All the News that’s Fit to Print?
A Content Analysis of Newspapers’ Portrayal of Rape and Sexual Assault

by

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ABSTRACT

Newspapers both reflect and reinforce dominant societal norms and cultural beliefs. The way newspapers portray instances of rape impacts the public’s understanding of sex crimes. This study analyzed newspaper coverage of rape and sexual assault, focusing on the types of rapes that were covered and the language used to describe the victim, the perpetrator and the crime itself. Over 200 articles from United States newspapers were reviewed. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to explore the narratives that newspapers construct about rape. The results indicate that reporters use different language and writing styles, depending upon the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, whether the victim aggressively physically resisted or not, and the circumstances surrounding the crime. It is important to increase public awareness of bias in the media in order to ensure community support for all victims of rape and equal treatment in the criminal justice system for perpetrators.
1. INTRODUCTION

In April 1989 a woman was raped while jogging through New York’s City’s Central Park. The assault was particularly brutal and it left the young investment banker close to death. What followed in the wake of this assault was a storm of media reports, public outcry and national news coverage. The story of the Central Park Jogger became a case of national interest and importance. Over twenty years later, the case is still well known; Trisha Meili, the victim, recently published the best-selling memoir *I Am The Central Park Jogger: A Story of Hope and Possibility* (2003).

In the year following the attack, the New York City Police Department received 3,126 reports of rape. Rape is historically one of the most underreported crimes (Gavey & Gow, 2001), so it is safe to assume the actual number of rapes was much higher. Many of these victims never had their stories reported in local newspapers, and most of the cases that were mentioned probably received less than 200 words. This begs the question: what was it about Meili’s case that fascinated the public and inspired newspaper reporters to consider the event so newsworthy? And, are there certain types of rape, certain types of victims, or certain types of perpetrators that get systematically included in, or excluded from, the media’s discussion of rape?

The media can both perpetuate and reflect cultural myths and beliefs (Reinholtz, Muehlenhard, Phelps & Satterfield, 1995; Korn & Efrat, 2004). Therefore, the media serves as a socializing factor that influences conventional values, and also a mirror that reveals common attitudes and assumptions.
(Brownmiller, 1975). By examining various media sources, researchers can identify, isolate, and examine common societal beliefs.

Americans are exposed to many different forms of media, such as television, feature films, documentaries, radio, and newspapers. Newspapers have been a dominant avenue through which the public has gleaned information about important current events and issues for over 100 years (Korn & Efrat, 2004; Roshco, 1975; Benedict, 1992). According to the Newspaper Association of America, in 2008 51% of men and 46% of women regularly read the daily news. Most households regularly receive the local newspaper, and many more people are exposed to newspapers on a less frequent basis. Newspapers are unique as a social influence because the news is almost always presented as a “media with authority” (Markowitz, 2006). Because television programs and films are fictional accounts, most people understand that these programs reflect the authors’ and creators’ beliefs and ideologies; newspaper accounts are often assumed to be objective and true (Lamb & Koen, 1995; Bennet, 1983). For this reason, it is important to be critical of how newspapers represent their narratives, and to examine potential biases that may pervade newspaper accounts.

In addition, sociologists, psychologists, and critics of the press have pointed out that news reports are often framed as stories, or as what Bennet (1983) called drama narratives. By fitting real-life events into the conventions of storytelling, newspapers standardize stories, and lose much of the complexity involved in the actual events. This narrowing of the narratives can have the affect of narrowing the public’s understanding of crime, and the actors involved. Romero & Stewart (1999) theorized that the mass media cultivates master narratives, which influence the way
the public interprets events and experiences. Master narratives are stories that are frequently told in popular culture, until they become implicitly the way the public understands events in their world. In this thesis, I argue that newspaper articles reiterate cultural master narratives about rape. Because newspapers are such an important socializing factor, it is important to understand the intricacies of these master narratives, and to explore newspapers’ representations of crime, criminals and victims. Because most individuals are not personally victimized, nor are they criminals, newspapers are one of the major ways in which most people are exposed to real crimes. Thus, newspapers’ portrayal of crime affects the public’s attitudes and understandings. And by influencing public opinion and attitudes, newspapers can affect how people vote, make decisions as jurors, and treat perpetrators and victims.

Rape is a taboo subject that is not frequently discussed. For this reason, newspapers’ portrayals of instances of rape and sexual assault are especially important, since a crucial part of the way the public understands sex crimes is through newspaper accounts. Representations of rape and sexual assault are unique for several reasons. In instances of rape, the perpetrator is often not the only individual whose actions are questioned. Often, the victim of rape falls under intense scrutiny as well (Krahé, 1988). Newspapers have the ability to represent rape victims in a sympathetic light, and to challenge and discredit rape myths. However, too often newspapers cast aspersions on the victim’s character and only add to the negative image of rape victims.

Feminists and victim advocates have considered rape a topic of interest since the early 1970s. Social psychologists have contributed greatly to the study of myths
surrounding rape. There is a specific set of frame narratives that are accepted as prototypical rape scenarios in American culture. These scenarios can lead to a high prevalence of victim blame. Examples of these myths are that rapists are insane strangers, or that a healthy female adult can successfully stave off an attacker if she really wants to. These myths have important cultural implications. For example, if people consider the typical rapist to be a stranger, then acquaintance rape may be seen as a less likely scenario, and victims of acquaintance rape my be less likely to be believed, and perpetrators of acquaintance rape may be less likely to be prosecuted.

The public looks to newspapers to get an accurate picture of the types of crimes that are occurring, the types of people who are being victimized, the types of perpetrators who are committing these crimes, and the frequency that these crimes occur (Ditton & Duffy, 1983). In other words, the public reasonably expects an accurate representation of crime. In this study, I explore the different narratives that the press is constructing about rape and rape victims.

I examined over 200 articles from over 30 newspapers around the country to explore the specific ways that newspaper reports depict instances of sexual assault and rape. I searched for patterns of familiar storylines, and the different rates at which subtypes of rape were represented. I looked first at the visibility of these different narratives—simply looking at how many articles and how many words were written about certain types of rape. I then looked more deeply at whether differences appeared in the way that the reporters discussed particular types of rape. In other words, were there differences in style that also emerged, depending on the
circumstances surrounding the crime, or characteristics of the victims and perpetrators?

Underlying my research is the assumption that newspapers shape, define, and reflect the way the public understands the crime of rape. My study builds off of a strong foundation of related research that also examines how sex crimes are represented in the media. I will review this research, as well as theories on critical discourse analysis, and the feminist body of literature that examines cultural understandings of rape and rape myth. This review will provide the context for understanding my own research questions and the methodology I employed to address these questions.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

For more than seventy years, sociologists, social psychologists, writers, and artists have explored the ways that exposure to mass media affects the public. In this section of my review I will explore the development of media research and theory, the history of discourse analysis, and research on the influence of news reports and the press in particular.

There has been an important shift in the theoretical approach used to examine media effects. Much of the early research examined the effects of media exposure on the individual (See, for example: Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, 1977), but a more recent body of work strives to understand how mass media influences the public and society as a whole (Romero & Stewart, 1999; Dijk, 1985). This more recent approach provides the theoretical framework for my study, but it is important to start with an understanding of initial attempts to scientifically study the effects of media.

Effects Studies

Early psychological research on mass media focused mostly on determining whether or not violence and aggression can be learned from television and other media. Bandura, Ross, & Ross’s classic 1961 study on modeling aggression quickly became the inspiration for most media research. In this study, children either observed an adult role model behaving aggressively towards a large toy doll, or behaving passively. Children who were exposed to an aggressive role model later
behaved much more aggressively towards the doll than their counterparts did. This research, and Bandura’s later works, *Aggression: a social learning analysis* (1971), and *Social Learning Theory* (1977), served to bring attention to observational learning and opened the door for theorists to explore what children, as well as adults, learn observationally from the watching the ‘model’ of the media. It is worth noting that an interesting and complex body of research on the effects of mass communication existed before Bandura revolutionized the field by bringing it into the forefront of popular psychology. However, early social scientists mostly posed questions about the dangers of mass media instead of conducting their own empirical studies. Their writing was mostly political, and warned against the potential consequences of too much exposure to mass media, such as increased propensity for violence. For a comprehensive review see Joseph T. Klapper’s *The Effects of Mass Communication* (1960).

In the decades since Bandura, researchers have explored the effects of several different forms of media. There has been extensive research on the effects of watching violent television and films (Eron, 1980; Eisenberg, 1980). Most of these studies examine whether or not watching television alone can make normally non-violent individuals become more aggressive. Several interesting studies have looked at the causal relationships between watching pornography and committing or endorsing violence against women (Donnerstein, 1980). More recently, a great deal of attention has been paid to the behavioral effects of video games and new interactive technology (Dill & Till, 2007).
Almost all of these early studies examine whether or not an individual’s own aggressive beliefs, tendencies, and behaviors are affected by witnessing violent media. Only recently have researchers sought to look at more complicated concepts, such as how video games influence gender role beliefs (Dill & Till, 2007).

**Master Narratives and Framing**

Although effects studies on aggression remained the prominent form of mass media research, sociologists and social psychologists started branching out in the late seventies. These researchers began to look closely at how media could influence public opinion and cultural norms. Erving Goffman’s innovative work, *Frame Analysis* (1974), established the theoretical background for much of this social science research. Goffman defined frame analysis as the “examination […] of the organization of experience” (11). Framing is interpreting events and narratives according to a schema. It involves classifying new information according to common cultural concepts and themes, and fitting new information into existing notions or ideas about the world. Goffman’s goal was to understand the basic frameworks that society provides for “making sense” of events. Dowler (2006) suggested that frames guide the selection, presentation and evaluation of information, and allow people to put stories into categories. For example, a person who believes that criminals cannot change or be reformed would interpret stories about crime through this frame or lens. Thus, when reading or hearing a story about a criminal, this person may be more likely to notice and remember that the criminal is a repeat offender, or interpret ambiguous information to mean that this criminal is evil at his core. Frame analysis
can also be used to explain how dominant societal values and beliefs shape our behavior; it suggests that dominant cultural ideologies and beliefs affect how people interpret their experiences, and that these altered interpretations can lead to changes in behavior (Dowler, 2006).

Romero and Stewart (1999), in their brilliant discussion of feminist theory, *Women's Untold Stories*, introduced the theory that mass media cultivates ‘master narratives,’ which influence the way the public interprets events and experiences. The authors posited that a culture offers certain common narratives that become “tools to understanding” oneself and others (xiii). These narratives support the dominant power structure and enforce stereotypes about gender, class, race, and sexuality. These stories, which are reiterated again and again by popular culture, become little more than “plot filled stereotypes” that help people interpret their own experiences (Romero & Stewart, 1999, xiv). These narratives influence not only external beliefs about others, but also internal beliefs about oneself. Master narratives frequently are developed by, and enforced with, mass media such as movies, books, television, and newspapers, as well as the stories that people share with each other every day. Romero and Stewart’s concept differed from other existing theory in that it strongly emphasized how these narratives can be used as agents of oppression.

Many of the studies I reviewed mention frame narratives and social frames, and build upon the work of Goffman and Romero and Stewart. Dowler (2006) looked at the dominant discourse on rape expressed by television news. He suggested that the news uses frames to guide their selection and discussion of individual rape cases. He argued that the news fits its reports of rape cases into preexisting
narratives, and describes victims according to preexisting notions about victims of rape. Similarly, Mooney, in her 2007 study on the news coverage of a high-profile rape case in Scotland explains that the victim and the perpetrator involved in the case were understood through “social frames” (204). The victim was fit into a certain role, and the perpetrator was fit into another. This simplifies the story, and makes it easier for the public to absorb and to understand. However, as a consequence, the news fails to challenge social norms and expectations. Although Meyers (1997) did not explicitly use the term frame narratives, her ideas seem to based on this theory. She argues that most articles on rape must have “local coherence” to be published (13). Local coherence is when a story makes sense within our understanding of society, according to our stereotypes, assumptions and myths.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

In the mid-eighties, the sociologist Teun Van Dijk contributed a great deal to defining and forming the method of critical discourse analysis. This method critiques literature and the media, analyzing problematic concepts and themes (Van Dijk, 1985). Van Dijk called the emerging field of discourse analysis “one of the most conspicuous and interesting developments in the humanities and social sciences in the past decade” (1985, xi). Similarly to Romero and Stewart (1999), Van Dijk saw discourse analysis as a tool that would allow social scientists to question authority and the current power structure. He saw it as a potential “basis of political action.” Van Dijk suggested using discourse analysis as a way of challenging the artificial power relationships that create a false and oppressive reality. Other social scientists have
since elaborated on Van Dijk’s body of work, developing methods of content analysis and textual analysis. These methods all systematically explore texts and the messages that these texts convey to the public (Carpenter, 2002; Schiffrin et al. 2001; Meyers 1997).

Carpenter (2002) defines content analysis as systematically using rules to code bodies of text. She explained that this method is most useful for condensing large amounts of text into a finite number of categories that can be explored both qualitatively and quantitatively. Carpenter suggested that content analysis also could be used for describing changes over time, and making comparisons. Dowler (2006) adds that content analysis is primarily used to “identify patterns, themes or biases” (386). Content analysis can produce two types of coding protocols. One examines manifest content, which is physically present and countable. An example would be identifying whether or not an article mentions the victim’s age. Latent content, on the other hand, is interpretable, and looks for an underlying implicit message in a text (Dowler, 2006). For example, examining whether an article is trying create fear in the reader.

Using the techniques of content analysis Meyers (1997) identified several literary devices that were problematic in newspapers’ discussions of rape victims. These were: vagueness, overcompleteness, presuppositions, concealments, euphemisms, and blaming the victim. She stated, “the purpose of discourse and textual analysis is to recognize what is implicit” (14). She also noted the importance of paying close attention to language and its usage, and insisted that this method be
used to “explore the discursive structures and rhetorical strategies of […] the text” (13).

In my own study I have attempted to build off of the theory and work of critical discourse theorists, and to explore latent and manifest content using interpretative and enumerative data.

