Domestic Violence and Sports News: How Gender Affects People's Understanding

Erin Willis, University of Colorado – Boulder, USA

Patrick Ferrucci, University of Colorado – Boulder, USA

Chad Painter, University of Dayton, USA

Edson Tandoc, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Abstract

Domestic abuse frequently appears in news headlines among professional athletes and has ignited much debate about personal conduct off the field. From Ray Rice and football to Hope Solo and soccer – domestic abuse has occurred. This study examined if and how participants differentiate between male and female victims and perpetrators of violence; specifically, whether participants placed blame differently when presented with a health message in a sports context when it involved a male or female athlete as perpetrator. Media influence topics of public conversation, and domestic abuse is an especially important public health issue. Sports media may be an outlet by which to reach both victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse. Results and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Social Identity Theory, Gender Stereotypes, Experiment, Sports Communication

In September 2014, the National Football League (NFL) suspended star running back Ray Rice indefinitely, while his team, the Baltimore Ravens, released him after the celebrity news website TMZ published a video depicting Rice punching and subsequently knocking out his then-fiancé Janay Palmer in an Atlantic City casino elevator in February. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell initially suspended Rice for only two games, but he increased the suspension after viewing the full video. From when Rice's situation became public and he received his initial two-game suspension, to when TMZ released the second full video, the media, specifically the sports media, publicly and thoroughly derided Rice and openly mocked the NFL for delivering such a minor suspension (Van Natta Jr. & Van Valkenburg, 2014). During the time Rice's situation unfolded, police arrested and charged United States soccer star Hope Solo with domestic violence, but that situation received far less media scrutiny, even allowing for the vast disparity in popularity between professional football and soccer in the United States (Chambers, 2014). In fact, numerous major media organizations eventually began arguing that American society exhibits a clearly sexist double-standard when discussing domestic violence (e.g., Baragona, 2014; Chambers, 2014; Dupont, 2014; Littmann, 2014; McDonough, 2014).

Domestic violence as a public health issue became a popular, mainstream discussion following Rice's altercation (Baragona, 2014). However, he is far from the only athlete accused or convicted of domestic violence. Current and former athletes such as Josh Brown, O.J. Simpson, Johnny Manziel, Greg Hardy, Ray McDonald and Tonya Harding, as well as numerous others also have reported histories of domestic abuse.

Nearly one in four women (22.3%) and one in seven men (14%) have been the victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner (Breiding et al., 2014). However, domestic violence is often not reported, so it is hard to know the true prevalence (National Institutes of Health, 2015). One possible avenue to reach potential domestic abuse perpetrators and victims is through sports media. Men, especially young men, engage with sports media. For example, ESPN reaches approximately 94 million (or 81% of) homes in the United States (ESPN, 2015). Its viewership is 75% male, with 29% of those falling between the ages of 18-34 (ESPN, 2015). In the wake of both the Rice and Solo incidents, many argued that the disparity in coverage of the two could be explained by the mere fact that the domestic assault of a woman is different than domestic assault of a man. Coates (2014), in The Atlantic, for

example, argued that Rice's act is one of power, one that historically is "insidious and sometimes lethal" and that "this is the tradition with which Ray Rice will be permanently affiliated. Hope Solo is affiliated with a different tradition—misdemeanor assault." Regardless of how these acts differ, a resounding majority of the media coverage surrounding both these acts acknowledged one societal benefit that came from these unfortunate incidents: the public dialog regarding domestic violence (McDonough, 2014).

The purpose of the current study is to examine if and how participants differentiate between male and female victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. Specifically, the researchers explored whether participants place blame differently when they are presented with a domestic abuse health message, delivered in a sports context, when it involves a male or female athlete as the perpetrator. Beginning to answer these questions is important because it may signal how health communicators can successfully deliver messages about domestic violence when talking to sports consumers.

