

Reporting of Sex Crimes in The Media: How The UK Daily Mail Endorses Rape Myths

メディアにおける性犯罪に関する報道：レイプ事件に関する大衆の思い込みをいかにイギリスデイリーメールは裏書きしたか

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how one UK tabloid newspaper, the Daily Mail, linguistically perpetuates rape myths in the reporting of sex crimes against women. Two frameworks, Halliday's model of transitivity and a naming analysis, are applied to a detailed analysis of two newspaper articles with a view to illustrating how the media can use language to code messages of agency, causality and responsibility in their publications.

Keywords : Halliday's model of transitivity; naming analysis; media; rape myths; sex crimes

Introduction and background

Sex crimes have a particular power to evoke entrenched beliefs about rape, sex and gender roles. The press can both reflect and shape public opinion and while news reporters are supposed to be objective, the newsroom is still predominantly male – a study released by the campaigning group Women in Journalism in March 2011 states that 74% of news journalists on national publications are men. Similarly, eight out of the top ten UK newspapers in the study have almost twice as many male editors as female editors (cited in *The Guardian* 03/04/11). This gives the media a male bias, with men deciding what constitutes newsworthy events. The reporting of these 'newsworthy' sex crimes can reflect "rape myths", which are defined as generalized and false beliefs about rape and sexual assault. Research has shown that men consistently endorse rape myths more than women do (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994). Although the press is unlikely to be perpetuat-

ing these rape myths out of malice, the continued use of these false beliefs only serves to internalize them in the minds of the public and this has consequences for how victims of sexual violence are treated and how rape culture is maintained within our society.

Brownmiller (1975) and Burt (1980) identified specific myths which apportion blame on the victim, excuse the perpetrator or trivialize the act itself. As these myths form the foundation of this background discussion, some are now identified in more detail.

Common Rape Myths

- Rape is unwanted sex, but not a violent crime.
- Women provoke rape through their appearance, behavior, age or dress.
- Women invite rape through risky behaviour.
- 'Bad girls' especially invite rape.
- Women lie about rape for attention or revenge.
- Perpetrators are perverts, mentally ill or 'monsters'.
- Rape occurs outside, at night.
- Rape only occurs between strangers.
- Rape is violent and involves threats or use of a weapon.

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How the media apportions blame on the victim through the scrutinization of the victim's character, rather than the perpetrator's, was the focus of Helen Benedict's argument in her 1992 book, *Virgin or Vamp*. Benedict analyzed four prominent sex crime cases and investigated the language used in the newspaper and magazine articles pertaining to each case and how the gender bias in our language helped perpetuate the myths. Dale Spender (1980) and Robin Lakoff (1975) discussed the inherent sexism in English and their findings are essential to Benedict's documentation of sexist newspaper language. She found numerous discrepancies in the way men were described in comparison to the way women were described: female victims of crime were described as bubbly, pretty, pert, prudish, vivacious, flirtatious and bright in the cases which she examined for her book. Benedict states: "The press habitually uses words to describe female crime victims, especially sex crime victims, that are virtually never used for men. Those words are consistently sexual, condescending or infantilizing." (p.20) These lexical choices have a powerful effect in establishing an image of a victim and of a perpetrator. She also discussed how victims of rape are portrayed in one of two ways: the innocent victim attacked by a monster or the provocative female who incited her own rape. Benedict further defined eight factors in how the press portrayed a woman as a "vamp", which included whether or not she knew the perpetrator before the rape, whether a weapon was used, whether she deviated from the traditional female role of being at home with family or children, and factors involving age, race, ethnicity and attractiveness. The vamp portrayal leads a victim to be blamed for the rape in the press and then by the public at large.

