CONSTRUCTING THE VICTIM AND PERPETRATOR OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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Introduction
How we talk about domestic violence is very important; what is expressed and not expressed, the exchange of cultural attitudes, stories, jokes all contribute to how individuals, communities and governments respond to domestic violence, as well as to the self-perception of domestic violence survivors and perpetrators. Public policy, and to some extent attitudes on domestic violence have been shifting in the UK in recent years; what was once largely accepted behaviour is less tolerated today and indeed is recognised in law as a crime. Nevertheless, many myths about domestic violence remain and the media is a primary cultural site perpetuating such myths.

To date in the UK there has been little if any academic investigation of the popular social construction of domestic violence; this paper therefore reviews existing literature on print-media constructions of domestic violence, mainly from North America as a precursor to carrying out empirical research on the topic. It looks at the print media’s role in shaping stories, understandings and responses to this serious social problem and how the media constructs the female victim and the male perpetrator; as Gallagher argues “It is in the comparison of how women and men are portrayed in the media that insights emerge, and change can ensue” (2004, p.157).

The ways in which we talk about domestic violence are dependent upon how it is defined and what we know about it. Domestic violence is a highly complex and multifaceted concept involving a pattern of coercive behaviours in intimate partnerships with the aim of one partner gaining control over the other partner. Such behaviours can range from verbal abuse/threats and coercion, to manipulation, physical and sexual violence, to rape and homicide. At the level of the individual, therefore, experiencing domestic violence entails a major inter-personal struggle invoking honour, pride and shame (Wilcox, 2007). Such individual struggles are set in a context of very real social structures and long-term social processes which also shape the experience of domestic violence. Because domestic violence resists easy definition, it is difficult to gain accurate statistical data on its incidence and prevalence. We cannot be certain about the numbers of people it affects since it is a crime which frequently goes unrecorded.

However, what we do know from quantitative research and statistics and qualitative empirical research is that domestic violence in heterosexual partnerships is gender-specific and occurs far more frequently than official statistics reveal. Research consistently reveals that domestic violence in heterosexual relationships is most commonly perpetrated by men against women (Stanko, 2001; Walby & Allen, 2004; Home Office, 2005). We also know that domestic violence is part of a broader variety of violence which the United Nations terms ‘gender-based violence’, a worldwide issue. The World Health Organisation’s first world report on violence and health (October 2002) found that violence against women accounts for approximately 7% of all deaths of women aged 15-44; in some countries, up to 69% of women report having been physically assaulted. In Britain, according to recent figures from the British Crime Survey, about a quarter (26%) of women have been physically assaulted since age 16, while 6% have been in the previous year (Walby & Allen, 2004, Home Office, 2005). Whilst some men are subjected to domestic violence, the
scale of male victimisation is considerably lower than that of females. Moreover, a high proportion of domestic violence perpetrators against men are also male. So, despite the problematic nature of statistical data on domestic violence, it affects the lives of many women and children. Indeed, since the mid 1990s it has been recognised by the United Nations as a violation of human rights (United Nations Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, 1995). Is this how our print media conceptualises domestic violence? The paper examines how crime in general is constructed before turning to focus specifically on the construction of domestic violence in print media.

The social construction of crime in print media
Social problems provide a key source of media stories; the media is thought to shape and transform social problems into stories with the aim of selling as many copies of the publication concerned as possible. Crime reporting is in fact more prevalent now and violent and sexual crimes are over-reported (Naylor 2001, Greer 2003). To sell copy, the media is prone to manipulate public perceptions creating a false view of crime. As Jewkes (2004) points out, this can be achieved in different ways, for instance through the use of stereotypes, bias, prejudice and even gross oversimplification of crime contexts. Often what people believe and think about a social problem has been largely constructed through claim-making in the media (Spector & Kitsuse, 1987).

Crime stories in the media are significant because, as McEvoy argues, discourses on crime tell us about a culture's social, political and moral order; the print media thus play a major part in the "construction, articulation, reassurance and ultimately reassertion of a sense of public morality, of what is moral and immoral, right and wrong, good and bad" (1996, p. 181). When newspapers report on a case of domestic violence, for example, this often initiates wider public discourse on how this event relates to broader questions about the moral health of the family (ibid. p.181). A conception of news as both constructed and productive of future discourse is, therefore, critical when examining news reports on domestic violence.

