The Faces of Domestic Violence: Media Portrayals in Pre and Post VAWA

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**Abstract**

Because domestic violence is not a part of most people’s everyday lives, for the vast majority of us, our exposure to domestic violence may be obtained largely through the media rather than through personal experience (Dominick, 1978; Hartley, 1982; Manoof & Schudson, 1986; Meyers, 1997; Motlotch & Lester, 1974; Sherizen, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). If the media’s portrayal of domestic violence victims acts as a source of public feelings and attitudes, then it is important to study these news magazines and the impressions about the victims that they may help to shape. In this paper, I utilize a content analysis to test whether media coverage of domestic violence victims has changed over time and whether minorities are portrayed differently from Caucasians. I find that the news media underrepresents coverage of African Americans and Hispanics are not present in their coverage. This misperception of race negatively reflects domestic violence victims and jeopardizes the antiviolence movement.

Keywords: domestic violence, news media, and perceptions of domestic violence victims

**Introduction**

Because domestic violence is not a part of most people’s everyday lives, for the vast majority of us, our exposure to domestic violence may be obtained largely through the media rather than through personal experience (Dominick, 1978; Hartley, 1982; Manoff & Schudson, 1986; Meyers, 1997; Motlotch & Lester, 1974; Sherizen, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). If the media’s portrayal of domestic violence victims acts as a source of public feelings and attitudes, then it is important to study these news magazines and the impressions about the victims that they may help to shape. This paper presents the results of a content analysis aimed at documenting media portrayals of domestic violence victims, with a particular focus on the sex, race, and age of those pictured with news magazine stories about domestic violence.

People’s beliefs about the composition of domestic violence victims may have great consequences for the public’s support for antiviolence programs. The visual representation of domestic violence victims are an integral part of how intimate partner violence is defined. Visual images illustrate particular issue frames (Gamson, and Lasch, 1983). Domestic violence victims who appear in images accompanying news stories are not simply indicative of isolated occurrences, rather, the photographs are symbolic of “the whole mosaic” (Epstein, 1973, p. 5). The pictures provide drama, detail, and texture, and help to shape people’s attitudes about battered victims (Clawson and Trice, 2000). The portrayals of victims can elevate fear unnecessarily among certain groups and create or reinforce myths about victimization (Britto, Hughes, Saltzman, & Stroh, 2007). Research by Meyers (2004), found that race contributes to whether the media frames sexual assault coverage in victim-blaming or offender-blaming terms. Benedict (1992) and Meyers (1997) both found that the news rarely covered violence against minority women unless it was sensationalistic or extremely horrific. In contrast, coverage that focused on Caucasians expressed greater sympathy for the victim (Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002). This matters because the media helps to foster our perceptions of domestic violence and if the news magazines photo editors are influenced by stereotypes, it can create differences in how often and the way minorities are portrayed as opposed to Caucasians.

Between the 1970s and the 1990s critical developments occurred that may have changed the dynamics of public opinion and the media coverage of domestic violence. The pre Violence against Women Act (VAWA) era (1976-1994) represents a time of the feminist movement, the deaths of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman, and the implementation of VAWA. The post VAWA era (1995-2010) represents a time after state and federal laws were passed in regards to domestic violence and renewals to VAWA. The most important development during this time frame was the implementation of the 1994 Violence against Women Act (VAWA). The act was intended to bring awareness of domestic violence, improve the legal and law enforcement’s response to domestic violence and sex crimes, and change the public’s attitude about violence against women (Sacco, 2015).

The Violence against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA) was passed as part of an omnibus crime bill. The legislation created new programs housed within the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services whose goals were to reduce domestic violence and improve the response to domestic violence incidents. In 1995, the Office on Violence against Women (OVW) was created to administer federal grants authorized under VAWA. It emphasizes the development of coordinated community care among victim services, law enforcement, attorneys, prosecutors, and advocates. VAWA funds support groups and shelters, and provides training to personnel who provide services to domestic violence victims. Since its creation, the OVW has awarded over $6 billion in grants that target the crimes of intimate partner violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking (Sacco, 2015). In particular, the STOP (Services Training Officers and Prosecutors) Grant Program has awarded over $400 million to support around 9,000 domestic violence projects from 1995 to 2000 (Sacco, 2015).