Not all press coverage of rape cases can be construed as victim blaming. Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-MacDonald (2002) examined 123 articles covering ten high-profile rape cases between 1980 and 1996. They coded for statements of blame and of sympathy for the perpetrator and victim. Of all the blaming statements, only 45% blamed the attacker for the rape, with 55% blaming the victim. Of all the

sympathizing statements, only 45% sympathized with the victim while 55% sympathized with the attacker. These statements were also cross-coded with other factors such as the race and class of attackers and victims, single attacker or gang rape, and stranger or acquaintance rape. The articles which contained the highest percentage of victim blaming statements were the ones which detailed the cases of acquaintance rape and those which involved alcohol. The smallest percentage of victim blaming statements was in articles about cases of stranger rape where neither bars nor drinking alcohol featured. While only a 10% difference in each category seems minimal, it is perhaps indicative of a trend in the nature of how the media misrepresents the parties involved in sex crimes through a subtle conveyance of rape myths.

In her 1999 paper, *The Linguistics of Blame*, Kate Clark took the idea of the linguistic embedding of rape myths to bear on a number of sex crime articles from the UK tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*, using descriptive categories from systemic functional grammar. She found that this particular publication had a tendency to obscure the culpability of the perpetrator through linguistic devices such as deleted agents and the passive voice and to suggest the victim had incited the attack through language of sexualization and showed clearly that *The Sun* not only communicates rape myths but endorses them as valid explanations about the occurrence of rape.

A crucial question at this stage is: why is the endorsement of rape myths in the media so dangerous? Research shows that exposure to rape myth endorsing material can have an effect on readers' attitudes towards sex crime. In 2008, a two part study was conducted by Franiuk et al into the effects of rape myths in the print media. Both parts dealt with the high profile case of Kobe Bryant, the LA Lakers basketball player who was charged with sexual assault in 2003. In the first part, the researchers investigated articles for the endorsement of rape myths. They found that 65.4% of their data set endorsed a rape myth. Following up on the first part, they assessed the impact that the media's representa-

tion of rape myths had on readers. They concluded that male participants in their study who were exposed to rape myth endorsing headlines were less likely to think Bryant was guilty and more likely to hold rape supportive attitudes than those exposed to non- myth endorsing headlines and also that they were more likely to hold rape supportive attitudes than female participants exposed to the myth endorsing headlines.

The press does not operate in a vacuum - writers and editors write and edit based on what they know and feel. Of course, this will be influenced greatly by the social environment in which we all live. However, the media has the power to choose certain ways of naming and detailing events, favoring certain interpretations while excluding others. What exists in the media, as Fairclough (1989) states, is: “the power to disguise power” (p.52), and in no other situation is a power differential more apparent than in situations of sexual violence against women by men.

Methodology

The data

The data is taken from two articles from a middle market newspaper, The Daily Mail, which has the second largest circulation in the UK. It is the only UK newspaper which has a majority female readership, albeit a slight majority, most recently at 53% (The National Readership Survey April 2010 – March 2011). It also has the joint highest percentage of female reporters working on the newspaper in the UK at 36% (Women in Journalism Survey, cited in The Guardian 03/04/11). It might be hoped that reportage of violence against women could be treated sensitively in this publication.

The Daily Mail online edition was monitored throughout March 2011 for its coverage of male on female rape trials. This yielded 38 reports, dealing with 26 different cases. Two articles were selected because they covered UK rape trials which resulted in convictions and were not part of a series of related articles on the same case, i.e. they were stand-alone reports which contained all the information the Daily Mail

would publish on each particular case. The first was published on March 16th 2011 with the headline: Thug rapes 30-year-old virgin on town centre pavement in full view of passing motorists (hereafter referred to as Text 1: Thug). The second was published a day later on March 17th 2011 with the headline: Six footballers jailed over gang rape of 12-year-old girls in midnight park orgy (hereafter referred to as Text 2: Footballers). The byline of both articles is ‘Daily Mail Reporter’ so the gender of the writer(s) is unknown.