The under-representation of domestic violence
The media is often criticised for paying too much attention to particular types of crime, particularly those of a violent and sexual nature which occur in the public sphere. When it comes to domestic violence, however, which mostly occurs in the home or private sphere, the opposite is the case. With regard to domestic violence there is too little media interest rather than too much, especially in relation to the high prevalence and incidence of this crime. In the case of domestic violence, as Garside pointed out (2003), reality can be as much distorted through under-reporting as through over-reporting. But what are the reasons for this paucity of reporting on domestic violence?

The masculinist lens through which domestic violence has been, and to some extent is still, perceived is one reason why there tends to be less press coverage than might
be expected. Traditionally, violent assault has been defined as a coercive, aggressive act committed in the street, in a pub or any other public venue, which has largely involved male-on-male violence. Domestic violence, which largely takes place in the home, was not (and to some degree is still not) seen as a form of assault, despite the fact that it is the most likely form of assault to be suffered by a woman (Naffine, 1996, 65). Public assault (which a man is most likely to experience) then is the standard case whereas domestic violence is viewed as “a special class of victimization … the complication” to the norm (Naffine, 1996, 65).

Furthermore, despite growing awareness of domestic violence as a social problem it still remains largely hidden due to the social stigma attached to a woman admitting that s/he is experiencing it, while many people are likely to be unwilling to want to discuss this problem. That stigma and taboo attaches to both victims and perpetrators may in turn explain why media coverage when it occurs tends to cover only exceptional cases (as will be discussed later). In all countries where large-scale surveys have been conducted, the findings reveal that at least one in five women have been physically or sexually abused by an intimate partner at some time in their lives (World Health Organisation, 2000). So, ironically perhaps, another explanation for the lack of coverage is that domestic violence may be perceived as too commonplace an occurrence to warrant news or media coverage and only rarely, in exceptional circumstances, is seen as newsworthy (Meyers, 1994, 1997).

But what impact does the under-representation of domestic violence have? Broadly, the implication is that the public largely continues to see domestic violence as someone else’s problem as well as being relatively rare. The under reporting of domestic violence becomes part of the circle of dominant discourse which perpetuates the silencing and stigmatisation of this issue. It also impacts on domestic violence victims in that victims may decide that what they are experiencing cannot really be domestic violence, after all. And even when they do recognise themselves as victims, they are more likely to blame themselves as individuals rather than see domestic violence as a cultural and social problem to do with gendered power relationships.

In developed countries, knowledge about domestic violence is paradoxical, as on the one hand public awareness has increased dramatically, while on the other hand individuals tend to keep such knowledge at arm’s length from their own situation (Pain, 1999) partly due to media gaps and silences and partly due to the emphasis in public discourse on ‘stranger danger’. This means that if a woman does experience domestic violence from a partner or ex-partner it comes as huge shock, rocking personal feelings of physical security as well as her hopes and aspirations about her marriage or partnership. This is so unexpected; it only happens to others; this can’t be happening; what am I doing wrong?

The over-representation of physical and extreme cases of domestic violence
During 2001/02, 116 women were killed by a current or former male partner in England and Wales, an average of more than two women each week (Flood-Page and Taylor, 2003). As Boyle (2005) points out, media coverage of domestic violence follows Surette’s (1998) ‘law of opposites’ in that the stories reported tend to be domestic murders or the most unusual cases as opposed to the most common stories. Murder of a wife/partner is clearly the most serious outcome of domestic violence and this potential must always be borne in mind. However, the news focus obscures the routine nature of domestic violence as mainly non-physical, psychological and emotional abuse with physical and sexual violence/s being employed far less frequently.
Emphasis on women’s physical injuries as a result of domestic violence is not solely due to media sensationalism, however. It has also been an outcome of the predominant ways in which domestic violence comes into public view through victims’ contacts with social agencies. Firstly, the physical injuries women sustain in domestic violence are extremely serious and can be life-threatening. Secondly, physical injuries are more likely to bring victims into contact with refuges/shelters, criminal justice and other social agencies. Thirdly, in our visual culture demonstrating the physical injuries sustained by women is more straightforward and visually shocking than demonstrating other forms of injury”. However, the media’s emphasis on extreme cases of physical violence again distorts the reality of domestic violence. It has lead to the widespread perception of domestic violence as separate and distinct incidents of physical violence rather than as an ongoing process of abuse, where the enactment of male power and control does not rely on violent acts alone. The focus on physical violence hence detracts from the seriousness of emotional abuses.