Since its passage in 1994, VAWA has been reauthorized and modified twice during the specified period covered in this study. In 2000, Congress reauthorized VAWA and enhanced several programs under VAWA by creating stiffer federal domestic violence and stalking penalties, added protections for foreign battered women, and created programs to aid elderly and disabled women. In 2005, Congress again reauthorized VAWA and enhanced penalties for habitual offenders, added additional protections for foreign battered women, created programs for American Indian victims of domestic violence, and created programs to improve the public health’s response to domestic violence (Sacco, 2015).

In this research, I analyze media portrayals of domestic violence victims that captures a period when VAWA was passed. I investigate whether the media perpetuates inaccurate and stereotypical images of domestic violence victims. Specifically, I examine the photographs that accompany stories on domestic violence in three U.S. news magazines between January 1, 1976 through December 31, 2010.

**Literature Review**

**Sex and Domestic Violence**

Currently, women make up 95% of victims in domestic violence cases (Bachman and Saltzman, 1995; Walker, 1999) and are more likely to be victimized than men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Partner abuse accounts for a large proportion of violence that women experience (Renzetti, Edelson, & Bergen, 2011). Women make up 70% of victims murdered by an intimate partner, a statistic that has remained nearly the same since the early 1990s (Renzetti et al, 2011). Yick & Agabayani-Stewart (1997), Greenblat (1985), and Gentemann (1984) suggest that only women can be domestic violence victims in this country due to patriarchy, power, and control. This may help to explain the high rate of victimization against women. On the other hand, men are less likely to report violence in the home (Renzetti et al., 2011). In 2008, domestic violence accounted for 5% of all violence against males in the United States (National Data on Intimate Partner Violence, 2013). One out of every 14 men has been assaulted by an intimate partner (National Coalition against Domestic Violence, 2013) and men experience almost 3 million assaults from intimate partners every year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Not only do male victims feel a sense of confusion because there are no guidelines for how they should respond to domestic violence (Cook, 1997) but they also face a different kind of shame than that of battered women (Caryle, Scarduzio, & Slater, 2013). The lack of male victims reporting their abuse has contributed to the skepticism toward their stories (Straus, 2006). There is a clear consensus in the literature that women are more likely to be a victim of domestic violence.

**Age and Domestic Violence**

Not only is the sex of the person a predictor of partner violence but age is a strong factor too (Suitor, Pillemer, & Straus, 1990; O’Leary, 1999; O’Leary, Barling, Arias, Rosenblum, Malone, & Tyree, 1989; DeKeseredy, 2000; Gelles, 2000; Straus, 1999). DeKeseredy (2000), Gelles (2000), and Straus (1999) find that the rates of domestic violence are far higher for women ages 18-24. Similarly, O’Leary (1999) reports that younger couples are more likely to have the highest rates of domestic violence. Likewise, Weaver, Kilpatrick, Resnick, Best, & Saunders (1997) conclude in their study that younger women report higher rates of domestic violence compared to older women. In particular, O’Leary et al., (1989) show that the rates of violence for couples peaks at the age of 25. These studies suggest that young and middle aged adults are more likely to experience domestic violence, although research indicates the tendency for elder domestic violence to remain under reported (Brandl & Cook-Daniels, 2002).

**Race and Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence cuts across all sexes, ages, and races. For decades, many studies have found a correlation between racial groups and the occurrence of domestic violence (Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson, & Johnson, 2007; Lockhart, 1987; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). For example, Benson, Fox, DeMaris, & Van Wyk, (2000); Tjaden & Thoennes, (2000); Hampton & Gelles, (1994); and Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, (1980) found that African American women face a higher risk of victimization as opposed to Caucasian women. Also, the rates of reported domestic violence by African Americans are generally higher compared to other minority groups (Breiding, Black, & Ryan, 2008; Ellison et al., 2007; Tjaden & Thonnes, 2000). Several studies indicate that African American women are assaulted and murdered at significantly higher rates than their general representation in the population (Hampton, Carillo, & Kim, 1998; West, 2004; Websdale, 1997).

The domestic violence victimization rates for U.S. women (including physical violence, stalking, and rape) were 24.8% among Caucasians, 29.1% among African Americans, and 23.4% among Hispanics (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). African Americans, who made up 12.6% of the total population in 2010 (U.S. Census, 2010), are clearly overrepresented among the domestic violence victims. Interestingly, Hispanics who are now the largest minority group in the United States at 16.3% of the total population (U.S. Census, 2010) and like African Americans, also have a high rate of victimization that is disproportionally large.