Literature Review

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory, at its core, argues two essential points: that people engender to see themselves holding numerous positive traits (Tajfel, 1982), and that a person's identity is tied to being members of groups with people who hold similar values (Turner, 1982). A person's conception of himself or herself "derives from membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1982, p. 63). Individuals maintain a sense of self-esteem that reinforces their self-worth by the mere action of differentiating between their group and another, by forming internal in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This practice of differentiating between groups forms the basis of in-group, out- group bias (Turner, 1982). When people consider themselves a group member, they become acutely aware of the differences between the group they belong to (the in-group), and, on the other hand, every person that is not part of said group (the out-group) (Gardikiotis, 2008). For people in the in-group, they understand the similar characteristics between members of their group, but, rather significantly, recognize the differentiations between them and people outside their group. Linville and Fischer (1993) found that people other based on in-group and out-group bias. These groups can be formed based on gender, race, class, or almost any characteristic that a person believes

is essential to their in-group. For the purposes of the current study, gender is the key characteristic for each group.

An individual believes that everyone in his or her in-group is distinctive, but tends to consider the out-group as essentially uniform (Brewer, 1979). Thus, they tend to other the out-group. Bodenhausen, Macrae, and Sherman (1999) posited that social identity theory remains the most effective way to study how people apply gender stereotypes.

Social Identity Theory and the Media

People tend not to associate as much with members of an out-group so the media inevitably become the main disseminator of characteristics (e.g., Billings, 2004; Harris, 1994). Thus, a question often asked by researchers is whether participants rate messages differently when they feature stereotype consistent or inconsistent text. Previous researchers, for example, have shown that the relatively recent rebirth of partisan news sources such as Fox News or MSNBC allow people to consume only messages aligned with their own beliefs while distrusting media sources they perceive as from their political out-group (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). This practice can have a destructive effect, with people discarding potentially important information because it came from a member of their self-codified out-group (Tajfel, 1982). In terms of stories concerning domestic violence, if people consider gender as part of their social identity, which researchers show is a consistent basis for in-groups and out-groups (e.g., Linville & Fischer, 1993), then they may apply stereotypes and discard or think differently about news concerning a domestic violence victim from the out-group.

Stereotyping

Devine (1989) recommended a model for understanding how people stereotype that is both controlled and automatic, and includes two discrete stages of stereotyping. The first stage, activation, occurs subconsciously and automatically. In this model, people are aware of cultural stereotypes and have no choice but to acknowledge them when presented with a person of said culture. Because we live in a world with so much media, it is impossible to have a cogent understanding of common stereotypes. No matter whether a person agrees with a stereotype, they have knowledge of the stereotype, and thus defined notions activate in the mind subconsciously when presented with a member of that group (Devine, 1989). The second stage is application. This stage does not occur in the subconscious; it is a controlled

process. Once a stereotype has been activated, a person makes a deliberate choice whether to apply it. Bodenhausen et al. (1999) noted that people differ in their motivation to apply or disregard a stereotype for a variety of reasons.

Numerous studies have tested Devine's model (e.g., Ferrucci, Tandoc, Painter, & Leshner, 2013; Leshner, 2006; Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997; Dijksterhuis & Van Knippenberg, 1996). In one study, digitally produced photos of women and men were shown to participants whose reaction speeds were timed, and participants responded more quickly to stereotype-consistent photos (Dovidio et al., 1997). This finding demonstrated the model's activation stage timed reactions measure automatic processes. Dijksterhuis and Van Knippenberg (1996) conducted three experiments and found that, when primed with a stereotype, participants acted consistent with Devine's model. Ferrucci et al. (2013) gave participants stereotype consistent and inconsistent news stories concerning baseball players, and then asked them to apply or not apply stereotypes and, further, whether these messages were credible or not. This study examined the application stage because it allowed participants to apply or not apply stereotypes. In the current study, researchers also will observe the application stage by asking participants to apply or not apply stereotypes to stories concerning domestic violence.