Theoretical frameworks

Two frameworks are used, the first being Halliday’s model of transitivity (1985). Transitivity refers to three basic elements in a clause: the process, illustrating the event usually through a verb or adjective; the participants, either the agent or the affected participant; and the circumstances, the time, place and manner of the event. Transitivity also refers to the way meaning is represented in a clause. According to Halliday (1973): “transitivity is the set of options whereby the speaker encodes his experience of the process of the external world, and of the internal world of his own consciousness, together with the participants in these processes and their attendant circumstances” (p.134). The key expression here is ‘a set of options’ as transitivity offers the idea that every text could be produced differently to represent alternative world views. Here, the analysis will employ two of its elements: the processes depicted – material, mental, verbal, relational – and their participants. An important concern in transitivity analysis is whether or not agency, causality and responsibility are made clear in the text. This framework is useful in decoding messages of blame or lack of responsibility and the absence, emphasis or prominence of an agent or an affected participant. The second framework applied is that of naming analysis.

This refers to the lexical choices selected by the writer. In particular, different names for objects carry different connotations and nuances which, again, are reflective of the opinions and ideology of the producer of the text. The notion of ‘a set of options’ is also relevant here. The naming of participants and events can alter

a reader's perception and as such, naming is a powerful tool which allows for the exploration of the lexical forms and their likely messages to be commented upon.

Analysis and discussion

The headlines

Text 1: Thug rapes 30-year-old virgin on town centre pavement in full view of passing motorists.

Here, the perpetrator is the agent in an active process of rape with the victim as the goal of this process. The naming of the perpetrator as a 'thug' and the victim as a 'virgin' clearly indicates where the newspaper stands in terms of culpability. The location of the rape is outside in public, in front of others, which is more shocking. If a tone is to be set for this article using this headline, it is one which sympathizes with the victim and holds the perpetrator responsible for his actions.

Text 2: Six footballers jailed over gang rape of 12-year-old girls in midnight park orgy

Here, the perpetrators are identified by their professions and, given that athletes are afforded a high social status in most societies, this could work in their favor. Here, they are the objects of a passive process in which they receive jail sentences. However, this subtly deletes the active process of the crime which they committed. The crime is stated but nominalized, providing a further distancing mechanism. The extreme youth of the victims is established, as is the late hour and the public place. Referring to the crime as an 'orgy' is an indefensible lexical choice which plants the idea of a consensual group sex activity. This headline blurs perpetrator responsibility.

The following tables show a detailed breakdown of the transitivity choices in the articles which illustrate The Daily Mail's representations of perpetrators and victims of sex crimes.

Text 1: Thug

The perpetrator is an active agent in 18 clauses, compared to the victim's 11. He is the agent of all four kinds

of processes but more than half of those processes are material. In 75% of these material processes, the perpetrator is acting on the goal – the victim – she is the recipient of his actions. Verbal processes involve telling, bragging and threatening the targets – the victim or the police. There are relatively few relational and mental processes. Through these transitivity choices, a picture builds of an active perpetrator, aggressive and obviously lying about consent, dehumanized through the lack of relational and mental processes. As far as lexical choices go, he is named as a brute, a sex attacker with an imposing physical presence who lay in wait for the victim, followed and stalked her, dragged her to the ground, raped her and threatened her.

In clauses where the victim is the agent, more than half are mental or relational, thus humanizing the anonymous victim and eliciting sympathy for her. Of the three material processes in which she is the agent, one has an inanimate goal (she walked home), one has a causative verb, giving the victim a degree of ownership (she let him pass) and in the one clause where the perpetrator is the goal, her actions fail (she fought back, hitting and kicking him...but he was impervious). The verbal process clause contains the only verbiage in the article and it is the victim asking the perpetrator's permission ("Can I go now?"). These transitivity choices serve to emphasize the sense of helplessness of the victim. The victim is named as a 30-year-old virgin, which is mentioned several times, as is her relationship status as part of a couple.

The article is sympathetic to the victim and condemnatory of the perpetrator. However, it is endorsing several rape myths – that rape is sex, by repeating the perpetrator's ridiculous lie about the woman consenting to sex on a pavement; that perpetrators are mentally ill 'monsters', with the use of words like thug and brute and suggesting that he was disconnected from reality in that he did not care about being seen or detected; and finally, that rapes occur outside, committed by a stranger and often with a weapon. Of course, in this frightening case, that is exactly what did happen, but it could be ar-

Transitivity Choices for Participants in Text 1: Thug (Article 686 words)