Immigrants are also vulnerable to domestic violence because of their unique circumstances which encompasses language barriers, political issues, social isolation, legal status, and financial constraints (Renzetti et al., 2011). In regards to their legal status, so many female immigrants depend on their spouses for information about their citizenship and many victims who are not citizens continue to suffer abuse under threats of deportation by their spouses (Renzetti et al., 2011; Crenshaw, 1994; Hass, Dutton, & Orloff, 2000; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Perilla, Bakeman, & Norris, 1994). As immigrant women adapt to the culture of their new country, changes in family dynamics and gender roles may become an additional stressor in an already stressful situation (Renzetti el al., 2011). As women begin to assimilate with American culture, their partners may attempt to regain control by inflicting violence (Firestone, Lambert, & Vega 1999; Jasinski, 1998; Soreson & Telles, 1991; Kaufman Kantor, Jasinski, & Aldarondo, 1994; Renzetti et al., 2011).

**Framing and Domestic Violence**

Researchers have explored the idea that news is framed in ways that convey certain perceptions of reality while excluding others (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Entman, 1991, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Tuchman, 1978). Gamson (1989) defined a frame as “a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue” (p. 157). Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997 found that “frames influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts, and other considerations, endowing them with greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame” (p. 569). Similarly, Entman (1993) suggests that factors such as selection and salience are essential pieces that the media provides so that the audience can interpret specific events. In particular, he states that “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). Therefore, the framing and presentation of events can affect how recipients of the news come to understand these issues (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1995).

Given the importance of the media in highlighting social issues and their potential to frame domestic violence in many ways, it is important to look at how the media has covered domestic violence. As Deborah Stone (1989) has discussed in her work, any issue can be treated differently when it is viewed as a social ill versus a private family matter (see also Kingdon, 1984). “The mass media formally discovered the ‘wife abuse’ problem in 1974, the first year the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* began listing articles under the special heading of ‘wife beating’” (p.192). The attitude shift that has changed over the years in the case of domestic violence is what was once considered a family privacy issue is now often seen as public outrage. This is evident when domestic disputes occur in a public setting. Once the social construction of domestic violence was manipulated to show this type of violence inflicted severe injury to women and children, the media saw this group as needing additional protection (Schneider and Ingram, 1993).

**Media Portrayals of Domestic Violence**

Scholars have been particularly concerned with the role that the media plays in shaping the public’s perception of domestic violence (Kozol, 1995; Maxwell, Huxford, Borim, & Hornik, 2000). Meyers (1994, 1997) found that news coverage of domestic violence is framed to support the status quo: a system she saw as immersed in patriarchal ideologue and designed to maintain male domination over women. In particular, her results showed that antiwoman violence is positioned in a context of individual and family pathology rather than relating it to the social structures that promote traditional gender roles. Numerous studies of news coverage of domestic violence indicate that women are often subject to overly sensational reporting (Carter & Weaver 2003; Kitzinger, 2004) and that the media tends to blame women for crimes perpetrated against them (Grothues & Marmion, 2006; Kitzinger, 1992, 2004; Benedict, 1992; Bumiller, 1990; Chancer, 1987; Cuklanz, 1997). Meyers, (1997) reports that Caucasian victims of domestic violence typically receive more media coverage than African American victims. Unlike African Americans and Caucasians, Hispanics victims tend to be invisible in the news media (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Dixon, 1998). Benedict (1992), Meyers (1997), and Hirsch (1994) found that the news described the majority of domestic violence victims as white, older women, and young girls. The media uses the ages of the victims as way to convey vulnerability (Britto et al., 2007). The public is more sympathetic to victims when it is an elderly person or a child (Britto et al., 2007). Yet, adults who did not fall in either age category are oftentimes blamed for their victimization (Britto et al., 2007).

Pictures of children who live in a household where a parent is experiencing domestic violence are often used for a political agenda in the media (Britto et al., 2007). Children represent both innocence and the future and as such their images are attention getting and powerful, particularly when the issue is domestic violence (Britto et al., 2007). Cohen (1972), Jenkins (1992), and Chiricos (1995) have all noted that children’s images are often the basis of moral panics, suggesting when stories focus on children they have more salience among the public.