**Influence of the Press**

According to Van Dijk (1991), “to point out that journalism is central to the study of the modern mass media […] is to state the obvious” (3). Newspapers, televised news, and more recently online newspapers, are undoubtedly a major avenue for gleaning information about the dominant cultural values and beliefs of a society (Korn & Efrat, 2004; Roshco, 1975; Benedict 1992). While many researchers believe the press should take on the responsibility of educating the public and keeping citizens informed (Ditton & Duffy, 1983), newspapers often simply reinforce conventional myths and the dominant ideology (Korn & Efrat, 2004; Walby, Hay & Soothill, 1983). Studying the news can serve to reveal narratives that both reflect and reinforce cultural and societal norms (Korn & Efrat, 2004).

Although newspapers, film, and television all focus on narrative storytelling, there are a few important ways in which the press may act differently as a socializer than other types of media. As noted in the introduction, most forms of modern mass media impart narratives that are fictional, whereas newspaper reports are often seen as objective and ‘true.’ This misconception can lead readers of the news to give special importance and priority to what they learn from the press.
Markovitz (2006) asserts that the ‘documentary style’ of news reporting makes it uniquely a “media with authority.” Therefore, the audience may be more easily convinced or persuaded by the messages they learn about in the news. Many media researchers choose to focus on newspapers and newscasts because of this special appearance of objectivity (Lamb & Koen, 1995; Bennet, 1983; Gavey & Gow, 2001). Many researchers have theorized that this ‘objectivity’ is illusory.

Meyers (1997) asserts, “the news supports the dominant power structure by creating a consensus that appears grounded in everyday reality” (19). She goes on to explain that this consensus is mostly based on the opinions and perspectives of educated, elite, white males. Heath, Gordon & LeBaily (1981) labeled the news a “second-hand reality,” because it is generally filtered through the lens of a small elite group of writers and editors, and then repackaged as the ‘truth’ about what took place. Allan (1998) goes even further to argue that there is no objective truth, and that the truth is instead “the subject of dispute between contrary voices” (124). He continues, asserting that journalists claiming to uphold the ‘doctrine of objectivity’ are simply misleading their readers. Although newspapers often strive to be objective, studies have demonstrated that newspapers are biased in respect to the type of news they report, and that certain kinds of stories, such as reports of violent crime, are largely overrepresented (Marsh, 1991).

In addition, sociologists, psychologists, and critics of the press alike have pointed out that news reports are often framed as stories, or as what Bennet (1983) called ‘drama narratives.’ In his revealing book Newsmaking, Roschco (1975) discusses how newspapers frame their reports like stories to attract readership. By
fitting real-life events into the conventions of storytelling, newspapers start to ‘standardize’ stories, and lose much of the complexity involved in the real events.

For example, articles typically portray a suspect as guilty even before the trial begins, because every good drama has a bad guy. Bennet (1983) called this phenomenon “normalizing” news (22). He writes, “the main effect of normalized news is obvious: It narrows the range of acceptable, even ‘thinkable’ models for political action” (1983, 25).

Several theorists have suggested that news reports rely heavily on the opinions of the elite. In their quest to seem unbiased, journalists often cite experts. These experts tend to be middle-class white men (Meyers, 1997; Benedict, 1992). Furthermore, the demographics of the writers, editors and owners of most major newspapers and other news media are heavily imbalanced in that white men are again overrepresented (Benedict, 1992).

Another relevant distinction between fictional media and news media is that the news is generally more concerned with crime. Although the ‘crime drama’ has gained popularity, and films often feature criminals and bad guys, newspapers and the news are considered to be the authority on crime. Ditton & Duffy (1983) describe the press as the only factual way most people learn about crime. Relatively few individuals become victims of violent crime in their lifetimes, so the news is the main avenue through which citizens learn about laws and how to view those who break them. Since rape is a taboo subject, reports of rape become an “important medium in which the dominant discourse on rape is articulated” (Walby et al. 1983, 86). To
really understand how the public thinks about crime, researchers must examine the main source of the public’s knowledge: the news.

2.2. LITERATURE ON RAPE

Rape: An Introduction

Any discussion of rape must be considered within the framework of two important truths. The first is that rape is a very prevalent and pervasive problem in our society that affects women and men of all races and social classes. This truth is sometimes hidden from the public, because rape is currently and has historically been an extremely underreported crime and the public does not frequently engage in discussions about rape. The second truth to note as precursor to my review of the literature is that rape has a long history of inspiring unease among those who discuss it, and that this anxiety can be traced back through history.

Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey indicate that 18% of women experience attempted or completed rape in their lifetime, but only 20% of these rapes are reported to the police (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The National Crime Victimization Survey Report estimates that every year 133,000 women over the age of 12 are victims of rape or attempted rape (Bachman, 1994). Research also suggests that the conviction rate for reported rape is extremely low (Koss, 2000; Scroggs, 1976). Fundamental to any discussion of rape is the acknowledgment that rape is an underreported, under-prosecuted, and under-punished crime. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) found that 21% of victims of unreported rapes did not report the rape because they felt the police could not do anything or wouldn’t
believe them, and 16% were ashamed and wanted to keep the incident private. This disturbing statistic suggests that a large factor in victims’ silence is fear of the judgment and apathy of others. Unfortunately, victims’ fears of coming forward are not unfounded. In this section of my review I intend to explore several of the factors that contribute to the “climate of hostility and suspicion” that surrounds victims of rape and sexual assault (Krahé, 1988).

Rape began to be a topic of interest in the social sciences in the early 1970s, as the feminist movement began to gain power and popularity. Before this time psychologists had little to say about the topic, and early criminologists largely ignored rape. In 1975 Susan Brownmiller published her thorough and comprehensive history of rape, Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape. This groundbreaking work represented the current state of knowledge about rape, and gave criminologists, social psychologists, and sociologists a solid base to build on. Brownmiller points out that the practice of blaming the victim for the crime goes as far back as Hebrew and Babylonian law, where victimized women were often seen as damaged goods, and punished for this transgression. Although feminists and victim rights activists have fought a long, uphill battle to gain more understanding about rape victims, myths about rape and suspicion of victims still persist today.

Rape Myth

There is a specific set of frame narratives that are accepted as prototypical rape scenarios in American culture. They lead to a high prevalence of victim blame (Krahe, 1988; Fine & Carney, 2001). These myths are perpetuated and supported by
movies, newspaper reports, political legislation, and the stories that people tell each other every day. There is a large body of feminist work that attempts to understand and identify these damaging misconceptions about rape. In Martha Burt’s landmark paper, *Cultural myths and supports for rape* (1980), Burt defines “rape myth” as a set of “false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists that create a climate hostile to rape victims” (Burt, 517). Meyers (1997) elaborated on this theory, explaining, “rape myths are inherent in the mythology of anti-woman violence” (25). She asserts that anti-woman mythology “normalizes and naturalizes sexual violence” (25). In other words, rape myth diverts blame from rapists and society and redirects it towards the victim of the assault.

Some examples of myths that have been extensively explored in the literature are: woman provoke rape (Meyers, 1997; Benedict, 1992); women secretly enjoy being raped (Meyers, 1997); women “ask for it” (Reinholtz et al., 1995; Heath et al., 1981); rape is just forceful sex (Benedict, 1992); only “loose” or immoral women are victimized (Benedict, 1992; Calhoun, Selby, Cann & Keller, 1976); victims have less credibility if they were intoxicated (Mooney, 2007); and victims of rape are targeted because they’re sexually desirable (Brownmiller, 1975). There are also several common myths about perpetrators, such as that the assailant could not control his urges, or that he is always perverted or insane (Benedict, 1992). These beliefs are damaging in several ways. They illicit negative judgments about victims of rape, excuse the perpetrator for his acts, and lessen the sense of violence and violation that is involved in rape (Burt, 1980).
People often think that rape is typically perpetrated by a stranger who attacks a young, attractive woman on the street at night when the woman is not being careful enough (Heath et al., 1981). Meyers (1995) found that women who were drunk, able-bodied, “naïve,” and driving alone late at night were seen as most culpable for their own victimization. This finding demonstrates the pervasiveness of rape myth, which asserts that a woman who is able-bodied should be able to fight off a rapist, that women who were drunk at the time of the crime should be believed less, and that women who drive late at night are ‘asking for it.’

There is also a body of research that explores the correlates of ‘rape myth acceptance’ (RMA). RMA scales measure how much an individual agrees with, supports, and internalizes cultural myths about rape (Krahé, 1988). Many studies have found that an observer’s level of rape myth acceptance is an important indicator of how harshly he or she will judge a victim of rape (Thornton & Ryckman, 1981; Krahé, 1988; Acock & Ireland, 1983; Krahé, et al. 2007, Bohner, 2001). Scores on rape myth acceptance can also be predicted from sex-role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual conservatism, acceptance of violence, age, and level of education (Burt, 1980).

Rape myth acceptance in jurors has important legal implications. Burt (1980) notes that rape myth acceptance affects the breadth or narrowness of rape definitions, and, importantly, the outcomes of mock trials. This is especially chilling, since rape myths are so often perverse distortions of reality.
Rape Myth Revealed

Often, people assume that stereotypes are based on reality, and cultural myths are merely exaggerations of the truth. However, surveys on rape, sexual assault, and violence against women indicate that many, if not most, of the common rape myths are complete misconceptions. As this discussion of the facts about rape and rape victims unfolds, it is first important to establish that women and men of all ages, of all races, and from all social classes can be victims of rape (Heath et al., 1981). However, there are statistics on rape and sexual assault that reveal the ‘typical’ circumstances of rape. These facts and statistics often refute widespread myths about rape.

One of the most widely held misconceptions is that rapists are usually strangers. In reality, victims of rape are more likely to know their rapist than not (Heath et al., 1981; Meyers, 1997; Soothill, 2004). The results of various studies differ as to what the exact proportion is. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000), using findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey, reported that only 16.7% of adult female rape victims were raped by a stranger. Even more surprising, the authors found that 72.1% of adult women who were raped were raped by a current or former intimate partner. In addition, Tjaden and Thoennes reported that when a female victim was a child or adolescent, she knew her attacker a staggering 85.7% of the time. Bachman (1994) examined findings from the National Crime Victimization survey and found that 55% of rape victims knew their attackers. While there is a large discrepancy between these two thorough and extensive survey reports, both surveys
showed that the typical victim of rape knew her attacker. This casts doubt on the common myth of the deranged stranger who grabs his victims off the street.

And to further dissect this myth scenario, the question of where rapes commonly occur must be explored. Even if a stranger does not perpetrate the assault, perhaps victims are still attacked in public outdoor places, walking home late at night, or in dark parking garages. In fact, 43% of rape victims were assaulted “at or near their own home” (Bachman, 1994). Another 16% were assaulted at or near a friend’s home. Only 5% were raped in a public parking area or garage, and only 18% were raped in an “open area or public area” (Bachman, 1994). Victims are more likely to be raped in their own homes than anywhere else.

The remaining aspects of the myth of the deranged stranger grabbing his victim off the street at night are: the time of day and the insanity of the perpetrator. More rapes do occur after dark, especially between 6 pm and midnight (Bachman, 1994). So this aspect of the common myth is confirmed by research. However, Brownmiller (1975) points out that the average rapist is no weirdo, or psychopath, or schizophrenic. She asserts that the typical American perpetrator of forcible rape is a hostile, aggressive youth. Of the original myth, only the time of day remains grounded in reality. In fact, the typical rape scenario is a male acquaintance attacking a female under the age of 18 in the victim’s own home.

I will discuss the issue of race much more extensively in the section ‘race and rape,’ but it worth noting here that researchers have uncovered a separate set of myths about rape that concern race. For example, Esqueda and Harrison (2005) found that black women were judged to be more provocative, and perceived as more at fault for
rape. Donovan (2007) theorizes that the ‘Jezebel stereotype,’ of a hypersexualized black woman, is responsible for the popular belief that black women are more promiscuous than white women, and even ‘unrapable.’ Another controversial issue that has been written about frequently is the myth of the dangerous black male rapist. Many white women learn, through the media and through their absorption of cultural messages, to fear black men. There are many images in popular culture of black men sexually assaulting white women. The truth, however, is that rape is overwhelmingly intraracial (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). I will return to these ideas more thoroughly in a later section.

**Victim Credibility**

Questioning the credibility of the victim in rape cases is a prominent theme in court cases, newspaper reports on rape, and portrayals of rape on television and in the movies (Dowler, 2006). However, the FBI estimates that false reports of rape make up about 2% of all rape allegations (Benedict, 1992). This is the same rate of false allegations as other crimes.

Gavey and Gow (2001) examined this atmosphere of mistrust surrounding rape victims in their study of New Zealand magazine articles about false rape allegations. They saw the recent surge in articles written about false reports of rape as a “backlash of anxiety” about the gains made by feminists, and their challenges of the attitudes supportive of rape myths. The authors did find many disturbing trends, including the widespread belief that lying about rape is just as bad as, if not worse than, rape itself. They cite a magazine article, which reports, “Men and women have
equal capacity for both good and evil. Some men rape, but some women cry rape when it has not happened” (354).

Another common, and rather disturbing, myth about rape is that victims lie about rape to hide their own sexual transgressions (Myers, 1997). Rape victims who do not report their abuse to the police often explain that a main reason they do not go to the police is that they fear they will not be believed. Therefore, this unwarranted mistrust and hostility towards victims should be considered a very serious obstacle that victims face.

Because rape victims are doubted so often, they are often put ‘on trial,’ along with their assailants. Especially in cases of acquaintance rape, the defense attorney’s entire case often relies on calling the victim’s story into question (Tiersma, 2007). Although this is true for many other crimes, because questioning a witness’ credibility is often a good defensive strategy, rarely is the victim’s character so severely impugned. Defense attorneys are not only suggesting that the victim is lying, but also that she is lying out of malice, to purposefully destroy the alleged perpetrator’s life. Evidence of this can be seen in Franiuk, Seefelt & Vandello (2008) examination of article headlines in the Kobe Bryant trial. The authors found that the victim was frequently referred to as ‘the accuser,’ instead of as ‘the victim.’ This is the unique predicament of the world of rape victims. They are often victimized first by their assailant, and then again by the police and their communities. The court proceedings can become “a second traumatic experience” for victims (Ponterotto, 2007, 104).
**Perceiving Rape as a Primarily Sexual Crime**

Brownmiller (1975) asserted, “all rape is an exercise in power” (254). She used the examples of heterosexual males raping other men in prison and the molestation of the extremely elderly to demonstrate that rape is often not about sexual desire or the attractiveness of the victim. She also quoted the famous Boston Strangler, Albert DeSalvo. When the police asked him why some of his victims were elderly and others were young, he shocked them by replying, “attractiveness has nothing to do with it” (204). Many psychologists now believe that rape is primarily an act of dominance, power, violence, and control, as well as sex (Dowler, 2006; MacMartin & Wood, 2007; Brownmiller, 1975; Bavelas & Coates, 2001). However, the general public and the media often focus only on sexual motives in explanations of why rape occurs. MacMartin & Wood (2007) studied the motives that judges ascribed to the crime of rape. They found that the vast majority of judges ascribed sexual motives to the perpetrators, with only a very few even mentioning motives of power, violence or control.