Perpetrator as agent 18 clauses	Material	A sex attacker who raped a virgin He stalked the woman The 15-stone brute dragged her to the ground and raped her He followed her through the streets He then lay in wait for her He used his strength and weight to keep her on the ground He was able to go as far as he wanted to go He made no attempt to hide what he was doing	8
	Verbal	He later bragged to police that she had agreed to sex there and then He told the police...he asked her if she wanted to have sex He told her...he would harm her unless she did as he demanded He still maintains he did not rape the victim He...told her he had a knife and was prepared to use it	5
	Mental	He was prepared to rape the victim right on the pavement He has 'entrenched and unshakable views' about what happened	2
	Relational	He was impervious He is a very imposing presence, physically very strong and heavy [He] had a girlfriend	3
Victim as agent 11 clauses	Material	She walked to her parents' home after visiting her boyfriend She let him pass She fought back, hitting and kicking him	3
	Verbal	She...was able to ask him "Can I go now?"	1
	Mental	She...wished to remain that status [as a virgin] until her wedding night She feared that she might be killed She was terrified throughout She...wanted to keep her virginity until she wed	4
	Relational	She was a 30-year-old virgin who had a regular boyfriend for eight years She was a complete stranger to you The victim of the rape was in a long term relationship	3

gued that it would be helpful to emphasize the extraordinary nature of this crime more than the article did. There is a danger that this kind of hyperbolic coverage can lead rape victims to believe there is only one kind of 'real' rape, that which is carried out by a stranger in a public place with a weapon. This can trivialize the circumstances of other rapes.

Text 2: Footballers

The perpetrators are agents in 12 active clauses. What is noticeable is that of their total clauses the perpetrators' material processes are only a third but the victims' are over half. At no stage is there a material process with the perpetrators as agents which states cat-

egorically that these men raped the girls. This is markedly different to Text 1: Thug. In fact, one of the four material processes is highlighting their 'civic-mindedness' in confessing to the crimes. Verbally, there is a categorical admission of guilt, but the one other verbal process, which contains the only verbiage in the article, seems to be intended to show one perpetrator's self-awareness and regret. The only mental process detailed is that of shock and disgust (although it is only shock and disgust about the ages of the girls but not about their involvement in a gang rape). Relationally, numerous details of their status as professional athletes are given. They are named as 'footballers' or 'soccer players' – on one occasion, 'promising young footballers'

Transitivity Choices for Participants in Text 2: Footballers (Article 791 words)

Perpetrators as agents 12 clauses	Material	Six footballers who had a midnight sex orgy with two 12-year-old girls have been jailed The six players picked up the two girls and drove in two cars to a recreation ground The boys went over to Girl A one at a time All six handed themselves in and made full confessions	4
	Verbal	[They] have all admitted rape of a girl under the age of 13 One [man] stating: “I’ve got a little sister about that age.”	2
	Mental	They were said to have been shocked and disgusted to learn the true ages of the girls	1
	Relational	D. is a former Reading DC academy player F. plays for Reading Town A. has completed two years of football coaching Several of the players had been part of the Reading FC football academy [They] had all been together on the night of the rapes	5
Victims as agents 15 clauses	Material	The girls...had sneaked away from a party to be with them after exchanging suggestive text messages ...with Girl A allegedly sending them a text message saying “We can have three each”. The girls separated The Girl A went to the far end of the area and called the defendants over one-by-one to have full sex or perform sex acts on them Girl B...returned [to Reading] for a party Girl A was texting ‘some boys’ Girl A was in touch with E. and had been for some days Girl B eventually gave in to his persistence	8
	Verbal	The girls told the men they were 16 years old Girl B said one of the males kept asking her for sex It was Girl B’s account that there was only one male that she had sexual contact with	3
	Mental	Girl B was more reluctant Girl B was initially reluctant	2
	Relational	The most active [sic] of the two girls (Girl A)...could not have been trusted by the prosecution as a witness She had a fake age on her Facebook page	2

Passive	The soccer players were encouraged by the schoolgirl ‘Lolitas’ [Girl B was more reluctant] and was raped by just one player
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Note: I have referred to the victims as Girl A and Girl B for the sake of clarity here. They are not referred to as such in the article.

whose careers ‘had been ruined by the biggest mistake of their lives’, which seems like a linguistic master-stroke of mitigation – and, also somewhat confusingly, as both ‘the men’ and ‘the boys’. For a group of adults aged between 18 and 21 years old, this seems slightly infantilizing, as though to reduce the gap between the

ages of ‘the boys’ and ‘the girls’.

