Reporting violent crime against women: the discourse of ’stranger danger’ and the normalisation of male violence against intimates

Bethan Davies
University of Leeds, United Kingdom

A previous study on the reporting of violent crime (Clark, 1992) found that male perpetrators and female victims were subject to different naming practices depending on whether the victims were constructed as being to blame for the attack. Blame was ascribed on the basis of such things as dress, sexual history and occupation leading to a dichotomous division of women akin to the ’virgin’ / ’whore’ distinction. ’Blameless’ women were attacked by beasts and fiends, whereas ’culpable’ women were attacked by men referenced only with names and occupations. A transitivity analysis also indicated a removal or downplaying of agency from those who attacked culpable women.

Using equivalent reportage from The Sun, this is a diachronic study which investigates whether there have been any shifts in these discourses of blame and danger in the intervening 25 years. It uses a broadly critical discourse analytic approach, going beyond the framework deployed by Clark (1992), in order to explore the relationship between reporting practices and ideologies about violence towards women. In particular, it focuses on the relationship between perceived danger and public space: the discourse of ’stranger danger’ and the demonisation of unfamiliar males.

Through this study, it is evident that the representation of violence against women is still gendered. However, the nature of that gendering appears to have shifted: sexual history and appearance are no longer the main focus, instead it is whether the male perpetrator is familiar to the victim. Blame is much more likely to be attributed to attackers who are strangers whereas the culpability of male intimates and acquaintances is downplayed.


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