However, feminist researchers have shown that women experience emotional abuse as a ‘deeper and more central form of abuse’ (Kirkwood, 1993, p. 44). Moreover women are far more likely to conceptualize verbal abuse as an expression of violence (Burman, Brown & Batchelor, 2003). The dominant understanding of domestic violence as physical violence hides the reality of the cumulative impact over time on women and children of what may seem from the outside to be relatively ‘minor’ infringements of women’s emotional and physical integrity; subtle acts can be very threatening:

… and when it come to birthdays and things like that he used to fall out wi’ me so he didn't have to buy me anything, or owt like that, until he felt as though you know, he knew he was going to lose me again, so he bought me an orchid. I don't know why he thought, I hated orchids! I hate orchids! (laughs) I hate orchids! He once bought me an eternity ring and erm it was second [hand], it were only twelve pounds, but it were something special, you know, I thought he was actually being nice, you know. And then as soon as he'd bought it he went, ‘and don’t ask for anything else because you're not getting it’, you know, I thought, oh God you've spoilt it again (Sally as cited by Wilcox, 2006)

This commonplace aspect of ongoing ‘low level’ patterns of domestic abuse over time, sometimes interspersed with physical violence, is rarely if at all represented in print media stories on domestic violence.

The focus on victims and the neglect of perpetrators of domestic violence

The overwhelming finding from research on print media coverage of domestic violence is that the vast majority of stories focus on individual female victims thereby continuing to construct the public issue of domestic violence as a private problem of women (Berns, 1999, 2001, 2004; Boyle, 2005; Evans, 2001; Wykes, 2001). This dominant individualistic perspective places responsibility onto female victims and normalizes the idea that they should be held responsible for solving the problem of domestic violence.

Berns, who has researched the coverage of domestic violence in women’s magazines in North America, points out that to write successfully on a social problem the story must ‘empower the victims, be primarily about one person, and have an upbeat and inspiring ending’ (2001, p. 83). She suggests that the media does this in the following ways:

- “Sympathetic and empowering perspectives look at how women can take care of themselves
- Inform readers about resources or services on how to solve the problem, prevent abuse or spot the signs of abuse
- Keep the story personal rather than look at wider social and cultural Issues” (ibid. p. 83)
In a study on ‘Women viewing violence’ (Schlesinger et al., 1992) women said that popular representations of social problems like domestic violence can provide a lifeline to victims/survivors of domestic violence letting them know that they are not alone and public is more likely to recognise and acknowledge what is a hidden abuse. Whilst such stories may seem empowering in celebrating an individual woman for escaping and surviving domestic violence, they conceal an underlying contradiction. In fact, these stories also imply that any woman who is still in a violent relationship is to blame for staying on, as the focus is clearly on what the victim should do to prevent or end the violence. The ‘public service notices’ which often follow such reports encourage victims who have ‘experienced anything similar to get in touch with appropriate support agencies’ but here again the burden is placed on the victim to do something about her situation rather than focussing on the perpetrator. Domestic violence victims/survivors who read these stories when still in a violent relationship may well receive the message that they are weak for staying and that it is their duty to leave the relationship, thus reinforcing strong cultural messages. It is quite common to hear people saying ‘why on earth do they stay, I would walk out at the first sign of violence’!

A further, important issue in terms of domestic violence ‘survival’ stories is whose victims/survivor stories are chosen. As victims must appeal to readers, be victims who could get out and be responsible, journalists rarely write about the elderly or children as victims as they cannot be held responsible for ending their abuse (Berns, 2001). ‘In order for their victim empowerment formula to work, the audience needs to believe that the victim can indeed be held responsible for ending her abusive situation’ (Berns, 2001, pp. 91-2). Berns cites the editor of ‘McCalls Magazine’ (admittedly a traditional publication) as saying:

I would say other criteria we take into consideration in selecting people to be covered in the magazine is [sic] probably not the poor, not with awful backgrounds, and this is my own impersonal opinion, but not those who are too fat or ugly … readers find it very easy to distance themselves from someone who has had a less than utopian life. So we’re doing a story about a woman who was abused, I can’t imagine us doing a story about a woman who was a drug user and abused, because we know from letters that readers would say, ‘What did she expect?’ (cited in Berns, 2001, p. 92)

As with the reporting of other crime stories, victim/survivor must be ‘appropriate victims’ fitting into traditional norms of femininity to appeal to readers. “The meaning systems that we apply to the category ‘crime’ are metaphoric systems; the coherence and consistency of their application operates to sustain certain relations: relationships of similarity/otherness and inclusion/exclusion most commonly” (Brown, 2003, p. 45). When we look at gender and public discourse, it is not just ‘Benchmark Man’ (Thornton, 1995) we need to be aware too of the invisible ‘Benchmark Woman’, the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, irrational, middle class sexed-female body whose image and character ‘other’ women are judged against. ‘Benchmark woman' and the metaphors of respectable femininity are incredibly powerful in dividing the social world into the acceptable and non-acceptable behaviours for women.

