). In the media, if a rape case conforms to rape myths, the perpetrators are typically described as predators, sick, evil, sociopaths, monsters, devil, beasts, or

fiends (O'Hara, 2012, p. 251). When the rape does not conform to rape myths, the media typically attacks the victim and builds up the perpetrator(s) (O'Hara, 2012, p. 252). In the academic community and the nonprofit sector-serving survivors, domestic violence is understood as a pattern of behavior in a relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner (Besse, 2012). Sexual assault, stalking, and domestic violence are all part of the umbrella term, "intimate partner violence" (Besse, 2012). Many men, women, and children experience domestic violence in the U.S. and worldwide, though reported statistics lead many to believe women and children experience it more frequently, and perpetrators appear to be mostly men (Besse, 2012). Media portrayals do not typically adhere to the academic definition of domestic violence or seek out authorities on the subject.

Other studies of media portrayals of intimate partner violence myths found similar, and equally problematic, results. In her study of media portrayals of black athletes' violence, Suzanne Enck-Wanzer, a professor and scholar of communication and women's studies at University of North Texas, found that "mass-mediated reports frequently excuse intimate abuse as an aberration of masculinity-under-pressure coupled with predictable...black rage" (2009, p. 6). This racist intimate partner violence myth was perpetuated across various media outlets, and *Sports Illustrated* seemed to make these types of claims all too frequently (Enck-Wanzer, 2009, p. 7). In a study about domestic violence in men's and women's magazines, Dr. Pamela Hill Nettleton, a professor and scholar in journalism and media studies at Marquette University, identified four major themes in domestic violence myths on which those magazines relied: "women are responsible for preventing the violence of men and men cannot help themselves"; "domestic violence is terrifying to women and amusing to men"; "statistics are distorted to implicate men and overlook the violence of women"; and, "the only way to prevent domestic violence is to separate victims from abusers (and it is the victim's responsibility to do this)" (Nettleton, 2011, p. 140). It is especially harmful for the media to subscribe to and perpetuate myths about intimate partner violence because of the significant power the media holds over public opinion.

Media's perpetuation of myths about intimate partner violence has varying effects on different privileged and/or oppressed groups. For example, Heather Hensman Kettrey, a sociological scholar at Vanderbilt University, discovered the following reader letter in a 1968 issue of *Playboy*:

A white woman is more likely to be raped by a white man than by a Negro, but Negroes are executed for the rape of white women exactly nine times more frequently than whites. Furthermore, the rapist of a Negro woman, whether he is white or Negro, is virtually never executed. (Kettrey, 2013, p. 986)

This reader is refuting the rape myth that determines black men are more likely to be rapists, while also highlighting one of the tragic consequences of this myth: "the notion that a Black woman cannot be raped" (Kettrey, 2013, p. 986). This is rooted in the stereotype that black men and women are hypersexual and the myth that rape is related to the sexual appetite of the perpetrator and/or victim. The reader utilizes the magazine's reader feedback section to call attention to the problems with adherence to such myths about intimate partner violence. This is a positive example of the presence of these myths in the media, and the reader uses an

intersectional lens to address the myth, perhaps without even realizing it. Unfortunately, this is not the way this myth appears in other forms of media.

Sometimes, the myth is never actually stated, and it is left to the researcher to find what is missing from media narratives. Based on content analysis and statistics about domestic violence, Enck-Wanzer (2009) inferred the following:

Black women...are kept doubly quiet: not only can they not speak out about their own abuse due to pervasive sexist expectations of supporting men, but they cannot 'out' black men for patterns of abuse for fear of perpetuating racist expectations of black masculinity. (p. 14)

These examples imply that black women feel a deeper sense of shame and humiliation when experiencing intimate partner violence. They fear coming forward if the perpetrator is black because they would be reifying long-held racist stereotypes, and they fear coming forward if the perpetrator is white because they would be subjected to such racist stereotypes. While all victims are at risk for experiencing further victimization from law enforcement if they report intimate partner violence (Besse, 2012), black women are at greater risk due to institutionalized racism and sexism.

This myth also seems to appear in the media's response to the gang rape in Cleveland, TX, but Shannon O'Hara (2012) did not notice or address it. In this case, an eleven-year-old girl was gang-raped up to four times (O'Hara, 2012, p. 249), but most of the articles addressed how the assaults impacted the community and/or the families of the rapists, rather than discussing how four gang rapes impacted the eleven-year-old child (O'Hara, 2012, p. 252). If the victim's race was not white, the media's response makes more sense. Consciously or not, the reporters involved in this case may have believed a woman of color cannot be raped, and their belief in this harmful stereotype affected the way they reported the rape of a child of color. It is irresponsible of the researcher not to consider this possibility, especially when looking at the otherwise horrific aspects of the case that reporters may have accepted more easily if the victim was white.

The nature of some forms of oppression lead people to believe that those from certain marginalized groups are not capable of intimate partner of violence. When studying readers' commented responses to online news stories about intimate partner violence in late life, "many assumed that prior to the incidents, the couples had healthy relationships...coexisted peacefully...and enjoyed life together" (Brossoie, Roberto, and Barrow, 2012, p. 797). Readers may have lacked knowledge of intimate partner violence as a pattern of behaviors within a cycle (Besse, 2012), or they may have struggled to picture elderly people as potential perpetrators of intimate partner violence. Furthermore, "Only 22 (6.5%) comments included statements that patently blamed the perpetrator for the violence" (Brossoie et al., 2012, p. 798). Whether readers were prejudiced, ignorant, or simply refused to believe intimate partner violence is a lifelong risk was not clear in the article. With so few people attributing blame where it belonged, it is important for researchers to consider the reasons for this using all possible strategies for analysis, including an intersectional lens. Readers' reluctance to believe that elderly people were capable

of intimate partner violence is likely tied to both ageist and ableist stereotypes, considering that people are more likely to experience disabilities as they age.