Bavelas and Coates (2001) designed an interesting study, where they examined the language used to describe sexual offenses in 75 trial judgments in British Columbia. They grouped the language used to describe the sexual assault into the following categories: sexual language (“they had intercourse,” “he kissed her”); violent language (“he violated her,” “forced her to…”); and physical descriptions that did not have any connotations. Interestingly, they found that the most commonly used discourse was erotic and sexual language, and the second most commonly used discourse was physical descriptions of the act. They found there were very few
descriptions of the sexual assaults that employed violent language. And, surprisingly, the authors also found that the defendant’s guilt had no effect on which type of language was used. The authors warned that although the use of sexual language may be less awkward and more convenient, it also might normalize the act and deny the amount of trauma that the victim has suffered. Using language that implies consent hides the victim’s experience of “fear, disgust, objectification, and pain” (38).

Rape and Race in America

Hemmens (2008) writes, “the criminal justice system is, and has always been, infused with issues of race, gender, and class” (297). The history of interracial rape in the United States goes back to the era of slavery, when white men’s raping of black slaves was an institutional crime (Brownmiller, 1975). In the years after slavery, white men cultivated a growing fear of black male violence. From the time of slavery until surprisingly recently, the United States maintained a long history of lynching black men for the rape of white women (Brownmiller, 1975; Benedict, 1992). Black men were, and still are, hypersexualized by the media, and seen as a threat to white women (Markovitz, 2006). Still today, the most harshly punished perpetrators of rape are black men who rape white women. Susan Brownmiller eloquently described this situation, stating, “racism and sexism and the fight against both converge at the point of interracial rape, the baffling crossroads of an authentic, peculiarly American dilemma” (1975, 210).

As the cultural myth of the black rapist who seeks out white women became more and more ingrained in American culture, civil rights activists began to become
concerned about false rape allegations against black men. The tension surrounding this issue culminated in 1931 with the case of the Scottsboro boys. Nine black men were falsely accused of raping two white women (Benedict, 1992). Eight of the men were sentenced to death in a trial fraught with injustices (Brownmiller, 1975). Although all of the accused were eventually found to be innocent, the case left a strong imprint. The result was the common phenomenon of pitting of black men against white women—black men began to blame white women for these damaging allegations instead of the system of white patriarchy.

This conflict remains a major concern today. Markovitz (2006) writes that the controversial racial events from the past have become part of an American “collective memory” that still affects the way people understand rape. He used the concept of collective memory to look closely at the media and the public’s response to the Kobe Bryant rape trial. In 2003, Bryant, a black basketball star, allegedly sexually assaulted a nineteen-year-old white female hotel employee. Markovitz examined surveys of the public, and found that white Americans were two times more likely than black Americans to see the rape charges against Bryant as “probably true.” He found that the black press, however, asserted that Bryant could not receive a fair trial because of his white female accuser. Regardless of the truth of the case, Markovitz concluded that the controversy over Bryant’s trial “illuminates bitter divisions in American society” (2006, 397). Interestingly, the Duke lacrosse rape scandal brought questions of rape and race to the forefront of the nation’s consciousness for another reason. A group of white lacrosse players from Duke University were accused of raping a black woman, who was hired by them to be a stripper. In an attempt to
appear to be racially sensitive, and to prove that they were not biased, the press treated the white college athletes as if they were absolutely guilty before the case was thoroughly investigated and the trial started (Hemmens, 2008). The woman later recanted her allegation, and the Duke students were presumed innocent.

While there has been extensive research on the race of perpetrators, there is a dearth of literature devoted to how the race of rape victims affects their treatment in court and portrayal in the media (Donovan, 2007; George and Martinez, 2002). There is some evidence to suggest that rape victims from lower classes and who are racial minorities may be judged as more deserving of rape when they are victimized than white women (Weis and Borges, 1973). Angela Davis (1991) outlined the myth of the black woman as a “chronically promiscuous” woman who is “too loose” to be a legitimate victim of sexual violence. Esqueda and Harrison (2005) stress the importance of continued research on black rape victims, noting that African American women may have very “different psychological and legal experiences than men and other women” (829). Studies that ask participants to make judgments about victims in an observed rape scenario found that black women were judged to be more provocative, more at fault for the rape (Esqueda and Harrison, 2007), and more promiscuous (Donovan, 2007) than their white counterparts. Interestingly, George and Martinez (2002) found that interracial rapes were less likely to be judged as undoubtedly rape, and that black victims of interracial rape were found to be less credible, when the perpetrators were white.

Tjaden and Theonne’s (2000) study of the prevalence of violence against women found that women of color were slightly more likely to be victims of rape
than white women, though the difference was not statistically significant. However, American Indian and Alaskan native women were found to be much more likely to be victims of rape in their lifetime (34.1%) than white (17.7%), or black (18.8%) women. Mixed race women were also significantly more likely to be victims of rape (24.4%) than white women.

There is relatively little attention paid to the socioeconomic status of rape victims and perpetrators. Authors often mention SES briefly, as they confront the more visible construct of race. Meyers (1997) asserts, “race, class and gender are intertwined” in our cultural understanding of violence against women. Many researchers and social scientists allege that poor and working class people, along with racial minorities, are seen as more deserving when they are victimized (Weis & Borges, 1973). Victims with lower socioeconomic status also often do not get the same level of support and attention from law enforcement and police (Meyers, 1997). Therefore, social class can have a large effect on the experiences of rape victims.

**Factors that Influence Victim Blame**

Victim blame is alarmingly prevalent in American culture, and many people mistrust women who have been raped (Krahé, 1988; Fine and Carney, 2001; Burt, 1980). Because the crime of rape is unique in that the victim also falls under intense scrutiny, it is important to understand what leads an observer to attribute responsibility to victims of rape (Yarmey, 1985; Esqueda & Harrison, 2005). Research suggests that there are certain victim characteristics, such as victim attractiveness, perceived provocativeness, and gender norm violation, that influence
how much observers attribute blame to the victim (Fulero and Delena, 1976; Acock & Ireland, 1983). Many of these findings are consistent with rape myth, and may be rooted deeply in the narratives that Americans learn about rape. I will briefly summarize the findings from studies on the most well researched victim characteristics that influence perceptions of blame.

Researchers have studied the effects of victim’s physical attractiveness rather extensively, but there is some disagreement among researchers as to how attractiveness affects attributions of blame to the victim and to the perpetrator. For example, Calhoun et al. (1978) found that although physically attractive victims were held more accountable for their own rape, they had significantly higher ratings of social acceptance after the event. The authors presumed that observers thought that the attractive women drew more attention from the perpetrator, making them more likely targets and therefore more accountable for the occurrence. However, despite some mixed findings, most studies concluded that unattractive victims are assigned greater responsibility for the rape (Thornton & Ryckman, 1983; Kanekar & Nazareth, 1988). The authors of these studies offer the explanation that participants believe unattractive women are unlikely candidates for being raped, as they are perceived as sexually less desirable, and therefore it is assumed that these women provoked the rape (Thornton & Ryckman, 1983).

A great deal of research shows that women who are judged to be provocative, either in dress or behavior, are blamed more than women who are seen as demure (Scroggs, 1976; Yarmey, 1985; Brocke, Goldenitz, Holling & Bilsky, 2004; Schult and Schneider, 1991). And, importantly, Brocke et al. (2004) reported that a victim’s
perceived provocative behavior had an extremely strong influence on an observer’s assessment of punishment for the assailant. The perpetrator was punished less harshly when observers perceived the victim as presenting herself in a sexual way.

Researchers have posited that conformity to or violation of gender norms could have a significant effect on how observers ascribe blame or responsibility to a victim of rape (Fine & Carney, 2001; Acock & Ireland, 1983; Krahé, 1988; Frese et al., 2004). An example of a violation of normative behavior is offering a ride to a man whose car is broken down (Acock and Ireland, 1983) or going for a drink alone (Krahé, 1988). Research suggests that victims who violate gender norms are judged more harshly than those who conform to gender norms (Acock and Ireland, 1983; Frese et al., 2004), especially for observers who scored high on ratings of rape myth acceptance (Krahé, 1988).

Other factors that have been shown to influence perceptions of responsibility are respectability of the victim the victim’s past sexual history; the amount of physical resistance; how emotionally disturbed the victim seems following the rape; how much injury she sustains; the race of the victim; the victim’s socioeconomic status; and the level of intoxication of the victim. Researchers have consistently presented evidence that these and other extralegal victim characteristics can affect how harshly a victim is judged whether the victim is believed, and how much a perpetrator is punished. The troubling truth is that there are rape victims who are seen as more sympathetic and deserving of support than other victims. These findings emphasize the need for increasing public awareness of misconceptions about rape.
Perpetrators of Rape

Although most of my review focuses on victims, because much of the literature focuses on victims, it is worth briefly discussing the common misconceptions about perpetrators of rape that are perpetuated in American culture. How people view perpetrators of rape deeply affects how they view victims and understand the act of rape. The findings regarding the public’s perceptions of rapists have been extraordinarily robust.

The research on portrayals and opinions of rape perpetrators has focused on the predominant belief that perpetrators are insane, sick, deranged and inhuman (Meyers, 1997; Brownmiller, 1975; Benedict, 1992). Newspapers commonly refer to “sex fiends” (Clark, 1992). Walby et al. (1983) asserted that there is no solid evidence to support the idea that most rapists are insane. The authors also suggested that people think of rapist as ‘fiends’ because it is comforting to think that rapists stand out and are immediately recognizable. Meyers (1997) proposed that another reason all rapists are seen as psychopaths is that people seek to deny the truth that healthy, normal men, who are part of society, are capable of rape. Clark (1992) eloquently theorized, “by implying that these men are extra-societal, this naming also excuses our society which produces them” (224). Asserting that rapists are abnormal, fiends and/or beasts diverts blame from a culture and society that is ambivalent about male violence against women.

One comprehensive meta-analysis of the literature on willingness to rape found that willingness to rape was linked very strongly to adherence to and belief in patriarchal masculine ideology (Murren, Wright & Kaluzny, 2002). This suggests
that willingness to rape may be related to certain beliefs that are consistent with socially acceptable values in American culture.

2.3. RAPE IN THE NEWS

Newsworthiness

A number of books and studies have examined the elusive theme of what events and stories make it into the news. Crime news, compared to news of other non-violent events, is vastly overrepresented by newspapers and television news in the United States and many other countries (Marsh, 1991). Reporting on crime became a very popular way to sell ‘penny papers’ as early as 1833 (Roshco, 1975), and has remained an integral part of news reporting ever since (Greer, 2003). Recently, researchers have attempted to uncover what characteristics of a story give that story salience. When Meyers (1997) asked a reporter how he knew what events and occurrences should become news, he elusively replied, “I can’t put my finger on it, although I know it when I see it. It’s instinct” (88). Allan (1998), on the other hand, believed that rather than being a simple matter of instinct, there are “unspoken rules of inclusion and exclusion” that are based on gender, race and class (129). Roshco (1975) suggests that crime stories are so prominent because conflict is intrinsically interesting, especially when the outcome is in doubt. A famous quip in the newspaper industry is, “if it bleeds, it leads.” Other factors that seem to predict story salience are the number of victims affected (Chermak, 1998), how well the story can be turned into a dramatized account (Bennet, 1983), and whether the story allows the writer to put a new spin on old themes (Benedict, 1992).
Roscho (1975) also identified several major characteristics of an event or incident that could deem the event newsworthy. These were: timeliness, conflict, the unexpected, routine typifications, presence of ‘big names’ or celebrities, and the appearance of objectivity. These characteristics do not necessarily lead to representative reporting that will accurately present the current situation. Therefore the events covered may create a false reality that misleads the public (Benedict, 1992).

In the following section, I will provide a review of studies that focus on how newspapers and television news have reported on rape. It is worth noting here that only about half of the studies reviewed examined news sources from the United States. Keith Soothill has conducted a great deal of thorough research with colleagues on the reporting of rape in British newspapers, but no American researcher has accomplished the same depth of understanding about American crime reporting. However, it is clear that there is a wide interest in studying the reporting of crime news, as research has been done in a large number of countries. Many of the same themes emerged in vastly different countries and cultures. Marsh (1991) conducted an extensive and detailed literature review on studies that examined newspaper reporting of crime news. He noted that one of his most surprising and robust findings was how uniform the reporting of crime news was all across the world.

Studies on rape in the news seem to fall under two main methodological categories. Some follow a single newspaper, or a number of newspapers, over a period of time, identifying stories about rape and then analyzing them. Other studies choose one, or several, important rape cases and follow the media’s coverage of these
particular events. Both methodologies have their advantages and disadvantages. Studies that examine all the cases covered by a newspaper in a certain period of time are able to report on what kinds of rapes, as well as which victim and perpetrator characteristics are overrepresented and underrepresented in newspaper coverage. These studies also note the major themes that emerge in the general formula of writing articles about rape. These studies allow for a general and broad understanding of the narratives constructed about rape. However, often these studies cannot focus on the specific rape myths that are being perpetuated, because the breadth of the articles reviewed is too large. Studies that follow particular important cases examine the aspects of each case that made that particular rape stand out, and how these prominent cases reflect the attitudes, biases, and cultural ideas of the time. Some cases that have been studied are the Kobe Bryant rape trial (Markovitz, 2006), the case of the Central Park jogger (Hancock, 2003; Benedict, 1992), and the abuse of children by the Irish Christian brothers (O’Keef & Breen, 2007). These studies allow for a deep understanding of several key issues in the reporting of rapes, but they often do not include how each case fits into the broader context of rape reports in general.