Identification

Identification is a process where audience members forget themselves and temporarily adopt the perspective of another, usually a character in a text (Cohen, 2001). It is different from fandom, liking, similarity, affinity, or imitation in that in these, the viewer positions himself in himself, while in identification, the viewer positions himself in the character's perspective (Konijn, Nije Bijvank, & Bushman, 2007). Thus, Cohen (2001) posited that identification "culminates in a cognitive and emotional state in which the audience member is aware not of himself or herself as an audience member, but rather imagines being one of the characters in the text" (p. 252). It is not feeling about the character, but feeling just like how the character feels. This conceptualization of identification is broken down into three attributes. Cohen (2001) argued that identification is a process of losing self-awareness, a response to textual features designed to provoke identification, and something that involves not the projection of one's identity onto someone else but rather the internalization of a point of view other than

one's own. Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) used this explication of identification in their discussion of narrative engagement. They argued, "locating one's self in the story constitutes cognitive perspective taking, an understanding of events and situations from within the story, not as an objective observer" (p. 323). Thus, cognitive perspective- taking is offered as one of the three dimensions of identification, along with empathy and sympathy (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009).

Stets and Burke (2000) argued that the concept of identification and social identity theory can be linked intrinsically. In an essay concerning the two fundamentally similar ideas, the authors wrote that while there are differences in how scholars apply the two concepts, it is more important for future research to link them to understand how people identify within a group. In fact, people find a message to be more credible when they identify with a person in a media message and consider themselves part of that in-group (Sternthal, Dholakia, and Leavitt, 1978; O'keefe, 1987).

Gender Stereotypes

Helgeson (2002) argues that gender stereotypes are beliefs about traits and responsibilities belonging to each gender such as gender role behaviors (e.g., men are "bread winners"), physical features (e.g., women are voluptuous), or careers and occupations (e.g., men are high-powered executives). Gender roles are cultural definitions of what men and women typically do and should do, depending on what society deems as acceptable behavior (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011; Eagly, 2009). For example, in the United States, traditional norms of the male gender suggest that men should avoid feminine activities, be "masculine," seek success and accomplishment, not show weakness, and engage in violence if necessary (Levant & Richmond, 2007; Addis & Mahalik, 2003); traditional norms of the feminine gender indicate that women should be nice, physically attractive, nurturing, domestic, and submissive to men (Mahalik, Morray, Coonerty-Femiano, et al., 2005; Crawford & Unger, 2000). Research on gender stereotypes posits gender roles affect individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making (Eagly, 2013; Barker, Ricardo, Nascimento, et al., 2010; Higgins, Hoffman, & Dworkin, 2010).

According to Eagly (2013), individuals are expected to perform activities that are within their culturally defined gender role. Previous research of gender stereotypes typically focuses on

males and females behaving in stereotypically masculine and feminine ways (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Burgess & Borgida, 1999) and suggests that men and women are considered more effective and are liked more by their peers when engaging in behaviors consistent with their own gender roles (Carli, 2002). Numerous studies identify weakness as a stereotype of women, that the media consistently depict women as victims and men as the perpetrator of acts of violence toward women (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011). This study presents participants with stereotype- consistent messages of male athletes victimizing female domestic partners, but also presents participants with stereotype-inconsistent messages of female athletes victimizing male domestic partners.

Theoretical Synthesis

This study examines how participants react to stories featuring both male and female athletes domestically assaulting partners of the opposite sex. Participants will be primed with short stories that prominently feature male or female athlete perpetrators. According to social identity theory and the concept of identity, participants who consider themselves a member of a social group defined by gender could stereotype the other, thus allowing for the disparity in terms of reactions toward male- and female-perpetrated domestic violence. By showing participants stimuli that present stereotype-consistent situations (male domestic violence toward women) and stereotype-inconsistent situations (female domestic violence toward men), researchers also examine whether participants stereotype both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. Therefore, this study asks:

> H1. Participants will assign more blame to male victims than female victims.
>
> H2. Participants will assign more blame to male perpetrators than female perpetrators.
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> RQ1. What is the relationship between participants' gender and victim's gender in assigning blame to the victim?
>
> RQ2. What is the relationship between participants' gender and victim's gender in assigning blame to the perpetrator?