While some disabilities may render a person incapable of violence, there are many forms of abuse that do not require physical violence (Besse, 2012). Financial abuse (controlling money and a victim's access to money) is common among elderly populations, and emotional abuse can be just as harmful as, if not more harmful than, physical abuse (Besse, 2012). As perpetrators, people with disabilities and elderly people may be assumed incapable of perpetrating intimate partner violence, but as victims, they are often at greater risk of experiencing abuse, and they often have limited options for seeking help. One way to encourage an understanding of the elderly and people with disabilities as potential perpetrators or victims of intimate partner violence is for the media to include these types of incidents in their news reporting. They do not conform to myths about intimate partner violence, and greater awareness of these types of incidents can then decrease belief in intimate partner violence myths. These populations are also often ignored in the research community, except in specialized journals.

In men and women's magazines, gendered roles and stereotypes informed their narratives about intimate partner violence. Men's magazines dismissed domestic violence as a response to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a natural (and unproblematic) expression of masculinity, or even somewhat humorous (Nettleton, 2011, p. 148-149). By incorporating medical and biological narratives, the magazines normalized socialized behaviors and attitudes. Masculinity is a social construction, not a genetic code. As a set of behaviors that are taught and learned, masculinity norms can be changed, and do change, across time and culture. They do not provide a viable excuse for perpetrating intimate partner violence, though they do contribute to rape culture. While PTSD may become violent, it does not account for a pattern of behaviors that may have started prior to the abuser's traumatic incident, and it indicates a need for mental health counseling. In this way, men's magazines perpetuate the myth that abusers must be mentally ill in some way, when the majority are actually relatively normal people to all but their intimate partners (Besse, 2012).

Throughout the magazine narratives, women were often held accountable for men's violence against them (Nettleton, 2011, p. 140), and they were expected to take sole ownership of the movement to end intimate partner violence (Nettleton, 2011, p. 153), even though children and adults of all genders experience intimate partner violence (Besse, 2012). By relying on these gendered stereotypes about intimate partner violence, it is normalized, and the roots of the problem remain hidden. Non-normative experiences of intimate partner violence, such as male rape victims, are marginalized and ignored, and the narrative around intimate partner violence becomes very one-sided. Additionally, no researcher in the present study addressed whether their media artifacts promoted heterosexist models of intimate partner violence, which indicates that their artifacts probably all did treat intimate partner violence as a problem that only affects heterosexual couples, and they, too, overlooked the variation in this identity category.

These myths can have positive or negative effects for particular people based on what kinds of privilege and oppression they experience. Elderly people and people with disabilities were more likely to be excused from responsibility for intimate partner violence (Brossoie et al., 2012, p.

797-798). In this way, they experienced a positive effect of the media's reliance on intimate partner violence myths because they manage to escape responsibility for their actions. Their experiences as potential victims of intimate partner violence, however, were also largely ignored, considering that many of the victims in the study were also elderly and may have had disabilities, an egregiously negative effect. According to Nettleton (2011), the media tends to excuse men from responsibility for violence against women (p. 153), and narratives about abusive black athletes tend to implicate racialized hypermasculinity, while allowing white men to avoid scrutiny (Enck-Wanzer, 2009, p. 3); however, this means that black men are blamed for a problem in which all men are stakeholders. In shifting responsibility away from men, women are expected to foresee, prevent, and end men's violence against them (Nettleton, 2011, p. 153; Ryan, Anastario, and DaCunha, 2006, p. 212). The reliance on these types of myths can also erase men's experiences of intimate partner violence. As discussed previously, women of color experience specific types of oppression that can lead them to choose not to report intimate partner violence, sometimes because they do not want to perpetuate race-based intimate partner violence myths, and ignoring their experience only perpetuates these myths further and encourages women of color to remain silent. One of the most grievous affronts of the media and media researchers is that the experience of the LGBTQ population is absent from the conversation altogether.

An intersectional lens does not ask that a researcher always include every possible identity category, as this would be exhaustive for all involved. It does require that important intersections of privilege and oppression not be overlooked. None of the researchers in the present study addressed intimate partner violence in non-heterosexual couples, which may have had more to do with the artifacts they analyzed. Although the media artifacts may not have included this identity category, it is entirely relevant to intimate partner violence, and it is curious why the media is not addressing this topic. People of all genders are at risk of experiencing intimate partner violence, yet most researchers treated it as a problem experienced within a gender binary, and many did not address male victims of intimate partner violence at all. Current research questions why the experiences of some are privileged within the news media, but they cannot do so fully if they are not using an intersectional perspective. This perspective allows media scholars to determine categories most salient to their research, but it can be irresponsible to overlook categories like race, sexual orientation, citizenship, and disability in favor of a singularly gendered lens. People are not defined solely by their genders, and the intersections of privilege and oppression they experience directly affect their experiences in institutions like the criminal justice system. Until research on these issues has a more specific, intersectional focus, the media will continue to get away with perpetuating intimate partner violence myths. Researchers must expose the way those myths impact various groups of people in specifically varied ways if there is any hope for the media to adopt a more neutral narrative.

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