Of the studies I reviewed, only a small minority included the reporting of rapes or sexual assaults where the victim was male. While O’Keef & Breen (2007) limited their study to reports of sexual abuse perpetrated against male children, no studies I reviewed looked at the reporting of rape of male adults. This gap in the literature may be partially due to the limited number of newspaper reports of sexual abuse against males, and partially due to the psychologists and researchers that are
interested in rape. Rape has been taken up as a feminist cause, and many of the leading researchers exploring this subject therefore focus only on female victims of rape and the systematic sexism that promotes violence against women. This leaves male victims as an underrepresented group that is so frequently neglected from discussions of rape.

**Changes in News Coverage Over Time**

Although most studies only explored the current state of rape in the news, a few studies have taken a historical perspective and examined how the reporting of rape has changed over time. Taking a historical perspective is important because it allows the researcher to track the way cultural understandings—and the discourses that surround these understandings—shift. Soothill (1991) looked at how the coverage of rape trials has changed since World War II. He explored the newspaper coverage of rape in six newspapers at various one-year intervals, starting in 1951. One important change he found was that even though court cases with single offenders of rape increased over time, newspaper reports of rapes with a single offender decreased. The author also found that there was a fall in the proportion of rape cases that were covered by the news in the mid-eighties. Instead, there was a rise in very high-profile cases that received a great deal of coverage. In a follow-up study, Soothill (2004), reported that national newspapers began covering more rape trials in the late 1990s, whereas in previous decades only the local tabloids had focused on rape. Soothill also found that in the 1990s there was more reporting of high-profile acquaintance rapes than there historically had been. So what we’re
seeing in the media today is most likely a small number of high profile crimes (Soothill, 2004) that are written about sensationally. And although acquaintance rapes are being covered more than they were in the past, these rapes are being portrayed as ambiguous interactions that are open to interpretation.

**Selective Coverage**

Most comprehensive studies of newspapers found that the newspapers were very selective about which rapes were covered. Soothill (1991) found that in 1978 British newspapers covered only 40% of rape cases that had gone to court. In a later study, Soothill (2004) found that in 1985 the numbers had decreased, and only 34.2% of cases that made it to court were covered. Although this may seem like a fairly large percentage of rape cases, it is worth pointing out that very few reported rapes ever make it to court (Walby et al., 1983). Heath et al. (1981) examined the proportion of rapes to murders in American newspapers, and found that papers reported many more murders than rapes (11 murder stories to every rape story), when in fact the ratio of murder to rape is 1:3. Ditton & Duffy (1983) found that in Scotland the press covered only 25% of the total crimes that appeared in police reports. It appears that even though newspapers focus on crime news a great deal, reporters are still highly selective of the specific cases they report on, and “the details they impart” (Soothill, 2004, 227). In the following sections I will examine how the systematic selection of the types of rapes covered, as well as the way in which these few cases were discussed in the news, affects the overall picture of rape in the news.
Sensationalizing and Selling Sex

Many of the studies I reviewed found that newspapers presented reports of sexual assault and rape with lurid details or in a titillating way (Soothill & Soothill, 1993; Soothill, 2004; Soothill & Walby, 1991; Dowler, 2006; Benedict, 1992). Examples of sensationalized reporting include tearful interviews with family members, wild speculations on what occurred, and emphasis on the brutal details of the crime scene (Soothill, 1991). Soothill & Walby (1991) theorized that papers include these lurid details to use the “soft pornography appeal” of rape reporting to sell more newspapers (22). Korn & Efrat (2004) found similar themes of dramatization, and emphasizing of seduction, in the Israeli popular press, and suggested, “In Israel, too, rape helps to sells newspapers” (1070). Soothill (2004) speculated that the media is “masquerading rape as seduction” (228).

By sensationalizing rape, reporters may evoke undue fear in readers (Dowler, 2006), distort the reality of rape so that it seems glamorous or sexy (Korn & Efrat), represent rape as being more about sexual desire than violence and domination (Dowler, 2006), or exaggerate the physical violence used in the typical case of rape (Soothill & Walby, 1991). Benedict (1992) asserted that by creating a sensational and dramatized story, reporters often either paint the victim as innocent and naïve (the prototypical virgin), or sensual and seductive (the prototypical vamp). This creates a false reality that oversimplifies rape, and forces each separate case to fit a typical mold.
Evoking Fear

A major theme explored in media studies on rape is the degree to which reports of rape are meant to evoke fear in readers, especially female readers (Dowler, 2006; Walby et al. 1983; Hancock, 2003; Marsh, 1991). Studies that evoke fear can gain more attention, because people feel that the case affects them personally. Readers may also pay special attention to these articles, because they contradictorily think that reading them will make them safer, if they know what to expect. Dowler’s (2006) study compared reports of sex crimes in the news with the presentation of other crimes, and he found that newscasters were more likely to provoke fear, and less likely to provide a motive, when discussing sex crimes. A common way that these newscasters would evoke fear was to ask the public to be alert. In her case study of the Central Park Jogger rape, Hancock (2003) noted how racialized code words, such as teenagers ‘wilding’ in the park, could be used to evoke strong fear reactions in the readers, and increase racial tensions. In this case, the ‘hysteria’ created by the media caused a great deal of discord, anger, and fear between white upper-middle-class New Yorkers and Hispanic and black youths living in New York.

Marsh (1991) asserted that the prevalence of crime news in papers may be sufficient to create “exaggerated fears of victimization” (76). There may be a disproportionate fear of being victimized, relative to the incidence of crime (Ditton & Duffy, 1983). In other words, if people are constantly reading about violent crime, then they may come to believe that victimization is common, and they may fear for their safety.
Over-representing brutal rapes

Soothill (1991) found that brutal rapes were more likely to be covered by newspapers than rapes with less physical injury to the victim. Heath et al. (1981) also found that rapes that resulted in overnight hospitalization were overrepresented by newspapers in the US. When asked what would make a rape or sexual assault newsworthy, one reporter answered, “if the person is beaten up badly, or is gang raped” (Meyers, 1997). This is consistent with Marsh’s (1991) finding that violent crimes are covered more frequently than nonviolent crimes.

These finding are particularly relevant to an understanding of how the media impacts cultural views on rape, because research indicates that neutral observers assign more blame to victims who are not severely physically injured (Kanekar and Nazareth, 1988; Krulewitz, 1982). Kenaker and Nazareth (1988) found that longer prison sentences were assigned to perpetrators when the victim was severely injured. A possible explanation is that observers begin to believe that in a “real rape” the victim is hospitalized or injured, because this is typically the kind of rape that they read about in the newspapers. Kahn et al. (2003) examined the testimonies of women who reported situations that met the legal definition of rape, but who did not label these experiences as rape. The authors then compared these testimonies to those of woman who reported having been raped. One important finding was women were less likely to call their forced sex experience ‘rape’ if the assailant used a lesser amount of physical force. These women did not interpret the situation as a typical sexual assault, and therefore did not label their experiences as rape or seek legal action.
Some studies also looked at how often newspapers covered rapes when a weapon was present (Heath et al., 1981; Benedict, 1992). Schwengels & Lemert (1986) found that 17% of newspaper stories on rape in Eugene County involved a weapon, whereas only 11% of reported rapes in the area involved a weapon.

**Number of Victims and Number of Perpetrators**

Research has indicated that both gang rapes, where there are multiple perpetrators, and serial rapes, where there are multiple victims, are overrepresented in the news (Meyers, 1997; Soothill, 1991; Soothill, 2004). Caringella-MacDonald (1998) examined reports of sex crimes in popular magazines, which only cover the most infamous and widely publicized cases. Of the 12 cases she examined, only half of the cases involved single offenders. One possible explanation of why multiple offender rapes gain more newspaper coverage is that gang rapes may be more violent than single-offender rapes (Meyers, 1997), or more sensational. Reports of serial rapes may also be used to evoke fear (Soothill, 2004). Regardless of the reason for this phenomenon, a negative effect may be that victims of much more common single offender rapes may not be seen as ‘real’ or ‘legitimate’ victims.

**The Over-reporting of Stranger Rape**

All of the studies that examined the relationship between rapists and their victims in the news found that newspapers cover many more cases of stranger rape than acquaintance rape (Schwengels & Lemert, 1986; Heath et al., 1981; Soothill, 2004; Soothill, 1991; Benedict, 1992). This is especially alarming because in most
cases of rape, the victim does know his or her rapist (Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000). Schwengels & Lemert suggest that this low reporting of acquaintance rape can be partially explained by the almost complete exclusion of reports of incest and rape by an intimate partner. The authors found that the local newspapers in Eugene County did not report on any intimate-partner rapes, while Eugene county police blotters reported a relatively high number of rapes by intimate partners.

This over-reporting of stranger rapes may contribute to the common misconception that victims generally do not know their rapists. Several authors have tried to explain this misrepresentation. Schwengels & Lemert (1986) found that reporters indicated that they did not cover incestuous rapes because they wanted to protect the identity of the victim, and including the perpetrator’s name in incestuous rapes often implicates the victim. Another possible explanation is that stranger rapes are more likely to result in severe physical injury than acquaintance rapes are (Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000). It is possible that the systematic exclusion of many acquaintance rapes is related to the increased violence of stranger rapes, but studies have not examined this interaction.

Another disturbing finding is that not only are acquaintance rapes rarely covered, but the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator also affects how the rape is reported on. Los & Chamard (1997) found that newspapers were covering acquaintance rapes as ambiguous interactions that were more related to sex than to violence. Soothill (2004) also found that acquaintance rapes were more likely to be seen as possibly just a case of seduction. The literature strongly suggests that victims of acquaintance and partner rape are blamed much more for their behavior than
victims of stranger rape, and are less likely to be believed (Bell et al., 1994; Calhoun et al., 1976; Krahé, Temken, and Bieneck, 2007; Frese et al., 2004; George and Martinez, 2002; Krulewitz, 1982). Frese et al. asserted that respondents of their 2004 study felt that reporting acquaintance rape could result in stigmatization for a victim. There is much less social acceptance of victims of partner and acquaintance rape than of victims of stranger rape, even though acquaintance rape is the most prevalent type of sexual assault. The evidence shows that victims of acquaintance rape may be unfairly seen as less legitimate and less sympathetic victims.

**Race and Social Status**

Many of the studies mentioned race and social status as important factors that could possibly influence the degree of blaming the victim, the amount of media attention that a case gets, and the way that each story is reported on. However, there have been very few systematic explorations of race, and even fewer of socioeconomic status (SES) that directly relate to how the media represents crime (For an example of a study that does so, see Carney, 2004). This is most likely because it is very hard to study race and SES in newspaper reports, because these factors are so rarely mentioned.

Many authors have averred that race, gender and class are irrevocably intertwined (Meyers, 1997; Markovitz, 2006; Benedict, 1992; Hancock, 2003). However, as Meyer’s eloquently points out, few studies have “addressed the convergence of multiple oppressions” in the news (33). In Meyer’s own attempt to explore gender and race in Atlanta newspapers she discovered that it was only
possible to identify the race of the victim 48% of the time. This is especially surprising because Meyers was also using photographs and additional research to help her identify race. The race of the victim was mentioned in the article even less. Meyers also found that it was impossible to identify the class of the victim 80% of the time. Consistent with this finding, Schwengels & Lemert found that even though police reports *always* provided the race of the victim, news reports *almost never* gave the victim’s race. The authors found that the race of the perpetrator was reported occasionally, but not frequently.

There were many studies that followed the media’s representations of high-profile race-relevant rape cases. Hancock (2003) provided a thorough study of the coverage surrounding the 1989 Central Park jogger case, and the racial and class tensions that resulted from the incident. When a young, white, successful investment banker was brutally assaulted and raped while jogging, the amount of coverage indicated that the media became obsessed with her case. Newspaper reporters blamed a group of teenagers of color who were indicted and then later exonerated. Hancock demonstrated how the press created a divide between black and white, and rich and poor, by describing an angry group of poor young minorities who wanted revenge against the rich upper class. Hemmens (2008) discussed the racially charged Duke lacrosse rape scandal, and how reporters’ agendas to prove that they weren’t racially biased led to injustice, as the press treated the white lacrosse players as if they had already been proven guilty when they were accused of gang raping a black woman.

Benedict (1992), in her landmark book on media representations of sex crimes, *Virgin or Vamp*, explores how class, race and ethnicity relate to the reporting
of rape cases. She follows four major cases of rape, and explores how the press exacerbated issues revolving around race and SES. One of her more interesting analyses is of the Jennifer Levin rape trial, where the New York tabloids represented the tragic rape and murder of a young woman by a former boyfriend as a sensational narrative about the dark, violent and seductive hidden underbelly of rich ‘preppie’ culture. Benedict described how the press glamorized Levin’s murderer, making him seem brooding and attractive. She also described the coverage of the New Bedford rape trial, in which a Portuguese woman was gang raped by a group of Portuguese men in a crowded bar. She pointed out how the press exacerbated the conflict between feminists and the Portuguese population, who felt they were being demonized. The case soon became of national concern, forcing women of color to ‘choose a side,’ pitting their gender against their ethnicity.

While these studies are all well researched, enlightening, and revealing, there is still a dearth in the literature on how the race of the victim and perpetrator affects the coverage of rape cases in general. Questions remain about how race affects the coverage of less high-profile crimes. For example, even though most articles do not mention race, are newspapers still systematically excluding victims of color from their reports? Are white victims overrepresented in the news, even if race is not mentioned? Nevertheless, these qualitative explorations are helpful in understanding the climate of hostility that affects rape victims of color and victims from lower SES backgrounds.
Discrediting the Victim

Many studies have shown that a major theme in the news coverage of rapes is discrediting the victim. Korn & Efrat (2004) noted that quotations from defense lawyers attacking the truthfulness of the victim were overrepresented in the coverage of rape cases in the Israeli press. In most other types of crime the prosecutors are most frequently quoted, because their accusations are more interesting than the defense’s relatively tame arguments. However, in rape cases, the defense lawyers often make equally provocative accusations against the victim as the prosecutors do about the perpetrator. Dowler (2006) asserted that the strategy of defense lawyers is almost always to attack rape victims’ credibility, and this strategy is reflected in the press’ coverage of trials. Dowler also noted that defense attorneys were mentioned much less in other kinds of crime stories. In this way, the discussion of who is ‘guilty’ goes both ways in rape trials—the victim’s behavior is also being judged.