Method

Procedure

This study is a 2 (gender of athlete: male and female) x 2 (stereotype: consistent or inconsistent) x 4 (message repetition) mixed experimental design where gender is a between-subjects factor while stereotype consistency and message repetitions are within- subject

factors. Undergraduate students were recruited from a medium-sized Midwestern university to participate in the online experiment in exchange for course credit. The researchers eliminated incomplete responses, which left the study with 84 participants almost evenly split in the two gender conditions (n1=44, n2=40). Participants randomly were assigned to one of two conditions based on the month they were born. They were directed to the corresponding hyperlink for their assigned condition and then encountered a standard consent form and a set of instructions on how to proceed. During the experiment, each participant read four pre-tested fictional news stories, with one condition reading all stories with female athlete perpetrators and male victims, and the other reading stories with all male athlete perpetrators and female victims. The stories did not utilize actual athletes' names so as not to predispose participants to judge based on feelings about actual athlete. Both conditions read the same stories, with generic athletic names. The only thing that changed between conditions was the gender of both the victim and perpetrator. So, for example, participants in condition one and condition two each read the exact same four stories, with only names changed; the sport each athlete played stayed the same in each condition. Participants then answered Likert-scale questions about blame and gender roles. Finally, they answered a set of demographic questions before they were debriefed.

Sample

The average age was 19.64 (SD = 1.37). Some 59% are females and 80.7% identified themselves as Caucasians.

Predictor Variables

Gender of victim. The participants randomly were assigned to one of two groups. The gender of the victim and perpetrator were manipulated by using female-sounding or male-sounding names, as well as by assigning male or female pronouns to the subjects in the stimulus materials.

Gender of participant. The participants were asked to report their gender identity in the questionnaire. Forty-one percent were males while 59% were females.

Dependent Variables

This study adapted a domestic blame scale developed and validated by earlier studies (Petretic-Jackson, Sandberg, & Jackson, 1994). The scale includes 15 items rated in a 7-point

Likert scale. Seven items measure victim blaming while five items measure the blame placed on the perpetrator. Three items were about social blame, but these did not achieve an acceptable reliability value. Thus, the societal blame scale was excluded from this study.

Blaming the victim. The participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each of the following statements, using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree): "It is the wife who provoked the husband to physically assault her; The wife encouraged domestic violence by using bad judgment, provoking the husband's anger, and so on; The wife was physically assaulted by her husband because she deserved it; Domestic violence can be avoided by the wife trying harder to please her husband; The rise of the 'women's movement' and feminism has increased the occurrence of domestic violence; Wives exaggerate the physical and psychological effects of domestic violence; In our society, it is a husband's prerogative to strike his wife in his own home." The items were rephrased depending on the condition. The items formed a reliable scale, Cronbach's alpha = .94. In general, the participants did not attach a lot of blame to the victim, M = 2.25, SD = 1.05.

Blaming the perpetrator. The participants also were asked to rate their level of agreement with each of the following statements, using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree): "The husband who physically assaulted his wife should be locked up for the act; The husband who physically assaulted his wife is 'mentally ill' or psychologically disturbed; Domestic violence can be mainly attributed to peculiarities in the husband's personality; The husband who physically assaulted his wife cannot control his violent behavior; The husband who physically assaulted his wife had a dominant, aggressive father who also engaged in domestic violence." The items also were rephrased depending on the condition. The items formed a reliable scale, Cronbach's alpha = .84, after the first item was excluded. In general, the participants only lightly blamed the perpetrator, M = 3.38, SD = 1.13.