Entman (1992, 1990) and Entman & Rojeck (2000) argue how race is portrayed in the media is critical because viewers construct their reality through news magazines and this may result in “modern racism”. For example, minority victims were more likely to be depicted as contributing to their offense (Meyers, 2004). This coverage “minimized the seriousness of the violence, portrayed most of its victims as stereotypic Jezebels whose lewd behavior provoked assault” (Meyers, 2004, p. 95). These studies illustrate that the media tends to portray domestic violence through sensationalized stories that oftentimes facilitates stereotypes in regards to battered victims.

This cycle might be disrupted by the changes in perceptions of domestic violence policy and by a de-racialization of media coverage of domestic violence. Exploring race separately of gender has the effect of looking past the ways that sexism and racism reinforce one another to form an interlocking system of oppression (Collins, 2000). It is possible that public perceptions of domestic violence may have changed with the implementation of VAWA. In particular, an awareness of domestic violence may have caused an attitude shift towards the victim.

**Misperceptions**

This attitude shift towards domestic violence victims will occur only if citizens learn about VAWA and that this new information will influence them to correct their predispositions about battered victims. The former may be unlikely because most citizens have low information rationality when it comes to policies and in general, do not pay attention to politics (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Even if citizens were to learn about these changes, it does not guarantee that this information would change their attitudes about domestic violence victims. For example, Nyan & Reifler (2010) demonstrate that the wrong information can persist even in the face of facts and it still will not alter the public’s perceptions. This is important because visual images can perpetuate stereotypes that influence public attitudes (Graber, 1990), even having “the power to trump auditory and text messages” (Avery & Peffley, 2003, p. 135).

Studies of public perception about domestic violence have addressed three related issues: beliefs about the causes of domestic violence, beliefs about victim blaming for domestic violence, and opinions about circumstances under which intimate partner violence may be tolerated (Worden & Carlson, 2005). Researchers agree that there is no single factor for the causes of domestic violence (Carlson, Worden, van Ryne, & Bachman, 2003). Studies of public attitudes about domestic violence suggest that most citizens believe that household stress, unemployment, and financial dependence increases the likelihood of domestic violence (Hattery, 2009; Benson & Fox, 2004; Stephens & Sinden, 2000; Davis & Carlson, 1981; Gentemann, 1984; Koski & Mangold, 1988; Yick & Agbauamo-Siewert, 1997).

On the other hand, the Family Violence Prevention Fund survey (Klein, Campbell, Soler, & Ghez, 1997) revealed that 30% of respondents did not know why a husband would assault his wife. Other studies have found a relationship with alcohol and drug use and domestic violence (Parrott, Drobes, Saladin, Coffey, & Dansky, 2003; Schumacher, Feldbau-Kohn, Smith-Slep, & Heyman, 2001; Testa, 2004). Anger and hostility have been connected to intimate partner violence (Norlander & Eckhardt, 2005; Schumacher et al, 2001). In particular, hostile attitudes toward women have been linked to domestic violence (Holzworth, Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000). Beliefs about traditional gender roles are also associated with tolerance of domestic violence (Greenblat, 1985 & Gentemann, 1984). Similarly, Nason-Clark (2004) and Kristiansen & Giuletti (1990) found associations between political conservatism and support of intimate partner violence. All of these studies indicate a correlation between domestic violence and behavior or attitude issues which are all attributes to individual perpetrators (Klein, Campbell, Soler, & Ghez, 1997).

Researchers have also been interested in measuring the prevalence of victim-blaming attitudes. Some citizens believe that women’s behavior provokes domestic violence (Grothues & Marmion, 2006; Arias & Johnson, 1989; Dibble & Straus, 1990; Gentemann, 1984; Greenblat, 1985; Klein, Soler, & Ghez, 1997). It is important to note that until the late 1970s, this perspective was legitimized in the legal system. Other people believe that the victim takes on some responsibility for continued abuse if she remains in the relationship (Grothues & Marmion, 2006; Davis & Carlson, 1981; Ewing & Aubrey, 1987). Renzetti et al. (2011) and Ewing & Aubrey (1987) found in their work that the majority of respondents underestimated how difficult it is to leave an abusive relationship. Finally, it is reasonable to speculate that one’s experiences with domestic violence shape perceptions of domestic violence. The literature shows a multitude of beliefs that people have in regards to the causes of domestic violence and who is perceived to be a domestic violence victim but there is reason to suspect that many people’s beliefs and attitudes are not well informed.