Conclusion

Many of the authors had interesting suggestions for ways the media can improve how they cover and report on rapes. Benedict (1992) suggested that reporters should: use vocabulary that avoids any suggestion that the woman enjoyed the incident or was an active participant, avoid focusing on the victims behavior, and stop questioning the veracity of victim’s stories. She also suggested diversifying newsrooms, and having more female reporters and editors. Heath et al. (1981) insisted that the media can still improve the “accuracy of the vicarious reality” of rape that they create, by reporting more acquaintance rapes. Marsh (1991) asserted that
there should be more information provided about the roots or causes of crime, and society’s impact on the nature of criminals, instead of treating crimes as completely individualistic. Schwengels & Lemert (1986) suggest that newspapers report more incest and intimate partner rape by leaving both the perpetrator and the victim anonymous.

These studies do not merely seek to criticize, blame or cast aspersions on the press, but instead seek to find ways in which the public’s overall understanding of rape, rape victims, and the climate that surrounds sex crimes, can be bettered. But until the media implements these changes, it will remain “a prominent part of the cycle of injustice that traps victims” (Benedict, 1992, vi).

Although these studies provide a strong foundation of research, there are still gaps in the literature. For example, very few of the studies I examined discussed male victims of rape. Male victims of rape have been almost entirely ignored by psychologists (For a review of the literature that exists, see Davies and McCartney, 2003). And although a much lower percentage of males are victims of rape than females, these victims should still be given a voice. 3% of males report experiencing attempted or completed rape in their lifetime (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998). Only one of the studies on the reporting of rape in the news examined the portrayal of rapes where the victim was male, and this study only discussed children.

There is also no comprehensive study of different regions in the United States, and there are very few recent studies that look at the current portrayal of rape in the United States on a broad scale. It is important to explore the messages that American newspapers, from all over the country, are extolling about rape, in order to better
understand how this reporting influences our societal beliefs and ideologies. In addition, many of these studies examine either tabloid newspapers or television news, which generally cover more high profile cases and are slightly more sensational than the typical newspaper story. It is important to look at the typical article on rape, and not just to explore high profile cases, because the American public is exposed to these more typical articles on a regular basis. Also, most of these cases discuss rape in general, instead of focusing on the different subtypes of rape, such as acquaintance rape and stranger rape, and the way they are specifically represented. My study attempts to build off this current body of research, and to help further understand the narratives that the press is constructing about rape, rape victims and perpetrators.
3. METHODS

Glaser and Straus’ (1967) introduction of Grounded Theory was an invaluable contribution to the theory that underlies the study of mass media. This method, which advocates forming theory based on observed data, is still widely used by social scientists. Previously, social science research was primarily hypothetical and theoretical, and did not focus on collecting empirical data. Grounded Theory insisted on creating a system of protocol based on observed data.

For my study I employed Grounded Theory. The first step was simply to closely examine a large number of articles from American newspapers on rape and sexual assault. The next step was to identify themes and patterns that emerged from this data (such as whether or not an article evoked fear, dehumanized the perpetrator, or expressed sympathy for the victim). The next part of the process included developing a coding protocol based on these themes, which made it possible to systematically explore how articles talked about rape, and which details and types of cases were frequently included in newspapers, and which were frequently excluded. I specifically sought to answer several primary research questions. Are certain types or cases of rape overrepresented by newspapers? What details and themes make an article more likely to be ‘big news’? Are there situations when victims are seen as more deserving of sympathy? How do articles talk about rape and sexual assault—what details are included, and what details are excluded? What problematic themes will emerge that could affect how the public views and understands victims of rape? After selecting a sample of recent articles on rape and sexual assault from four
different states, I then used both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze my data based on my coding system.

3.1. SELECTING A SAMPLE

When choosing which articles to include in this analysis, two unique aspects of newspapers’ coverage of rape were explored. The first research question was, ‘what rapes are being covered by newspapers?’ To answer this question, several themes were examined. These themes were: the proportion of stranger and acquaintance rapes reported on, the age of the typical victim in a rape report, the location of the rape, the amount of physical injury sustained by the victim, the number of victims involved in the case, the number of perpetrators involved in the case, the type of rape (home invasion, kidnapping, partner rape), the race and SES of the victim and perpetrator, and the proportion of articles that focused on ‘high-profile’ cases. The second research question was, ‘how are reporters writing about rape?’ More specifically, what types of narratives were being constructed about different kinds of rape? The themes that were used to shed light on this question were: whether newspaper articles talked about male victims of rape differently than they talked about female victims, what motives were ascribed to perpetrators of rape, how articles directed responsibility towards victims, perpetrators and society, how and when articles expressed sympathy for either the victim or the perpetrator, whether articles accused the victim of lying or dehumanized the perpetrator, and if articles were sensational or not. In the preliminary examination of articles, it became clear that the most complex and interesting findings about these narratives were culled from reports on high-profile cases that received a lot of coverage. In order to answer
both these primary questions, data was gathered in two distinct ways. First I used broad search parameters to look for any articles from the time period chosen that discussed race and sexual assault. For the second, specific high-profile cases were studied.

The electronic database LexisNexis was used to search for articles that were about rape and sexual assault. LexisNexis contains a large variety of newspaper articles from the US and other countries. Most of the newspapers are archived from the mid-1980s to present. To collect articles I considered several factors. First, to get an accurate idea of how newspapers in the United States write about rape, I knew that I needed to review newspapers from different regions of the country. To accomplish this goal, four states were chosen that were representative of the four Census Bureau-designated geographic regions: the West, the Northeast, the South, and the Midwest. The states were New York, California, Texas and Minnesota. Using the keywords “rap! OR sexual assault,” and the restricted one month time period of November 18 through December 18, 2008, I gathered all articles available online from these four states. Articles that were about general rape statistics or about political policies regarding rape were not included in my analyses, unless they used examples of a specific case. In order to understand the current narrative about rape and sexual assault in the US, only articles from this recent one-month time period were collected. These parameters were set in place to get a snapshot of articles that would allow me to understand the broad picture of the way rape and sexual assault is being written about in different regions of the country. After randomly selecting articles from this
sample, the original dataset contained 140 articles from 28 newspapers (See Appendix A for a complete list of these 140 articles).

To supplement this original dataset, several cases were chosen that were relatively high profile, and that were particularly representative of themes that were relevant to this analysis. A secondary search of LexisNexis was conducted to find all articles related to these cases.

Any articles and newspapers that were not from LexisNexis, or were from magazines or journals were excluded from my search. However, US wires, such as The Associated Press State and Local Wire, were included.

The high profile cases that were closely examined were: the rape and murder of the high school student Jennifer Moore, the rape and murder of graduate student Immette St. Guillen, and the presumed rape and disappearance of Laura Garza, a young female dancer. I chose these three cases because they all shared the narrative of the young, attractive, female partier who was abducted, raped and murdered by a stranger. I found that this narrative was highly visible in the articles reviewed, and cases that conformed to this narrative received a great deal of coverage.

3.2. PROCEDURES

In the earliest stages of the study, articles were gathered from LexisNexis, and a preliminary analysis was conducted. Any articles on recent cases of rape from any newspaper in the database were considered. A large number of articles were closely examined so that I could reach an understanding of the themes, writing techniques, and types of rape that were being covered. In the tradition of Glaser & Straus (1967),
no coding schema was used. Instead, the goal was to develop an understanding of how newspapers portrayed victims, perpetrators, and individual cases of rape. After reading a large number of these articles, a coding schema was created, based on important concepts and themes that were emerging. These codes were refined and elaborated on until as the process continued.

**Coding Scheme**

Codes that examined what types of rape were covered included: the age of the victim (child, teen, adult or elderly), the charges against the perpetrator, the stage in criminal proceedings, the occupations of the victim and the perpetrator, the race of the victim and the perpetrator, the socioeconomic status of the victim and the perpetrator, the location of the crime, whether the victim was murdered or not, the degree of brutality, mention of the victim's emotional trauma, the number of victims, the number of perpetrators, sex of the victim, discussions of victim credibility or ambiguous rape situations, incest, whether a celebrity was involved in the case, the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, and whether the story involved institutional rape (the perpetrator was affiliated with an organization, such as a religious group, a school, or the military). A primary code of interest was the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. This code was divided into several categories: friend/peer; partner/ex/date; stranger; relative; or institutional figure (such as a teacher).

More complex themes centered on *how* newspapers discussed rape. For example, major codes in this category were: evoking fear; the motives that were
ascribed to the perpetrator; sympathy for either the victim or the perpetrator; sensationalizing; the presence of outrage; the community’s emotional response to the event; the victim’s and perpetrator’s family’s responses; victim provocation; any explanation for why the crime occurred; discrediting the victim; dehumanization of the perpetrator; discussions of the role of alcohol in the assault; using sexual language to describe rape; and rape myth. An article would be coded as evoking fear if there were phrases that implied or directly suggested that the public should be afraid or feel the need for more protection. Articles were coded for ‘discrediting the victim’ only if the reporter mentioned the possibility that the victim was intentionally or knowingly lying about what happened. For using sexual language to talk about rape I looked at whether the reporter used erotic language that implied consent. Rape myth was a broad code, and categories included: victim ‘asking for it,’ victim being partially responsible, perpetrator not being able to control his actions, or that the perpetrator was insane.

The next step was to refine the search parameters. As previously mentioned, the search terms “Rap! OR Sexual Assault” were used to search LexisNexis for newspapers and US wires in the four states outlined above, in the brief one month period. Search results that were not about specific cases of rape were disregarded. The 140 articles in this original data set were read thoroughly and coded using a final version of the coding protocol.

I then chose the three cases of Moore, Garza, and St. Guillen as cases that exemplified important themes, and searched LexisNexis with relevant key words that
would call up articles about the case. These articles were read for relevant themes and concepts. These articles could come from any newspaper in the United States and any time period in the last ten years.

3.3. ANALYSIS

After all the articles had been coded, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyze the data. The original dataset of 140 articles was entered into SPSS. Chi-square tests for independence and independent sample t-tests were run to determine if there were associations between variables, and if these relationships were significant and not the result of chance. An example of a relationship explored was whether or not a mention of how much a victim resisted was significantly related to whether or not sympathy for the victim was expressed. Another example is whether or not the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator was significantly related to when articles dehumanized the perpetrator.

Through the course of gathering data and running quantitative analyses several prominent and noteworthy themes emerged. The most important pattern that became clear was that newspapers discussed cases where the victim knew her perpetrator in a completely different way than the way they discussed cases where the victim did not know her perpetrator. These two categories of articles used different tropes, different styles, and different conventions to talk about the event, the victims,

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1 For the purpose of this study, female pronouns will be used to refer to victims and male pronouns will refer to perpetrators, unless otherwise specified. Of course, not all victims of rape are female, and not all perpetrators of rape are male. But in order to simplify the language used, this system will be employed.
and the perpetrator. For this reason, the following analysis will primarily be divided into narratives of stranger rape and narratives of acquaintance rape.

In the following sections of this paper I will also discuss the demographic information of the victims and the perpetrators, such as race, gender and socioeconomic status. Expressing sympathy was an interesting and problematic theme that emerged. It became clear that reporters did not express sympathy uniformly to all victims—certain types of victims were portrayed as more sympathetic than others. For example, victims of home invasions were significantly more likely to be described in a sympathetic way than other victims. Questions of motivation also became a theme that required a closer examination. Articles very rarely provided a motive for the perpetrator—implying that rape is a senseless crime, with no explanation. When the articles did suggest a motive for the perpetrator, these motives were highly individualistic, and never suggested that society has a role in how and why people commit rape. The results and discussion section of the study that follows provides an in-depth examination of these themes, and describes the most prominent narratives that American newspapers are constructing about rape today.
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this content analysis I examined over 200 articles—140 articles from my original data set, and over 70 supplemental articles—in order to explore the ways that American newspaper reports depicted instances of sexual assault and rape. I hypothesized that a pattern of familiar storylines would emerge, and that particular narratives and types of victims would be more visible than others. My analysis revealed that there were indeed distinct patterns of narratives that appeared. These patterns materialized both in the way that specific types of victims were discussed, and in the amount of coverage and visibility that certain types of cases received.

Because newspaper reports are a primary means by which the public understands sex crimes, these findings have important implications for how people develop attitudes about victims, perpetrators, and the act of rape itself. The purpose of the present analysis is to expose biases in the reporting of sex crimes, deconstruct the stereotypes and problematic conventional beliefs that determine how newspapers represent victims and perpetrators, and reveal the dominant narratives about sex crimes that are present in newspaper reporting today.

My original search yielded 140 articles from four different states, and 28 different newspapers. The articles were coded and entered into SPSS. This data will be called the ‘original dataset’ for the remainder of this section. I then conducted chi-square tests for independence and independent sample t-tests to determine if the codes were significantly related to each other, and to establish whether or not these
patterns were the result of chance. In addition to this original dataset, I will discuss several high profile cases that further illuminate important themes.

Qualitative methods were used to further investigate the themes and relationships that emerged, and to explore the manifestations and implications of these codes. For the purpose of presenting these results in a logical and coherent way, I will discuss the quantitative and qualitative results together.