Results

The study's two hypotheses predicted a main effect of the gender of the victim and the perpetrators on the level of blame. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test the differences between the two conditions in the level of blame assigned to a) the victim and b) the perpetrator. H1 predicted that male victims would be blamed more than female victims would. H1 is supported, $F(1, 85) = 4.10$, $p<.05$ partial $\eta^2 =.05$. Male

victims (M= 2.48, SE = .15) got a higher level of blame than did female victims (M= 2.03, SE = .16). H2 predicted that male perpetrators would be blamed more than female perpetrators would. H2 is supported, F (1, 85) = 4.23, p < .07, partial η^2 =.04. Male perpetrators (M= 3.62, SE = .18) got a higher level of blame than did female perpetrators (M= 3.17, SE = .17).

RQ1 asked about the interaction effect between participants' gender and the victim's gender in assigning blame to the victim. The analysis found a significant interaction effect on victim blaming, F (1, 85) = 3.98, p < .05, partial η^2 =.05. Though male (M= 2.02, SE = .26) and female participants (M= 2.05, SE = .18) assigned the same level of blame on female victims, male participants (M= 2.84, SE = .21) assigned more blame on the victim than did female participants (M= 2.06, SE = .21) when the victim was male (see Figure 1). RQ2 asked about the interaction effect between participants' gender and the victim's gender in assigning blame to the perpetrator. However, the analysis did not find any significant interaction effect.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to understand how participants differentiate between male and female victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, and whether males or females are blamed more in the role of perpetrator. Considering recent events in professional sports, it is important for sports journalists to understand how to report public health issues such as domestic abuse. While many people hold gender-role stereotypes (Eagly, 2013; Barker, et al., 2010; Higgins, et al., 2010), media coverage of issues such as domestic abuse could activate such stereotypes in readers and influence their attitudes and behaviors. It is not often mass media report on male victims of domestic abuse or females as domestic abuse perpetrators; however, the current study found some interesting insights into stereotypical expectations about domestic abuse scenarios.

We hypothesized that male victims would be blamed more than female victims, and this hypothesis was supported. Participants (whether female or male) blamed male victims more than female victims in scenarios of domestic abuse. Stereotypically, most think of domestic abuse as being between a male perpetrator and a female victim. When the scenario was opposite, with a female perpetrator and a male victim, participants put more blame on the victim. Participants may have answered using activated stereotypes of gender roles in

domestic abuse situations, and because few mass-mediated messages are seen portraying female perpetrators and male victims—it is difficult for participants to perceive male victims as being in the same situation as female victims. This finding shows that when participants read paragraphs depicting domestic violence, they activate long- standing gender stereotypes regardless of their own gender: Men are masculine and strong, and sometimes they assault weaker women.

Additionally, participants might view female perpetrators as "weaker" than male perpetrators and unable to inflict much harm to male victims. Because both male and female participants put more blame on male victims, it stands to reason that participants do not perceive a female perpetrator's act of domestic abuse the same as a male perpetrator's abuse of a female victim. This finding reflects stereotypical gender-roles (Eagly, 2009; Helgeson, 2002) and characterizes women as secondary to men, less able or capable (Cotter, et al., 2011; Crawford & Unger, 2000). Domestic abuse may be stereotyped as something men "do" to women, being a masculine activity that requires strength. It may also be that participants expect women to be the victims of domestic violence because so few cases are reported of women as perpetrators in domestic violence situations. Further, it is uncommon to see mass mediated reports of men being abused by women.

We also hypothesized that male perpetrators would be blamed more than female perpetrators. The results support this hypothesis. Again, thinking of domestic abuse as a masculine activity (Moore, Stuart, McNulty, et al., 2010), it makes sense that male perpetrators would be blamed because women are stereotyped as being weaker than men and unable to cause harm. Participants were strong in their support of traditional, stereotypical gender roles, including how domestic abuse happens and who is to blame. In this case, male perpetrators received more blame than female perpetrators, and perhaps media coverage of domestic abuse is to blame. We typically see domestic abuse cases where males are the perpetrators and females are the victims. Rarely do we see male victims of domestic abuse where a female acted as the perpetrator. Further, this could relate to the number of cases reported where females acted as the perpetrator. It might be that male victims underreport domestic violence because of gender stereotypes and may feel shame for being the victim of a female's physical abuse.