**Hypotheses**

In this analysis, I examine how the news media portrays domestic violence victims using sex, age, and race. I consider whether the media reflects the same biases and misperceptions that reinforce existing stereotypes about partner violence.

Hypothesis 1: I hypothesize that the media will accurately match the proportion of women among actual domestic violence victims.

Hypothesis 2: I hypothesize that the media will accurately match the proportion of young and middle aged adults among actual domestic violence victims.

Hypothesis 3: I hypothesize that the media will not accurately match the proportion of African Americans and Hispanics among actual domestic violence victims.

**Data and Methods**

To test these hypotheses, I assembled a comprehensive list of every story about domestic violence that included a relevant image and related matters that appeared in three leading American news magazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* between January 1, 1976 and December 31, 2010[[1]](#footnote-1). These three news magazines were selected because they are an indicator of domestic violence stories that were being published nationwide. This was accomplished through a keyword search on the EBSCOHost database, searching for the terms “battered women”, “battered wife”, “domestic abuse”, “domestic assault”, “domestic disturbances”, “domestic violence”, “family violence”, “intimate partner violence”, “marital rape”, “mental cruelty”, “personal violence protection order”, “physical cruelty”, “spousal abuse”, “violence against women”, and “wife beating”, limiting the search to the domestic context. The search retrieved 335, after eliminating those not tied to domestic violence or those that did not include a relevant image; I was left with 58 stories for a total of 79 domestic violence victims[[2]](#footnote-2). STATA was used to analyze...analyzes used for descriptive statistics.

Of the 79 domestic violence victims pictured, race could be determined for 79 of them. To assess the reliability of the coding, a random 10 percent sample of pictures was coded by a second coder. The intercoder reliability was 100 percent for race of each domestic violence victim pictured. For this coding, both the picture and any accompanying textual information were used. The race of each domestic violence victim in each picture was coded as African American, Hispanic, Caucasian or other[[3]](#footnote-3). In addition to race, the age of each domestic violence victim pictured was coded as younger than 18, between 18 and 64, or older than 64. Again, textual information accompanying the picture was used (often including the exact age of the person pictured). Intercoder reliability was 100 percent for age. Each person’s sex was coded as male or female. The intercoder reliability was 100 percent for the sex of the battered victim pictured. Both the picture and any accompanying textual information were used to identify the sex of the domestic violence victim.

**Results**

The three magazines combined published a total of 58 stories about domestic violence in the U.S. from 1976 thru 2010. *Newsweek* accounts for 31 of those, whereas *U.S. News & World Report* published 16, and *Time* accounted for 11 stories (Table 1). For all three magazines, the majority of people pictured with domestic violence stories were women with *U.S. News & World Report* having the highest proportion at 100%. Overall, 94% of pictured domestic violence victims are women and matches the proportion among actual domestic violence victims quite closely. This statistic supports hypothesis 1 and the work of Benedict (1992), Meyers (1997), and Hirsch (1994).

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

Table 2. shows that 86% of domestic violence victims pictured were between the ages of 18 and 64 which is a group that has a higher chance of experiencing domestic violence and matches the proportion among the actual domestic violence victims (DeKeseredy, 2000; Gelles, 2000; Straus, 1999). This supports hypothesis 2. When examining the numbers more closely, we see that Caucasians made up 76% of pictured victims whereas; African Americans made up 10%. Children receive 14% of media coverage but what is even more interesting is that all of the pictured children are Caucasian. The elderly did not elicit any media coverage in all three of the magazines. The most sympathetic age category that is represented in the table is children and they are portrayed exclusively as Caucasian.

[Insert Table 2 About Here]

As the literature suggests, the majority of people pictured with domestic violence stories were Caucasians (Table 3) with *U.S. News & World Report* having the lowest proportion at 73%. Overall, 88% of domestic violence victims pictured were Caucasian which supports hypothesis 3 in regards to race.