This paper will first look at the general themes and overarching messages about all types of sexual assault and rape, and briefly examine the differences in reporting across geographic regions. The demographic characteristics of the perpetrators and victims, such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender, will also be discussed. In the next two sections of this analysis, the narratives that emerge around specific kinds of rape will be explored. Although there are many ways this section could have been organized, I chose to use a division that emerged naturally in the data. The victim’s relationship to the perpetrator was the primary factor that determined how reporters commented on the crime of rape and discussed the victim and the perpetrator. Therefore, this part of the analysis will be divided into two main sections—narratives of acquaintance rape and narratives of stranger rape. Within these two major categories, there were several unique narratives that emerged, and this analysis will attempt to illuminate the details and writing styles that frequently accompanied these different narratives.
4.1. GENERAL THEMES

Profile of the Typical Article

There was no typical narrative about rape that emerged; instead several principle narratives appeared. These narratives will be thoroughly discussed in the final sections of this analysis, but for now it is simply worth mentioning that no one storyline unites all the reviewed articles. Perhaps the most unifying characteristic of the articles was that most reports were sparse and contained little information. 72.9% of articles made no mention of the emotional repercussions or traumatic nature of rape. These articles failed to mention even the basic emotional response of the victims. Overt expressed sympathy for the victim was much more common, but still only present in 47.1% of the articles. Mentions of the perpetrator’s motivation, or any attempt to explain why the crime took place were even scarcer—only 25.7% of articles suggested a motive for the perpetrator. 24% of the time the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim was not mentioned. The mean word count of an article was only 295 words. Many instances of sexual assault or rape received barely over 100 words, and some stories contained less than 60 words.

Typically, each case that was present in the sample only had one or two articles written about it. These articles of low profile cases were usually well under 250 words. The mean word count of articles that featured cases that only appeared once in the dataset was 245 words. There were 117 different cases in the 140 articles reviewed. Of those 117 different cases, 29 of them (21%) were repeat cases—cases that were mentioned in more than one article.
Of course, many instances of sex crimes never make it to newspapers at all. High profile cases, on the other hand, typically are featured in articles over 500 words. Not only do these cases receive wider coverage, each separate article is more detailed. Articles that covered repeat cases were significantly longer than cases that only appeared once \((t (135) = 3.6, p < .001)\).

Once it was established that not all cases were receiving the same amount of attention, the question remained: were the cases that were shorter different in some significant way from the cases that had several long articles written about them? It became clear that certain types of cases were big news. Examples of these are: rape murders of young attractive women who come from a higher socioeconomic status, serial rapes, and sexual assaults committed in an institutional setting (such as a classroom or daycare). Other narratives were considered less newsworthy, such as sexual assaults by uncles or distant relatives, or attempted rapes of adult women. Other narratives were almost entirely absent, such as spousal and partner rape, rape in prison, rape of adult males, and rape by an immediate family member. These narratives will be explored later in this analysis.

There were also important qualitative differences in the way high profile cases were covered, and the way cases that only had one article written about them were covered. High profile cases were often imbued with more outrage towards the perpetrator, and expressed more overt sympathy towards the victims. Although high profile cases were more visible, and therefore could legitimize and give voice to the experiences of these types of victims, the newspaper coverage of them was often problematic. For example, longer articles were significantly more likely to
dehumanize the perpetrator (t (135) = 2.55, p < .05), use language that could evoke fear in readers (t (134) = 3.97, p < .001), and sensationalize (t (135) = 5.22, p < .001). Especially high profile cases were also more likely to blame the victim in some way for the crime.

Variations in Articles across Geographic Regions

Articles came from the local newspapers of New York, California, Minnesota and Texas, so that the four regions of the United States would be represented. It was surprising how little variation in reporting style there was across the four states. There were no important significant differences between the regions. For example, the two main variables that I hypothesized would vary between regions were expressed sympathy for the victim and victim perpetrator relationship. Whether the victim knew the perpetrator or not was not significantly related to the state ($\chi^2 (3) = 1.6, p = .66$) (See Figure 1), nor was whether or not the article expressed sympathy for the perpetrator ($\chi^2 (3) = 3.1, p = .374$). As such, all 140 articles in the original data set were analyzed together, and considered to be one body of data.

There were some slight differences amongst the narratives told.

![Figure 1. Victim perpetrator relationship broken down by state. This relationship was not significant. ($\chi^2 (3) = 1.6, p = .66$)](image-url)
For example, the frequency of reporting on home invasion varies significantly by state ($\chi^2 (3) = 10.1, p < .05$), with Minnesota and Texas more likely to report on home invasion rapes than New York and California. This may reflect a variation in the real instances of reported home invasion in these states—there may just be a higher proportion of home invasions in Minnesota and Texas. This may also be due to the types of cases that these newspapers choose to cover. Regardless of the reason for this difference in the data, it is evident that newspaper readers in Texas and Minnesota are exposed to more reports on home invasion, and may think of this as a more common type of assault.

**Motives**

The vast majority of articles did not ascribe any motives to the perpetrators. Newspaper reports made little attempt to explain the crime of rape. An overwhelming 74.3% of the 140 articles reviewed did not mention motive. This repeated suggestion that rape has no explanation, and that it is an act that cannot be understood makes rape a rather unique crime. When a murder or assault occurs, police and detectives often search for motive to help understand and explain the crime. I suggest that motive is so commonly absent from articles on sex crimes primarily due to a combination of two main factors. In many articles, the reporters emphasized that some sex crimes were so perverse that the reporters were overcome with a feeling of senselessness, and could not contemplate why a man would commit such a heinous act. This appeared often in articles covering brutal stranger rapes. Another factor in why articles failed to ascribe motive to the perpetrator may have
been that reporters assumed there was a motive inherent in the rapes or sexual assaults—sexual desire. Because such a large portion of the articles discussed rape with sexual language and conflated the two acts of rape and sex, and because the most commonly suggested motive in this sample was sexual desire, perhaps reporters believed that the reason for committing rape was implied.

A feeling of senselessness is often a reaction to acts that are interpreted as evil, and it is often a means of coping with tragedy. Believing an act to be without explanation prevents people from having to try to actually contemplate why the act was committed. Any phrase that overtly expressed the opinion that there was no way to understand the crime was coded as “the presence of senselessness.” For example, a quotation from a family member of a victim that expressed confusion (“But why would anybody do this? I don’t know” (Nelson, 2008)) or the reporter’s own opinion (“He had no explanation for his behavior”) would be counted. Claiming that there is no reason or rationalization for a perpetrator’s actions has several important implications. First, it removes any responsibility from society or the environment. Not a single article indicated that society, childhood environment, or any outside influence had swayed the perpetrator’s behavior, even when the articles did suggest motive. This means that crime is being treated as an individualized phenomenon. It suggests that the perpetrator is inherently a bad person, and completely outside of society. This removes responsibility from societal norms and cultural values. Newspapers may perpetuate this idea of senselessness because it is more comforting to believe that our culture is without blame, and it frees the public from taking any action to challenge American beliefs and ideologies. The only time that a
perpetrator’s childhood experiences were brought up in the articles reviewed was to emphasize that the perpetrator “had a normal, pleasant family life, unmarked by abuse” (Fraley, 2008a), negating this influence entirely. If people understand rape as an individualized crime that stems from the deep character flaws of perpetrators, their reaction is likely to be much more punitive toward, and less forgiving of, perpetrators.

Although the majority of articles did not attempt to assign motives to perpetrators, when articles did assign motive to the perpetrators, these motives were completely individualized (See Figure 2). As mentioned before, the most common motive ascribed to perpetrators was sexual desire. 5.7% of the articles mentioned a sexual motive. Assigning sexual motives to perpetrators is problematic, because it suggests that rape is a crime of sexual desire, and not of violence, dominance or control. This is not to say that sexual desire is never involved in the act of sexual assault, but to emphasize sexual desire to such a large degree simplifies and misrepresents the real reasons that men rape. One article quoted a defense lawyer whose client was a serial rapist who suffocated one of his victims. The lawyer argues, “Daryl Kemp wants sex, not dead bodies” (Fraley, 2008b). The article did not question this lawyer’s logic; it merely reproduced his argument. The implication that men who rape do not intend to injure or inflict
suffering, but merely want “sex” is misleading for several reasons. First it suggests that rape can be sex. Sex implies consent, and therefore a rapist never achieves sex. Secondly, it reduces the gravity of the situation, and denies the violence and violation that is inherent in all sexual assaults.

A second common motive in the articles reviewed was that the perpetrator’s actions were the result of his inherent evilness. This argument asserted that the primary reason for the perpetrator’s deviance was his individual twisted personality. When articles suggested this as the case, they also often mentioned that the perpetrator had no chance of reform. One article about a suspected rapist and murderer suggested that the perpetrator “had no hope for change” (Pheifer, 2008), and another that “therapy sessions would probably not cure someone that deranged” (Daly, 2008), and another asserted that a man who attempted rape would undoubtedly “strike again” if not caught and convicted (Nelson, 2008). These sentiments were especially prevalent in articles that reported on stranger rape and high profile cases. The belief that perpetrators cannot be reformed is problematic because it would call for an extremely punitive approach to sentencing rapists.

A third visible motive was that the perpetrator was insane or had a mental illness. 5.7% of articles mentioned that the perpetrator may have had a mental illness, or generally referred to him as insane or deranged. These articles were significantly longer than other articles that did not question the perpetrator’s mental capacity (t (135) = 3.19, p < .05). Because readers are more likely to be exposed to longer articles and not skip over them, it is likely that the trope of the insane rapist is a fairly well known one. *The Daily News* often called rapists ‘sickos’ or ‘sex perverts.’
Articles also sometimes reported that attorneys were ordering psychiatric examinations for their clients, or quoted acquaintances of the perpetrator, who described him as “deranged” or “disturbed.” Judges admonished perpetrators as being sick, and needing psychiatric help. Often times, the suggestion that the perpetrator was mentally ill was paired with the idea that the rapist could not control his actions because of his disorder. One article quoted a defense lawyer, who argued that his client was afflicted with paraphilia, and couldn’t “control his urges” (Fraley, 2008a).

Another motive mentioned, though infrequently, was that the perpetrator was on drugs. One article mentioned the desire to control and dominate as a secondary motive. It is also worth noting that the articles were significantly more likely to ascribe motive to a perpetrator who did not know his victim than to one who did \( (\chi^2(1) = 4.4, p < .05) \) (See Figure 3).

A possible explanation for this is that in articles on acquaintance rape, sex crimes were so often confused with sex that the assumption may have been that the perpetrators were mostly motivated by sexual desire. Therefore, this implied motive was not explicitly mentioned.
Victim Resistance

Another overarching theme that emerged was that a victim was discussed more sympathetically when an article described her physical resistance (See Figure 4). The author of an article was significantly more likely to overtly express sympathy if he mentioned that the victim resisted, than if he did not mention victim resistance at all ($\chi^2 (1) = 21.6, p < .001$).

16% of the articles mentioned that the victim resisted, 4% mentioned that the victim did not resist, and 80% did not mention resistance at all. Articles that mentioned the victim’s resistance were significantly longer than articles that did not mention victim resistance ($t (129) = 3.467, p < .01$). It seems that in the narrative of rape, victims who actively physically resist their attacker are championed and seen as more sympathetic. In an article about a serial rape case with multiple victims, the only victim discussed in great length is a woman who aggressively struggled before her death. The prosecutor argues “Wiltsey is a hero because she struggled, she yelled, she cried out” (Fraley, 2008b). The article implies that Wiltsey is essentially a better victim because she attempted to fight off her attacker in a more aggressive manner than the other victims. In another article,
the reporter champions a victim for resisting, “kicking and screaming,” (Pheifer, 2008), and in another article a victim proudly announces that she “would have fought to the death” (Rathbun, 2008).

Because of the high visibility of victims who resisted, physical resistance may be a main part of the way people discuss and think about sexual assault and rape. The articles’ frequent assertion that aggressive physical resistance was a positive and important action for a victim to take legitimizes certain victims, and prioritizes their experiences. In a sympathetic case, or perhaps even to establish a ‘real’ instance of rape or sexual assault, a victim should try to fight off her attacker. There are many reasons that a victim might choose to not aggressively physically resist her attacker—fear, confusion, the feeling that fighting back is futile, or if she is coerced. By praising victims who resisted forcefully, newspaper articles may create a climate of disbelief or indifference towards victims who did not aggressively fight off their attackers.

**Emotional Trauma**

Although mention of a victim’s emotional trauma was surprisingly rare (the victim’s emotional response to the event was mentioned only 28.1% of the time), there were instances where this was reported. Articles that mentioned the victim’s emotional response were significantly longer than articles that did not (t (135) = 7.00, p < .001). Examples of expressing emotional trauma were discussing a victim’s need for therapy sessions, development of PTSD, or a personal statement from the victim, such as “I can’t sleep at night” (Karoliszyn & Connor, 2008).
This lack of reporting on the victim’s trauma may reflect reporters’ discomfort with rape, and they may not want to make their readers uncomfortable. However, by removing trauma from the discourse on rape, reporters are denying victims a voice, and denying the extremely traumatic nature of all types of sexual assault.

**Sympathy for the Victim**

Overt expressions of sympathy for the victim were expressed in 47% of the articles coded. This is not to say that the reporters in the remaining 53% of the articles did not feel any sympathy towards the victims. As I previously discussed, many of these articles were extremely short, and therefore contained few details. However, in those instances where sympathy was expressed and not merely implied, the reporter may have considered the victim to be especially deserving of sympathy. The readers of these articles may also feel more sympathetic towards victims when the author overtly expresses sympathy. Examples of expressions of sympathy for the victim were the inclusion of quotes from the community or the victim’s family about the victim’s plight (“he’s been called a hero” (Hornbeck, 2008); the perpetrator “stole my daughter’s innocence” (Anchor Sexually Assaulted, *The Houston Chronicle*, 2008)), explicit expressions of the author’s own opinion (“the woman’s courage and strength” (Nelson, 2008)), or if the reporter attempted to understand what it must have been like for the victim (“here was one on one terrorism” (The charming & handsome pervert could even fool a cop, *Daily News*) or “this was a woman’s worst nightmare” (Olson, 2008)).
Articles that expressed sympathy contained significantly more words than articles that did not (t (132) = 2.89, p < .01). This, of course, is most likely a two-way relationship. It would make sense that articles that are longer include more details, and therefore would be more likely to include the detail of sympathy. However, I do think that articles where the victim is especially sympathetic do receive more media attention, and longer articles. If it were merely a matter of detail being included, then articles that expressed sympathy towards the perpetrator would also be significantly longer than articles that did not, and this was not the case (t(134) = 1.06, p = .292). It is encouraging that longer articles, which are usually higher visibility articles, do contain sympathy for victims of rape.