Our first research question (RQ1) asked about assigning blame. Interestingly, when the

victim in the stimuli material was female, both male and female participants in the experiment assigned the same level of blame to the male perpetrator, but when the victim in the stimuli material was male, male participants assigned more blame to the female perpetrator than did female participants. If male participants think of themselves as "masculine" or "macho," most likely, they may have difficulty identifying as a victim of domestic abuse where a female is the perpetrator. Processing these results through the lens of social identity theory, the majority of male participants had "in group" thinking in regard to gender roles in domestic abuse scenarios. Little sympathy was given to male victims of domestic abuse in this study. This finding correlates well with social identity theory: The male participants did not believe they could be victims and therefore needed to blame the male victims; this thinking allows the male participants to still strongly hold their beliefs about their own in-group such as having strength, power and other masculine characteristics. In effect, they othered the male victim and decided that person was not a real member of their in-group of males.

While our second research question (RQ2) about gender and assigning blame was not significant, it is important to point out that participants are traditional college-aged students and already hold stereotypical views of gender roles. Mass media reinforce society's views of traditional gender roles and stereotypical behaviors (Ter Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010). Regardless of priming, participants assigned more blame to both male perpetrators and male victims.

Perhaps it is so rare that we hear about female perpetrators of domestic abuse that it is difficult to imagine, thus participants resort to previous information they know about domestic abuse and apply those stereotypes. Or perhaps, as discussed by Coates (2014), people do not believe that men can be the victim of domestic violence and see the incident as more of a "misdemeanor assault." Growing up, it is common to hear, "Never hit a girl." When domestic abuse happens in a way that we understand (i.e., male perpetrator, female victim), then we know how to assign blame. But when the standard script is flipped, participants had difficulty identifying with the change in gender role stereotypes. In terms of practical implications, it is important to recognize the male victims in situations with female perpetrators may feel embarrassed or traumatized by the domestic abuse due to the reversal in gender roles and society's stereotype as to the way domestic abuse should occur. Therefore,

public health practitioners and mental health professionals must recognize the opportunity to reach this population discreetly. Male victims may be less inclined to seek professional help in times of trauma. Health communicators may educate the general public on domestic abuse with female perpetrators. Sports are alembic to society, as the goings-on on the court, field, or floors of sport tend to act as a transforming agent on society (Harris, 1994). Public health messages should also be part of the public agenda through sports coverage. For example, issues of race, gender and religion have long become part of the public agenda through sports coverage (Harris, 1994). This study shows that participants blame male athletes for incidents of domestic violence against women and do not blame the victim. This is a positive finding. But our participants, especially men, blame men when they are victims. Regardless of whether men can be victims of domestic violence or just misdemeanor assault (Coates, 2014), victims of any gender should not be blamed. The sports media reach a broad male base and should be cognizant of this fact when reporting on men as victims of assault via a female athlete. The average age of participants in this study was 19.64; ESPN reaches a largely male audience, including one in three viewers between 18-34 (ESPN, 2015). With contextual coverage, we may see a change in the views concerning how male victims are blamed.

Using sports media as a conduit for disseminating public health messages makes sense because so often athletes are victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse. Discussing domestic violence educates audiences on the public health issue; however, caution should be taken so as not to blame victims. While the results of this study are useful, there are limitations. A student sample was used for study, and future research might test the results on an older, more mature audience. Future research might examine racial and ethnic stereotypes related to domestic abuse. In conclusion, the results from the current study add to the literature in regards to understanding how stereotyping works in regards to victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse. Further, this research informs both journalism and public relations in messaging about this sensitive topic. Strides must be made among the general public regarding domestic abuse and the ways in which public health topics are discussed. Sports organizations such as the NFL should take part in such discussions and be a leading voice in standing up against domestic abuse and the stigma attached to it.

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Figure 1 Interaction Effect on Victim-Blaming