Of the victims’ 15 clauses, eight are material processes detailing what the girls did. They represent the victims as not only participants but instigators of events. Girl B seems to receive more sympathy as her

mental process of reluctance is mentioned twice, and she also is afforded two out of the three verbal processes, although one has a nuance of disbelief cast on it by the caveat of ‘it was her account that...’ Unfortunately this overtone of sympathy is shattered by the contents of one of the passive sentences: ‘[she] was raped by just one player’. Isn’t being raped by one man enough? Girl A is represented only through details of her instigation of events and her dishonesty. The victims are named as ‘the girls’ and Girl A specifically as ‘the most active of the two’ [sic]. They are also, astonishingly, named as ‘schoolgirl Lolitas’ who ‘encouraged the soccer players’: unconscionable lexical choices and a telling passive construction which send an obvious message about the writer’s opinion of these young victims.

There are a number of rape myths at play here. Again, that rape is sex – indeed, the rape is referred to as ‘sexual contact’ and ‘sexual activity’, mitigating its effect. The victims are portrayed as ‘bad girls’ through a use of naming strategies and verb and adjective choices: they didn’t leave a party early but they ‘sneaked away’, their text messages were ‘suggestive’ and they were girls who got into cars with men and were alone with them late at night – ‘risky behavior’. That the perpetrators and the victims were acquaintances, if not friends, is mentioned throughout, giving credence to the idea that only stranger rape is valid rape. Finally, although the article did not specifically accuse Girl A of lying about the rape, there were a number of references to her dishonesty and a statement from the defending lawyer about a concurrent investigation about a false rape accusation. It seems that a pattern of repetition could lead readers to unconsciously connect Girl A with lying and false accusations, and a common myth is that women lie about rape. This is a particularly dangerous myth as it has a silencing effect on other rape victims.

Conclusion

Although the data set is small, it is hoped that the extent of how one newspaper represents and misrepresents victims and perpetrators of rape through linguistic choices has been shown. These linguistic choices can have

the effect of sympathizing with the victim or blaming the victim, but in both cases, the articles perpetuated rape myths which can subtly enforce readers’ belief in them.

Both cases fit in with Benedict’s virgin/vamp dichotomy. In Text 2: Footballers, the victims were young, acquainted with their attackers, acting out with traditional feminine roles and the rapes took place without the use of a weapon – they are subtly blamed. In Text 1: Thug, the victim was well into adulthood and not behaving in a non-traditional manner, attacked by a stranger who had a weapon – she receives sympathy. No details were given in the articles regarding the race of the victims, their ethnicity or their attractiveness – there has at least been some progress in that regard. The articles used fewer qualifier words when referring to the perpetrators and victims when compared with previous research such as Benedict’s and Clark’s, so this is a vast improvement which helps to combat bias.

There is a very real danger that rape myth perpetuation in the media is contributing to the continuation of rape culture in our society. In a survey taken for Amnesty International in 2005, it was found that 34% of respondents believed that a woman is partially or totally responsible for her rape if she behaved in a flirtatious manner; 26% if she was wearing sexy or revealing clothes and 30% if she was drunk. While the overall results of this survey showed that people generally felt that a woman’s behavior did not make her responsible for her rape, there was a substantial section of the population who think that it does. While newspapers produce articles which send mixed messages to their readership about rape, the broad message seems to be that men are never really to blame – they are either led astray by provocative behavior or are so monstrous as to be not in control of their own actions. This false dichotomy means that the blame for rape falls squarely on women who are then made to feel they must police their own behavior in order to avoid violent crime. It would be a more helpful approach to report sex crimes in a way which is informative without resorting to linguistic devices which frighten or sensationalize.

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