Reactions to domestic violence victims often flow from myths attributed to those who suffer it, a separation of them from us. As a result, female victims are often viewed by the public as somehow to blame, in some way unable to treat men properly or to deal with them assertively (Duncan, 1996). This was not the finding of research on domestic violence I carried out, as the women participants took many actions and overcame multiple obstacles in moving through and away from abusive and violent relationships (Wilcox, 2006). Overall, the characterisation of the victim in print media sources is narrow and restrictive, one which is partially responsible for shaping a
broad public acceptance that domestic violence against some victims might be deserved.

To date, there has been relatively little academic investigation into the topic of male perpetrators of domestic violence (e.g. Hester and Westmarland, 2006). The social problem of domestic violence has been largely studied and acted upon by feminist researchers and activists and traditionally the focus has been on female victims. When we turn to look at media reporting of domestic violence, it is then not surprising that media discourse rarely if ever focuses on the perpetrators. Where perpetrators are covered, they are almost in the context of celebrity stories in which, as Boyle points out, the discourses tend to follow the pattern of ‘sin and redemption/confession and counselling’ narratives (2005, p. 87) or they tend to be constructed as sick and maladjusted individuals (McDonald, 1999).

Especially, it is interesting to contrast Bern’s work on women’s magazines with the utter lack of work on men’s magazines. As Berns (2001) has argued, women’s magazines have focussed considerably on ‘domestic violence survival stories’ over the last twenty years. In contrast, men’s magazines appear not to address the issue of domestic violence at all. Is it the case that those in the media believe their readers do not want to read about male abusers? Is it not upbeat and empowering enough or is it considered too depressing for readers to tackle (Berns, 2001)? Are journalists concerned about legal issues with respect of domestic violence perpetrators? Or is it because if the media were to focus on male perpetrators of domestic violence they would be forced to address issues of male power and sexism that permeate our society (Berns, 2001)? This area is one that is even more under-researched than coverage of domestic violence in women’s magazines and one that urgently needs further research.

The Sun newspaper, it could be argued, has provided some exception to the points raised above. The Sun has run campaigns against domestic violence since 2000 and most recently ran a series of articles by Sandra Horley, the Chief Executive of the anti-domestic violence charity Refuge. Since Rebekah Wade took over as editor of the Sun newspaper in January, 2003, the paper has run several high profile "name and shame" campaigns, including against paedophiles and against yobs. As editor of the Sun Wade was responsible for the "Shop a Yob" campaign, designed to name and shame young people who are subject to anti-social behaviour orders. The Sun run a “name and shame” campaign against domestic violence with photographs of male perpetrators on its front page. The headline read: “Domestic Violence. Shock Issue. Once these men had enough charm to win a woman’s heart. But they grew into brutes capable of a sickening crime. They’re all … wife beaters and we’re exposing them today” (Sun Newspaper 22 September, 2003).

However, this kind of coverage may not be the most helpful in addressing the issue of perpetration of domestic violence. This is by all means a punitive campaign that individualises this social problem once again by labelling particular men. The purpose of “naming and shaming” is hardly about finding ways to address domestic violence in a productive way. There are many other ways in which newspapers and magazines could address the issue of domestic violence perpetrators without taking a ‘naming and shaming’ approach. It is serious criticism of men’s magazines that they are clearly failing to address the issue of domestic violence and thus failing to tackle the gender-based violence that it represents.
Public opinion on domestic violence
As stated in the introduction to this paper, public policy and to some extent attitudes on domestic violence have been shifting in the UK over the last ten years. What was once largely accepted behaviour is less tolerated now and some aspects of domestic violence are recognised in law as a crime. However, despite such progress, most people continue to tolerate abusive behaviours by men against their female partners because they continue to see domestic violence as a private matter; and some consider that unless there are visible physical injuries intervention is unjustified (Berns, 2004). Also, some people actually condone the use of domestic violence in specific contexts, as “one in five young men and one in ten young women think violence towards a partner is acceptable in certain circumstances” (Burton et al., 1998).

The Sexual Assault Research, a survey of UK citizens run by Amnesty International (2005) on sexual abuse (which is often part of domestic violence) found that:

- “Blame culture” attitudes exist about women and rape
- More than a quarter (26%) thought that a woman was partially or totally responsible for being raped if wearing sexy or revealing clothing
- More than 1 in 5 (22%) held the same view if a woman had had many sexual partners
- Around 1 in 12 people (8%) believed woman was totally responsible for being raped if she had had many sexual partners
- More than a quarter of people (30%) said a woman was partially or totally responsible for being raped if she was drunk, and more than a third (37%) held the same view if the woman had failed to clearly say "no" to the man.

