

How does *The Sun* newspaper portray rape?

Jemma Tosh & Jeremy Phillips

THE MOST POPULAR newspaper in Britain, for both men and women, is *The Sun* (Matheson & Babb, 2002; National Readership Survey for October 2007 – September 2008). It is well known for its sensationalised approach to reporting, but due to the stories being classed as ‘news’ the fundamental details may often be assumed to be true/accurate (Alexander, 1999). However, the media is known for its misrepresentation of reality, such as over representing stranger rapes of White middle-class victims (Carter, cited in Korn & Efrat, 2004; Brownmiller, 1975; Ardivini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002). Therefore, even apparent accuracies can paint a very distorted picture (Korn & Efrat, 2004).

Previous research suggests that traditional sex role stereotypes and a lack of respect for women correlate with the frequency of rape attacks within a society (Sanday, 1981; Ward 1995; Baron & Straus, 1989). Cultures that promote certain values, such as objectification or ownership of women are more likely to be ‘rape prone’ (Sanday, 1981). Victim-blaming attitudes are more likely to occur when a woman is seen to be provocative, careless, sexually active, emotionally composed, intoxicated, passive or on a date with the perpetrator (Brownmiller, 1975; ICM, 2005; Ward, 1995).

The media, therefore, has the potential to consolidate these values, and influence people’s attitudes toward rape (Ardivini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002; MacKay & Covell, 1997; Brownmiller, 1975). Due to the ownership of the media becoming increasingly monopolised, people can be subjected to these messages repeatedly and from a variety of seemingly ‘independent’ sources (Bagdikian, cited in Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000). Consequently, these messages can become accepted as reality (Gergen, 1999).

Method

This research involved a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis based on the stages outlined by Willig (2001). This method identifies how a concept is constructed, which discourses are used and the potential reasons for constructing the concept in this way. The final stages look at the potential behavioural and emotional responses to these constructions, such as an increase in fear when a rapist is constructed as a ‘monster’. Three articles from *The Sun* newspaper were selected for analysis from an online archive. Each article was published between 1 January 2004 and 31 December 2004, had the word ‘rape’ in the title, and specifically described adult female victims of rape with one male attacker. One article described a stranger rape attack as the case was going through court. The second article described an acquaintance rape, as the victim

had some contact with the perpetrator prior to the attack. A guilty verdict had been decided and the court case had finished. The final article described a date rape that was still going through court.

Results

The three articles analysed from *The Sun* newspaper display negative constructions of female rape victims, which may promote victim-blaming and rape myths. The authors included voyeuristic descriptions of the attacks and confirmed social stereotypes, such as stranger rape being the only ‘real rape’. The victims were constructed as actively involved in their attack, whereas the perpetrators were described using the passive voice.

1. Victim-blaming

The articles emphasised details that may encourage victim-blaming. For example, an article describing a stranger rape emphasised intoxication and vulnerability in the line, ‘The 27-year-old, who had drunk several bottles of lager, was on her way home alone.’ An article describing a date rape stated, ‘she left Lorenzo’s nightclub in Dunfermline in a taxi to go to a party with two or three men’ and ‘The woman admitted she was p****d.’ These lines suggest sexual promiscuity and identify intoxication as something wrong that the victim needed to confess.

Furthermore, the articles neglected to mention details that would have reduced victim-blaming or encouraged support/sympathy for the victims. All articles neglected to mention any physical pain or emotional trauma experienced by the victims, except for the stranger rape article which described the victim as ‘terrified’.

2. Voyeurism

The articles selected and emphasised information that would give the articles ‘sex appeal’. All the articles involved young victims, and only included the occupation of one victim (which was of a sexual nature and described as a ‘hooker’). Additionally, two out of the three articles used sexual discourse to describe the attack, stating sexually provocative phrases such as ‘spread my legs’ and ‘on the floor, naked, with Symon on top of her.’ Furthermore, the date rape article described the rape as a sexually exciting experience, quoting a line from the rapist, ‘that was some adventure.’ All articles described rape as ‘sex with her’ as opposed to something done to the victim. These details promote the rape myths that rape does not exist, it is just sex, and that rape is a result of uncontrollable sexual urges.