Further analyses revealed that sympathy was extended more frequently to certain kinds of cases. As I noted previously, victim sympathy was more often present when the articles mentioned victim resistance. There was also more sympathy present when the article contained a phrase that dehumanized the perpetrator ($\chi^2 (1) = 13.8, p < .001$). When the perpetrator was removed from society, the act of rape seemed more horrific and the reporter was more likely to express his condolences. Also,

![Presence of Sympathy for the Victim by Presence of Doubting Victim's Credibility](image-url)
when a victim’s credibility is called into question the article was less likely to express sympathy for the victim ($\chi^2 (1) = 9.6, p < .005$) (See Figure 5 on previous page).

Attacking a victim’s credibility was a common occurrence, especially in acquaintance rapes. I will explore this phenomenon to a greater extent later in my analysis, but for now it is simply worth noting that this relationship between credibility and sympathy existed. Even before it is confirmed or denied that a victim has lied about the occurrence, the mere presence of doubt was enough to make her appear less sympathetic. As I continue my analysis I will further explore the relationships between sympathy and its correlates.

My analysis revealed that sympathy was not uniformly expressed; victims are not judged equally. These victims are judged by factors beyond their control, which should not affect how sympathetic they are, such as whether or not there is doubt that they could be lying, and whether the perpetrator is viewed as a monster or not.

**Race**

Hemmens (2008) argued, “criminal justice is, and has always been, infused with issues of race, gender and class” (297). However, in this sample, discussions of perpetrator and victim race were almost completely absent from the articles. The overwhelming majority of articles made no mention of victim or perpetrator race. The victim’s race was mentioned 4% of the time, and the perpetrator’s race was mentioned 8% of the time. Race was an invisible subject; the articles simply did not contain discussions of race and its relation to rape. Some of the time it would have been possible to infer the race of the individuals involved because of their names, or
the photographs that appeared with the articles. However, for the purpose of my analysis, and to ensure consistent results, I did not infer race if it was not explicitly mentioned. The perpetrator’s race was mostly mentioned if the police were trying to apprehend the suspect, or if it was extremely relevant to the case, such as if the perpetrator was a coyote smuggling immigrants across the border. The predominant feature of the way race was represented in sex crime articles is that it was almost universally ignored. This is particularly unusual, because as highlighted in my literature review, attitudes about rape are often profoundly bound together with attitudes about race and social class. Although in general newspaper articles are not contributing to negative attitudes about race and rape, they are also not serving to dispel myths. I did not run any quantitative analyses pertaining to race and its correlates because of the small number of instances where race was identified. There were several instances where victims and perpetrators were identified as being Hispanic, American Indian, or black, but it was never mentioned that a perpetrator or victim was white.

Interestingly, in the few instances where race was mentioned, race was introduced as an extremely important, and problematic, factor in the case. For example, in one article, the perpetrator had requested a change in venue because he was a black man in a predominantly white community (New venue asked in sex assault case, St. Paul Pioneer Press, 2008). In the article, his lawyer explained that it would be impossible for a black man accused of raping a white woman to be given a fair trial in overwhelmingly white town. By asserting that the fact of the perpetrator’s race would be enough to skew a jury and affect an entire community’s judgment of
the perpetrator, this article established race as a critical factor in how people interpret and understand cases of rape. Therefore, it is intensely problematic that newspapers fail to even discuss race, unless it is brought up in the trial itself and cannot be ignored. It is as if, in their attempt to avoid controversy, reporters simply bow out of the issue all together.

It is unclear from this analysis whether victims of any race are underrepresented, or whether perpetrators of any race are overrepresented. I cannot comment on whether the victim or perpetrator’s race affects the newsworthiness of the story, because it was impossible to determine the race of the individuals involved in the case. Just because race was not mentioned in these articles, it does not mean that reporters are not racially biased in selecting cases to cover. The only finding that could be determined was that race was not a part of the way newspapers discuss most instances of rape and sexual assault.

**Socioeconomic Status**

Although socioeconomic status of victims was rarely mentioned, 46% of the articles mentioned some detail that indicated the socioeconomic status of the perpetrator. Many of these indications were gleaned by inferring status from the perpetrator’s job (if the job was very clearly of a high or low status—mayor or drug-dealer, respectively—or if the reporter prefaced the description of the occupation with a telling adjective—20-year veteran police chief), but occasionally reports did indicate that the perpetrator drove a particularly nice car, or lived in a wealthy or low-income neighborhood. I would code an article that mentioned that the defendant was
a judge who served for seventeen years, or that mentioned the perpetrator’s beautiful vacation home as indications of high SES. I would code an article that mentioned that the perpetrator was on welfare, or was living in a halfway house as indicating low SES.

The SES of the perpetrator was significantly related to whether or not the article expressed sympathy for the victim. When the perpetrator’s SES was high, the article was less likely to express sympathy for the victim ($\chi^2 (3) = 9.6, p < .05$). For example, in one particularly telling case, a US judge was accused of molesting a female employee. The articles about this case portrayed the victim as wanting to seek revenge against her boss, doubted the victim’s story, and even mentioned that her sexual history was being called into question in court (Lozana, 2008; Olsen, 2008). The implication seemed to be that the victim was lying, and that she was targeting the perpetrator because he was of a higher SES. It was almost as if the roles had been switched, and the victim was the predator.

Although this observation was not immediately apparent, my analysis indicated that there is indeed a prejudice that emerges in the way reporters think about crime and culpability when the perpetrator is of a higher SES (See Figure 6). One explanation for this could be that the

![Figure 6. Expressed sympathy for the victim as a function of the perpetrator’s SES. ($\chi^2 (3) = 9.6, p < .05$)
public is less likely to believe that a successful and well-respected perpetrator is capable of rape. This would make the public more likely to think that the victim is lying, and falsely accusing the perpetrator. Indeed, the perpetrator’s SES was also significantly related to whether or not the article called the victim’s credibility into question ($\chi^2 (3) = 15.1, p < .005$). When the perpetrator was of a higher SES, the victim’s credibility was more likely to be doubted (See Figure 7). In another relatively high profile case where the perpetrator was a “veteran” prosecutor in the D.A.’s office, the victim’s allegations were denounced as being “political” (CoCo sex prosecutor in court today, East Bay Express, 2008). The article seemed to imply that the victim chose to accuse the prosecutor because of his high social status, and was therefore not to be believed or sympathized with. Perhaps the reporters believe that the victim has more of a motive to accuse her perpetrator if he is of a high social status, and therefore she is more likely to be lying.

Another notable finding was that when a perpetrator’s status was deemed important to a story, aspects relating to his SES were reiterated again and again. For example, in one case where the perpetrator was a famous pediatrician, the article mentioned

![Figure 7](image-url)

**Figure 7.** The presence of questioning the victim’s credibility broken down by the perpetrator’s SES. ($\chi^2 (3) = 15.1, p < .005$)
several times, and also that he was a “guru” and a “famed doctor” (Accused pediatrician is leaving institute, *The New York Times*, 2008). Similarly, a prosecutor in the District Attorney’s office was described as a “twenty-one year veteran,” and a professor at a prestigious university was qualified as “renowned” and “highly regarded (Chain of grief for flagship university, *The New York Times*, 2008). These details are deemed highly relevant in the article, and highlight the perpetrator’s status. Possible explanations for why this occurs are either that the public enjoys reading about how far the perpetrator has fallen from his high status, or that people of a higher SES have more social connections, and may already be somewhat famous and therefore there is more of an interest in their lives.

Occasionally a sense of surprise and peculiar delight was present in these articles, because the high SES perpetrators were committing these perverse acts. High SES perpetrators were rarely dehumanized; rather articles stressed the suggestion that even people from high socioeconomic statuses can occasionally transgress. For example, in response to the surprise that a respected professor was sexually abusing a former student, a member of the community was quoted as noting the “sad fact” was that “we can find examples of sexual harassment all throughout our society” (Chain of grief for flagship university, *The New York Times*, 2008). This quotation is interesting, because it suggests that it is particularly sad or disturbing that someone of the higher class would commit a sex crime. In this scenario, it is natural for people of the lower classes to commit sex crimes, but “sad” that someone of a higher class would commit such an act.
The SES of the victim is less often brought up. But in high profile cases that received a lot of attention, the victim’s SES was often revealed. The few times that the SES of the victim was mentioned in less high profile cases was when the victim was either from a very wealthy background, or from a very low SES background. In other words, the articles reported on the extremes. A reader with no knowledge of the reality of victimization might believe that only prostitutes and women who live in extraordinarily wealthy neighborhoods are raped or assaulted.

When the SES of a victim was brought up in high profile cases it was often dramatized and sensationalized. For example, when home invasions happened in very wealthy suburb neighborhoods that were considered safe and untouchable by crime, the status of the neighborhood becomes the main focus of that case. For example, in a home invasion that received a fair amount of media attention, the neighborhood was described in unusual detail, considering the general lack of details in the average article. The woman was described as living in a “quiet upscale neighborhood,” with “200,000- $400,000 homes” (Crowe, 2008). The specific mention of the price of the houses is especially noteworthy when one considers that in some articles the gender of the victim was not even mentioned. This article mentioned the expensive homes in order to emphasize the surprise and fear that the community felt. Neighbors were quoted as being on “high alert,” and “living in fear,” and suddenly deciding to lock their doors. This article seemed to suggest that rape, or specifically this kind of violent stranger rape, does not, and should not, happen in this particular world of safety. In these articles, it’s as if the high price of the houses should keep violent crime at bay.
The community’s response to the crime was also frequently documented in cases where the perpetrator or the victim was of higher SES. The reaction was often one of surprise, shock, fear, or outrage. All of this functioned to give the impression that sex crimes do not normally plague the higher classes, and when they do it is worth mentioning, and scarier than when crime affects the lower classes.

Although I was unable to run an analysis using SPSS on victim SES because of the small number of instances that a victim of a low SES was mentioned, it is worth noting that very few of the biggest, high profile cases involved a victim from a lower SES. There were a few serial rape cases where the victims were prostitutes, or run-aways but the victim was not the focus of those articles.

**Gender**

There has been remarkably little research done on how the media represents either female perpetrators or male victims of rape. This is in part to the small percentage of people who fit into either category. In this study, only 3 out of 140 cases dealt with female perpetrators. All three of these women knew their victims, and their victims were either very young or disabled in some way. Because of the small sample size, I will not attempt to analyze how the media talks about female perpetrators of rape.

However, there were a substantial number of articles about male victims. 18% of the articles reviewed included male victims, and of those articles that mentioned the victim’s gender, 20% were male. While this seems like a very large percentage, a considerable portion of these victims were young boys. Very few
articles reported on the rapes or sexual assaults of male adults. This narrative remains largely ignored by the press (See Figure 8). Of the 25 articles that discussed male victims of rape, only 8 of these discussed adult male victims (32%). On the other hand, in over half the articles about female victims, the victim was an adult. The relationship between whether the victim was an adult or not and victim gender approached significance, but was not significant ($\chi^2(1) = 3.5, p = .06$).

![Figure 8. Victim gender broken down by categories of age: child, teenager, adult and elderly.](image)

Articles about male victims had significantly higher word counts than narratives about female victims ($t(122) = 2.03, p < .05$). This was surprising, because male victims of rape have been historically neglected. However, I believe that this is because for a story to develop about a male victim, the case was often unusual in some way. For example, one relatively high profile case featured a male victim who had been sodomized with a baton by several policemen in a subway station. That case garnered a lot of media attention due to the bizarre and frightening circumstances, and also because the victim was very vocal to the press and allowed newspapers to publish his name. I also believe that the narrative of young boys and teenagers sexually abused by someone in an institutional setting, such as a teacher, priest, or older male authority figure is a familiar narrative that is often told, because it already fits into the public’s understanding of sexual assault.
Whether or not the perpetrator was someone involved in an institution, such as a teacher or authority figure, was significantly related to the gender of the victim \( (\chi^2(1) = 14.5, p < .001) \) (See Figure 9).

Although there was not enough data on male victims to run an analysis, I observed a peculiar phenomenon when reviewing articles about male victims. The author was much less likely to use the word ‘rape,’ or even the phrase ‘sexual assault.’ One article, which discussed a case where the same man molested a young boy and a slightly older girl, was particularly illuminating. Although the man was being tried for similar charges with both the boy and the girl, the article reported that the man “engaged in multiple sex acts with a young boy and molested a 12-year-old girl (Schlosser, 2008). While the juxtaposition of the author’s descriptions made this quotation particularly revealing, this was not an isolated incident. There are many other instances where authors described young boys as being involved in ‘sex acts’ with older men, even when the charge against the perpetrator was much more serious. This difference in language use is puzzling. A possible explanation is that reporters felt discomfiture discussing men raping other men, and used these euphemisms instead. A primary reason that the term rape is not used is that the legal definition of rape only includes vaginal penetration. Therefore,
male rape of other males is not legally rape, but rather forcible sodomy. However, the more general definition of rape includes any forced penetration. The term forcible sodomy does not carry the same implications of physical violence and emotional trauma that the term rape does. Therefore, male rape of males is talked about with a completely different vocabulary, and this vocabulary seems to imply a lesser degree of trauma and severity.

Although I did not have enough data to thoroughly examine the narratives surrounding male victims or rape, the fact that these stories do have their own unique narratives makes it necessary to further examine the way newspapers talk about male victims. Most of the following analysis focuses on cases with female victims, as they were part of the most common narratives in my sample about rape.

**Location of the Crime**

Before moving on to the analysis of specific narratives of rape and sexual assault, it is worth briefly noting that there were important categories of where the crime took place. The most common locations that appeared in the articles were: the victim’s home; the perpetrator’s home; the street; a public restroom; a parking garage or outdoor public space; an institutional space like a classroom or jail; being picked up at a bar; and other. If a crime took place in two spaces, the location where the victim was first abducted or first encountered her assailant was used. The place where the victim was first put in danger, or the origin of the crime, is the place that the public would potentially fear or see as the unsafe location. In other words, learning that a victim was abducted while walking down the street late at night and taken to a
stranger’s home may make a reader nervous about walking on a street at night, but it will probably not make a reader afraid that she will be attacked in a stranger’s home.