More research is needed into public attitudes towards domestic violence in order to evaluate to what extent the general public retains negative and/or blaming attitudes towards some groups of female victims of domestic violence. At the same time, there is very little data on attitudes towards perpetrators of domestic violence.

Lack of gendered analyses
Conceptualising domestic violence as gendered, as primarily male violence against women in the home and a different experience from when men experience domestic violence, clearly brings into question existing a-historical gender-neutral stances. As domestic violence is increasingly being mainstreamed, feminist understandings based on a history of gender relations may be distorted through gender-neutral definition and discourses. I would agree with Radford who argues that there is a ‘contemporary and worrying trend of re-presenting domestic violence as a gender neutral, equal opportunities issue through attempts to signify “male victimhood” and construct the female perpetrator’ (2003, p. 33). Certainly, there has always been a problem in the way in which print media cover domestic violence, that is taking a non-gendered or gender neutral approach when covering stories on domestic violence in almost all cases. Berns’s qualitative analysis of men’s and political publications identified two main discursive strategies in media resistance to feminist constructions of the social problem of domestic violence: ‘degendering the problem and gendering the blame’. The media is clearly productive in the ways it constructs gender in relation to violence (Berns, 2001, 2004).

Concluding Remarks
“Interrogating and challenging the nature of these representations is therefore one way in which critics can question – and ultimately change – the meanings and rewards attached to violence in our society” (Boyle, 2005, p. 49)

Feminists have challenged the dominant construction of male violence in the home as private and personal. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists researched into, and campaigned against, all forms of violence against women, at the same time developing networks of refuges/shelters and other support services. This work brought a new discourse on male violence against women into the public arena providing ‘a vehicle for change’ (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). However, whilst feminist discourse has emerged into the public sphere, such discourse is open to being re-shaped and sometimes distorted by the media. Whilst the media may be useful in championing appropriate cases of individual victims, there is a decided reluctance to enter into more complex debates about domestic violence (Bindel et al.1995, 74-5).

I argued here that the focus on the most severe and exceptional violence with graphic imagery hides the everyday abuse and violence suffered which is the majority case – this makes it very difficult for many female victims to see themselves as suffering domestic violence; only some women are seen as appropriate victims. It also characterises perpetrators of domestic violence as monsters rather than seeing them as men who draw on a cultural resource of violence against women. Demonising those men who are domestically violent allows many more men to perpetuate their abusive and controlling behaviours.

Meyers proposes that the news "supports the dominant power structure by creating a consensus that appears grounded in everyday reality" (1997, p. 19). Rather than challenging mainstream views, crime news reinforces certain forms of social control, with the depiction of "crime, criminals, and victims changing over time to correspond with social, political, and economic changes in society" (ibid., p. 21). In Meyers’s view, the news thus operates hegemonically to privilege certain discourses about violence against women over others. Unhelpful media responses deny or minimise domestic violence and blame women directly or indirectly, helpful support responses attempt to shift the discourse of blame away from victims.

To a great extent the press sets the frame for both the quantity and the quality of public discourse on specific issues in public life, including crime and social welfare. In this case the quantity of reporting on domestic violence is minimal and the quality is distorted in the way it covers victims only and for the most part fails to address perpetrators. However, media participation does not go in one direction only, readers often engage actively and intelligently with print media reports, bringing their own experiences, values and attitudes formed over their lifetime in relation with other institutions and people. Press representations of the issues surrounding domestic violence must hence be acknowledged as an influential part of an ongoing cycle, and individual journalists and editors be seen as both products of, and participants in the very society they seek to inform (Evans, 2001). Ultimately, “If we want to see a change in the way that our media reports crime, we need to lobby for a change in the way our politicians talk about crime” (Garside, 2003).
References


violenceiceline.org.uk/Article%20Pages/service-provision-for-perpetrators-of-domestic-violence.htm accessed 16 November 2006


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i Domestic violence can also be defined as including family-type relationships, and also occurs in same sex relationships, but in this paper I focus solely on intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships.

ii The same problem applies to coverage of child abuse by known others as well as white collar crime.

iv The ‘battered woman’ is linked in the public imaginary with visible injuries, and women experiencing domestic violence where there are no visible injuries may not see themselves as experiencing domestic violence.