3. Promotion of rape myths

By encouraging victim-blaming (Ward, 1995), the articles potentially supported the myth that rape is the victim’s responsibility and that in some way these women deserved the attacks. Lines such as, ‘he had never paid for sex and wasn’t going to start with ‘a brasser’ like her’ explicitly states the justification for the rape, and constructs the victim as deserving. The omission of references to pain, resistance or the woman’s lack of consent potentially reinforces the myth that all women want to be raped – that they enjoy it.

Furthermore, regardless of whether the perpetrator had been found guilty or not, the last line of every article constructed the victim as a potential liar, questioning her credibility. For example, in the date rape article the perpetrator claimed that ‘the woman helped herself to the contents of the bottle [spiked with GHB] and later had sex willingly.’

3. Confirmation of social stereotypes

The stranger rape article was constructed in the most sympathetic terms, describing a ‘brutal ... fiend’ raping a woman who ‘knew’ she ‘could not get away from him’ and who states ‘I thought I was going to die.’ This article constructs the rapist as a threat who is impossible to defeat and against whom resistance could result in death. This is in contrast to the other articles, where the perpetrators were portrayed as ‘a man’, with names, from a specific area and who were not demonised. This positions some rapes as more acceptable, and others as ‘monstrous’. This consolidates the perception that stranger rape is the only ‘real rape’ and that other forms of rape are not as serious. It also positions some women as more deserving of sympathy/support than others.

4. Passive perpetrators

The articles used the passive voice to describe the attacks, with essential actions occurring without social agents. For example, even in the stranger rape article, which was constructed in relatively sympathetic terms, the attacker still escaped responsibility. The line, ‘she found herself on the ground’ illustrates this point. The author chose to describe this action in this way, as opposed to stating that he pushed her to the ground. It is of significance that these details were not included in the articles, yet the actions of the victims were included. For example, in the date rape article the victim is described as ‘taking the date rape drug’, whereas the perpetrator’s spiking of her drink is neglected. Again, the rapist is passive, and the victim plays an active role in her attack.

5. Incitement of fear

The stranger rape article constructed the perpetrator as a ‘fiend’ who was impossible to defeat. So even though this victim was constructed in more sympathetic terms than the victims in the other articles, she was constructed as weak and incapable of defending herself. Rape was constructed as an alternative to death, and physical resistance as increasing her chances of being murdered. The implication that victims should ‘lie back and take it’ is potentially troubling given that the less physically resistant the victim is, the more likely people may be to blame the victim or disbelieve her experience.

Furthermore, describing rape in this way potentially increases fear in female readers as rape is constructed as a life threatening experience that they are unable to protect themselves from. Also, excluding detailed descriptions of the victims emphasizes that all women are potential victims and places the readers in the position of the victim as they read the article.

Conclusions

In 2007 *The Sun* newspaper initiated a 'Stop Rape Now' campaign, accessible from their website. The aim of the campaign was to set up a helpline for rape victims (after an attack) and readers could 'click' to sign their petition. Within this campaign it was stated that, 'no one asks to be raped and it is 100 per cent the perpetrator's fault' and 'to put blame on the victims is quite simply disgusting' (Brook, 2007, pp.15 and 18). However, it seems that victim-blaming may be encouraged elsewhere in the newspaper.

The way in which these three articles in *The Sun* newspaper were constructed potentially perpetuates victim-blaming and reinforces rape myths. This makes *The Sun's* popularity concerning, particularly in relation to victims' experiences of support. A society that actively supports this newspaper, and condones its reporting of rape as sensationalised voyeuristic stories, creates an environment conducive to victim-blaming and the consolidation of rape myth acceptance. This may provide a barrier to positive movements for rape victims, which are compounded by these culturally entrenched attitudes. Ardovali-Brooker and Caringella-MacDonald (2002, p.17) state:

The media exert tremendous influence on our attitudes about what rape is, who the victim is, and who to blame in rape cases. It is high time that we demand accountability of this sector that exerts such great influence on attitudes and behaviour related to sexual violence, and nearly exclusive victimisation of women.

This article is a summary of the first author's undergraduate research. If you would like more information, please contact:

Jemma Tosh and Jeremy Phillips (The University of Chester)

E-mail: j_m_tosh@hotmail.co.uk

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