[Insert Table 3 About Here]

The data presented in Table 4. shows that the racial breakdown of the magazine domestic violence victims is hugely discrepant with the breakdown of actual domestic violence victims. Caucasians are overrepresented by more than 60% whereas African Americans are dramatically underrepresented and Hispanics are not present. This is consistent with Meyer’s (1997) arguments that Caucasians receive more media coverage than minority victims of domestic violence. Even though the actual percentage of African Americans among domestic violence victims is 29%, in the three news magazines 12% of domestic victims pictured are African American.

[Insert Table 4 About Here]

Table 5. illustrates that during the pre VAWA, there were more pictures of domestic violence victims and 57% of them were Caucasian. Coverage of African American makes up 7% of the victims. While the number of domestic violence victims pictured during the post VAWA shrinks, Caucasians still make up 33% of the coverage. The number of African Americans pictured decreases to 3% as well.

[Insert Table 5 About Here]

**Discussion**

It should be noted in Table 1. the *US News & World* report did not portray a single male in their coverage of domestic violence victims. This distorted portrait of domestic violence victims cannot help but reinforce negative stereotypes of domestic violence as a woman’s problem. By avoiding male victims, the media continues to reinforce patriarchal ideals and systemic and cultural issues such as gender inequality and male socialization continue to be ignored (Moorti, 2002). As a result, the media’s images perpetuate national ideologies through their focus on individualism and not attacking the structural forces that continue to marginalize women (Kozol, 1995). This finding supports Meyers (1994, 1997) work that domestic violence is framed to support the status quo and builds on the literature in how the media characterizes domestic violence (Kozol, 1995).

In regards to age (Table 2), I speculate the images of Caucasian children were used to illustrate to the media and government officials that this group was in need of additional protection from domestic violence (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). The public has a greater willingness to help domestic violence victims when they are children (Cohen, 1972; Jenkins, 1992; Chiricos, 1995) and children are more likely to get government assistance for domestic violence programs (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Perhaps, the lack of senior citizens pictured is due to the under reporting of this crime for this age category (Brandls & Cook-Daniels, 2002). It is interesting that the only time African Americans were portrayed in this category was in an age group that is considered deserving of violence as stated in Britto’s et al., (2007) research.

Based on race (Table 4), I speculate that the use of Caucasians gained greater sympathy for the victim and perhaps garnered more support for antiviolence policies (Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002). The underrepresentation in the depiction of African Americans as domestic violence victims could be due the subconscious stereotypes of them provoking their own violence and thus, not deserving of media attention (Meyers, 2004). It should be pointed out that all three magazines do not represent Hispanics amongst domestic violence victims (actual number: 23%). They are not fairly represented despite their increased numbers. This supports Dixon’s (1998) work that Hispanics do not have a presence with the news media. Despite the similarities between African Americans and Hispanics, coverage by the media is vastly different for these two groups. The misrepresentation of domestic violence victims continues to stigmatize minority groups. The media’s avoidance of race in addressing domestic violence jeopardizes the legitimacy of the antiviolence movement because it fails to address the barriers that minorities encounter (Richie, 2000). Minimizing minorities as battered victims supports the stereotypical view that domestic violence is a predominantly Caucasian problem in the United States, whose cases are more worthy of media attention, rather than educating the public that domestic violence touches upon all racial and ethnic groups.

In terms of the pre VAWA coverage (Table 5), I speculate that the influx of images may have been partly related to the deaths of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman that occurred in 1994. The fact that it involved O.J. Simpson may have led to the accompanying intense media coverage. The decrease in images post VAWA may be due to the convergence of state and federal laws recognizing domestic violence as a crime and not a social pathology to be sensationalized. It is interesting to note that domestic violence may have been portrayed more as a “Caucasian” policy in the pre VAWA era than previously thought to rally support for VAWA. The racial patterns in coverage were unaffected by the passing of the landmark antiviolence reform bill in 1994. It is clear that the media are not offering citizens a corrective to their misperceptions about the racial composition of domestic violence victims. Thus, how the media portrays domestic violence victims has important implications for public understanding of the issue as well as support for antiviolence policies (Lawrence, 2004; Sotirovic, 2003). This may help to explain some of the systemic and cultural barriers that minorities continue to face in reporting domestic violence.

**Limitations and Future Research**

As with any study, there are limitations to note. First, the content was limited to three news magazines. Although the news media are an important source of information, people also learn from other forms of media such entertainment news, newspapers, social media, and the internet. Future studies should investigate the portrayal of domestic violence victims in these mediums. In addition, future research may attempt to survey the news magazines photo editors who have selected images for domestic violence stories and ask them how they choose the pictures to include. Second, the domestic violence victims analyzed here represent only those covered by the news media and as Carlyle et al., (2008) illustrated, news coverage of domestic violence can be skewed in comparison to epidemiological data on domestic violence. Future research should compare news coverage of domestic violence victims with police and hospital data at the community level to better understand which types of victims are being selected for media coverage. Addressing the array of mediums for the dissemination of news and the influence these various types of medium has on public attitudes and opinions is necessary to stop perpetuating stereotypes about intimate partner violence.

**Conclusion**

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that media portrayals of domestic violence victims have changed very little over the last thirty years. The data about domestic violence coverage indicates that the proportion of African Americans portrayed is extremely low and is nonexistent for Hispanics. This bolsters Gilens’ (1996) claim that photo editors’ stereotypes can be crucial to understanding misrepresentations in media coverage of domestic violence victims. After all, the prevailing stereotypes about African Americans and Hispanics in terms of victim status are similar in which both groups are seen as attributing to their own violence. To the extent that photo editors may share these stereotypes, it makes sense that African Americans and Hispanics are underrepresented among the pictured victims of domestic violence. The fundamental changes in antiviolence policy ushered in by the passing of VAWA has not done much to change how the media portrays battered victims. This should not be much of a surprise given the racial stereotypes in play and the research suggesting that people rarely alter their views in the face of credible information (Nyan and Reifler, 2010). The media continues to provide inaccurate beliefs about domestic violence victims and deflects attention away from systemic causes of domestic violence and policy solutions that would address racial inequality and patriarchal socialization (Moorti, 2002).

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**Table 1: Men and Women among the Pictured Domestic Violence Victims**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Num. of Stories** | **Num. of People Pictured** | **Percentage Men** | **Percentage Women** |
| ***Time*** | 11 | 21 | 9% | 91% |
| ***Newsweek*** | 31 | 35 | 9% | 91% |
| ***US News & World Report*** | 16 | 22 | 0% | 100% |
| Total | 58 | 79 | 6% | 94% |

**Table 2: Age Distribution of “Media Domestic Violence Victims”**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Caucasians** | **African Americans** | **Hispanics** |
| **Media Domestic Violence Victims** |  |  |  |
| Under 18 | 14% | 0% | 0% |
| 18-64 | 76% | 10% | 0% |
| 65-Older | 0% | 0% | 0% |

**Table 3: Caucasians among the Pictured Domestic Violence Victims**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Num. of Stories** | **Num. of People Pictured** | **Percentage Caucasian** |
| ***Time*** | 11 | 22 | 95% |
| ***Newsweek*** | 31 | 35 | 97% |
| ***US News & World Report*** | 16 | 22 | 73% |
| Total | 58 | 79 | 88% |

**Table 4: Comparison of Media Domestic Violence Victims and Actual Domestic Violence Victims**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Race/Ethnicity** | **Percentage of Media Domestic Violence Victims** | **Percentage of Actual Domestic Violence Victims** |
| Caucasian | 88% | 24.8% |
| African American | 12% | 29.1% |
| Hispanic | 0% | 23.4% |

**Table 5: Domestic Violence Victims Coverage Pre VAWA and Post VAWA**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **1976-1994** | **1995-2010** |
| **Caucasian** | 57% | 33% |
| **African American** | 7% | 3% |
| **Hispanic** | 0% | 0% |
| **Total** | 64% | 36% |

1. Taken as whole, these three magazines have a circulation of over 9 million: *Newsweek* has an audience of 3, 100,000; *U.S. News & World Report* has a distribution of 2,350,000; and *Time* has the largest readership with 4,000,000 subscribers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There were numerous stories on domestic violence I did not include in my sample because: the story did not include any pictures; the story was an editorial or opinion column; the story was found to be irrelevant to the research topic; or the pictures in the story did not pertain to contemporary domestic violence in the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For purposes of this paper, I focused on African Americans, Hispanics, and Caucasians. People who did not identify with one of these racial groups were dropped from the sample. This included a total of six stories with six people. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)