Location was mentioned 69.8% of the time, and the victim’s home was the most common location of the crime (See Figure 10).

![Location of Crime](image)

**Figure 10.** Breakdown of the location of the crime.

It was not possible to do analyses for the location of a crime, because my dataset was not large enough. However, it is clear from looking at the data that there were certain locations that were associated with whether the victim knew her perpetrator or not (See Figure 11).
This may not be particularly surprising, because this finding does mirror reality—generally strangers are the perpetrators abducting people off the street, and usually assaults in classrooms are perpetrated by acquaintances of the victim. However, it is important to note that even the simple notion of location can connote a certain type of rape. There is a separate story that surrounds being sexually assaulted on the street, in a parking garage, and in your own home.

The next two sections of this analysis will move away from general themes about rape, and instead focus on the specific narratives of rape and sexual assault that are being constructed by the media. The language, style and familiar tropes and characters involved in each narrative will be explored.
4.2. NARRATIVES OF STRANGER RAPE OR SEXUAL ASSAULT

Although articles where the perpetrator was a stranger were longer on average than articles where the perpetrator was an acquaintance of the victim (See Figure 12), this relationship was not significant (t (99) = 1.25, p = .21). However, when compounded with the fact that there were slightly more stranger rapes reported on than acquaintance rapes, it is clear that the reader is exposed to more information about stranger rapes than acquaintance rape (See Figure 13).

This is misleading, considering over half of all rapes are committed by someone the victim knew (Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000). This overrepresentation of stranger rape alerts the public to be more aware of this kind of assault, and to understand rape as an act primarily committed by those unknown to the victim—contrary to reality. There were also important ways that the narratives of stranger rape differed from the narratives of acquaintance rapes. In this section, first the general themes and tropes that are unique to the discourse on stranger rape will be discussed. Next, the
individual narratives that emerge about different types of stranger rape will be explored.

**Evoking Fear**

Articles used language that could evoke fear in 10% of the articles reviewed. Articles were coded as evoking fear if the author cautioned or warned the reader about something (mentioning that the perpetrator is still on the loose, warning the reader to lock doors), or quoted a community member who expressed that he or she was afraid. Articles that evoked fear were significantly longer than articles that did not (t (134) = 3.97, p < .001), and many articles on high profile cases of stranger rape also evoked fear. Whether or not an article evoked fear was significantly related to whether the perpetrator was a stranger or an acquaintance ($\chi^2 (1) = 14.3$, p< .001). Fear was evoked in 25.5% of the articles in which the victim did not know her attacker, and in none of the articles in which she did (See Figure 14). When the relationship of the perpetrator and the victim were not mentioned, fear was evoked 2.9% of the time.

![Figure 14](Presence of Fear by Victim Perpetrator Relationship.png)

*Figure 14.* Presence of language that evokes fear broken down by whether the victim knew her attacker or not. ($\chi^2 (1) = 14.3$, p< .001)
Because of the strength of this relationship, it is clear that these articles portray stranger rape as an occurrence that should be actively feared, whereas acquaintance rape was not something that the readers should necessarily be afraid of. Even when a stranger committed a relatively minor offense, such as groping or flashing a passerby, these events were treated as shocking and “creepy” (Jaccarino, Boyle & Connor, 2008). Readers are being exposed to the idea that being sexually assaulted by a stranger is more frightening than being sexually assaulted by someone that they knew. This has extraordinarily important implications for how people treat and understand the experiences of rape and sexual assault victims. People may be less likely to comfort or show support for a victim of acquaintance rape, because they do not feel that the experience was as scary. An alternative explanation is that the authors of these articles did not mean to express the idea that stranger rape is a scarier experience for an individual victim. Instead, the authors may only be evoking fear because they are giving the impression that stranger rapes can happen to anyone, without warning. Many people are more afraid of stranger rape merely because they cannot possibly imagine a scenario in which an acquaintance would rape or sexually assault them, but they fear that a stranger could attack them. So, the public may not think that stranger rapes are a scarier experience, but rather an experience that is more likely to happen to them, and to be beyond their control, than acquaintance rape.

The caution seemed to be that these perverse strangers could be anywhere. However, this same caution could be made when reporting on acquaintance rape—that even people you may trust are capable of sex crimes. It is clear that fear is very much a trope of stranger rape, and it is even more so a trope of high profile and repeat
cases. Higher visibility cases were more likely to make readers afraid for their personal safety. Cases often became ‘big news’ because reporters believe that these cases will personally affect their readers in a way that will captivate them. Making readers afraid is one way to affect them, and to make them curious and want to read further.

**Sensationalizing**

13% of the articles reviewed included sensational details. These articles were significantly longer than other, more objective articles ($t (135) = 5.22, p < .001$). When more details are present in the article, the author is more likely to sensationalize about the case. An article was coded as sensationalizing if the author included emotionally charged phrases like “deranged pervert,” or if the article was written in a particularly dramatic style. For example, one Daily News article went into detail about “the making of a monster” (Jaccarino, Boyle & Connor, 2008). This article described, with lurid details (“girls considered him creepy”) how a suspect in a rape murder developed into a vicious sexual predator. This crafting of a story, and including details that are emotionally charged and only barely grounded in fact would be coded as sensationalizing. If the perpetrator was a stranger, the author was significantly more likely to sensationalize than if the perpetrator was an acquaintance to the victim ($\chi^2 (1) = 7.0, p < .05$). Therefore, although reporters occasionally sensationalized about acquaintance rape, sensationalizing is mostly reserved for cases where the perpetrator is a stranger (See Figure 15).
In high profile cases that received a great deal of coverage, sensationalizing was extremely common. Even relatively objective newspapers, such as the New York Times, included sensational details (“chilling picture of police brutality and the subsequent cover-up” (Robbins, 2008)) if the case had already received a great deal of coverage. However, the most sensational stories appeared in tabloid newspapers, such as the Daily News (New York), the New York Post, and the Boston Herald (Massachusetts). While tabloids are often viewed as less legitimate than other newspapers, they are undoubtedly an integral part of the public discourse about rape and sexual assault.

**Dehumanizing the Perpetrator, and Removing him from Society**

8.6% of the articles in this sample used a phrase or word that portrayed the perpetrator as inhuman, and 19.3% of the stranger rape articles did so. Articles where the perpetrator did not know the victim were significantly more likely to dehumanize the perpetrator than articles where the perpetrator knew the victim. \( \chi^2 (1) = 7.9, p = .005 \) (See Figure 16 on next page).
These articles were also significantly longer than those articles that did not dehumanize the perpetrator ($t(135) = 3.19, p < .005$).

Common images were “monster,” “fiend,” “vicious predator,” or “the embodiment of evil.” These images were also often backed up with descriptions that emphasized the perpetrator’s inability to feel any emotions, or act humanely. For example, one rapist was described as having “cold expressionless eyes” and a “heartless smirk” (Olsen, 2008). These perpetrators were not considered human because of their supposed incapacity for empathy. These articles also often emphasized that the perpetrator could not change his behavior. The implication was clearly that these inhuman perpetrators were fundamentally and unchangeably evil. The effect this device produces is that the public may believe that preventing these men from raping again is impossible. The only way to stop these perpetrators would be a lifetime in jail, or death. In cases where capital punishment was considered, almost all of the perpetrators were portrayed as monstrous fiends, beyond human understanding. One article discussed how a serial rapist “laughed out loud” when his death sentence was announced (Rosynsky, 2008).

This narrative of the monstrous rapist, which so often showed up in the biggest, most widely covered stranger rapes, has the potential to influence and sway

Figure 16. The presence of dehumanizing the perpetrator by whether the victim knew the perpetrator or not. ($\chi^2(1) = 7.9, p = .005$)
how the public thinks about the typical rapist. For example, in one case, where the violent perpetrator had a family, the reporter noted that the crime was “hard to process with Henderson’s wife and young kid in the courtroom” (Fraley, 2008b). The reporter could not reconcile the perpetrator being an active member of society—a husband and father—with his ability to rape. The public often expects rapists to be immediately apparent as creepy, perverted sex criminals, and often times, especially in the most high profile cases that receive the most public attention, newspapers encouraged this view. In the high profile disappearance and supposed rape of Laura Garza by Michael Mele, a registered sex offender, authors tried to reconcile their sympathy for Garza with the notion that she should have been readily able to recognize Mele for the monster he was. One article read that Mele’s “handsome exterior” had even fooled a cop, implying that it was understandable that Garza would initially not suspect him when she encountered him at a bar (The charming and handsome pervert could even fool a cop, *The Daily News*, 2008).

Making these men seem to be monsters and sex fiends and animalistic predators also has another important repercussion. It places these men squarely outside of the realm of society. They are not even human, nonetheless an active member of American culture and life. This is supported by the other numerous instances of portraying these perpetrators as outsiders. The term “danger to society” was a common trope in describing dangerous criminals, and was repeated like a reprise over and over in high profile cases that were particularly brutal. These sex criminals were not only outsiders, they also threatened the status quo. This attitude removes all the blame from society, and only finds the individual as responsible for
the crime. If someone is a monster, then there is no reason to further examine or explain the act. There is no discussion of how our society, which highly values male dominance and physical strength and creates unequal power structures, could in some way contribute to the alarming frequency of sexual assaults. The role of society in causing or contributing to the crime was not mentioned in a single one of the 140 articles in the original dataset.

The dehumanizing of perpetrators of rape and sexual assault suggests many things. It implies that rape is a crime that is extrasocietal, that stranger rape is considered an inhumane act, and that one popular conception of what rapists are like is that they are monstrous loners who are clearly perverse. That dehumanizing the perpetrator was most often reserved for episodes of stranger rape suggests that stranger rape is considered to be a less understandable, more repulsive, and more perverse act than acquaintance rape.

**Home Invasion**

The narrative of home invasion was a fairly common one that appeared often in my original dataset. 12.1% of the cases analyzed here were home invasions. While these articles were not significantly longer than other articles ($t (135) = .659, p = .511$)—in fact they were slightly shorter than other articles—there was a significant relationship between expressed sympathy for the victim and whether or not the crime was a home invasion ($\chi^2 (1) = 6.1, p < .05$) (See Figure 17 on next page).
The fact that these articles were not significantly longer than other articles suggests that including the detail of sympathy was not the result of a longer word count and more detailed reporting. Instead, this appeared to be a pure relationship, which reflected the belief that a victim who was attacked in this way was more sympathetic than victims of other assaults. It was also remarkable how consistent newspapers articles were in describing this narrative.

Cases were coded as being ‘home invasions’ if the victim was at home and did not expect the perpetrator to come to her house, and did not invite him in. Almost all home invasions were perpetrated by strangers. The victim was typically an adult female; because children are rarely home alone, whereas adult women are. The stranger was described as breaking into the woman’s house, usually when no one else was home, and assaulting her either in her home, or kidnapping her and assaulting her in his car or another location. Often these home invasion sexual assaults were accompanied by some other crime, such as robbery, burglary, or kidnapping. The victim’s credibility was rarely questioned, and in about one third of these articles it was mentioned that the victim resisted. In a few cases, the victim was also murdered. The severity of the physical assault varied among the victims. Sometimes the victim
successfully fought off her attacker, and sometimes the victim was severely injured, such as tied up and beaten at knifepoint.

Although these articles were not significantly more likely to suggest motive for the perpetrator than other articles, the relationship approached significance ($\chi^2 (1) = 2.86, p = .09$) (See Figure 18). One possible explanation for this is that these perpetrators are seen as unstable, and the action of seeking a victim out in their own home seems so perverse that the reporters wanted to suggest that the perpetrators were indeed abnormal in some way. The motives provided tended to be insanity, incapacitation because of drugs, or evil.

This narrative was fairly high visibility despite the lack of high profile cases and long articles. So although each article was not long, the narrative of home invasion itself appeared frequently. The details of the cases reported seemed to mostly conform to a general storyline, and the roles of the perpetrator and the victim fit general molds. As mentioned previously, the most notable aspect of this narrative was the extremely high degree of sympathy for the victim. This victim was almost uniformly portrayed as sympathetic, brave, and as someone who did not deserve her fate. One possible explanation for the high degree of victim sympathy is that in this narrative there is little room for doubt as to the victim’s credibility, the facts of the case, or whether the victim was in some way
responsible for the misfortune. In this situation, it is hard to say that the victim could have acted differently—she was in her home, a normally safe place. She fits into the domestic sphere, in a place where no one should expect to be attacked, and she could not be seen as tempting or luring the perpetrator. It is hard for the authors to point fingers, and to ‘other’ the victim by describing her as acting in a way that we ourselves would not act. When the idea that the victim may have deserved her misfortune cannot be reconciled with our understanding of the facts, she was seen as extremely sympathetic.

**Serial and Gang Rape**

Although not all serial rapes, and certainly not all gang rapes, are perpetrated by strangers, in my sample the perpetrators of these crimes were mostly portrayed as malicious strangers. There were not many instances of gang rape (rape perpetrated by more than one assailant simultaneously) reported on in my sample, so I will not go into detail about this narrative. However, it is worth noting that articles with multiple perpetrators were significantly longer than other articles ($t (135) = 3.0, p < .01$).

16.4% of the articles reviewed involved serial sex offenders. Although the narrative of serial rapists or sex criminals was somewhat varied, there were consistencies that appeared in the data. Articles about serial sex offenders were significantly longer than other articles ($t (135) = 2.04, p < .05$). These articles also were frequently cases that were not “current”; in other words the crime had occurred at least a year earlier. For example, these articles would report on appeals for new trials, or information on the perpetrator’s status in jail. This was unusual, and
indicated that these cases had a greater staying power, and were intrinsically interesting, even if they were not current. Serial rapists were portrayed as unfeeling criminals who were unlikely to ever be able to change. All the serial offenders were adults, except for one sixteen-year-old. In describing this 16-year-old perpetrator, the article expressed surprise that such a young perpetrator could be such a ‘monster,’ and reconciled this with a quotation from one of his victims. The victim reported that he was “as old as time itself,” and “an embodiment of evil” (Pheifer, 2008). The victims of serial offenders were children, adults, and teenagers, and male and female. Male victims of serial rapists or sex offenders were always teenagers or children.

**Young Attractive Women Picked up at Clubs**

I found that the most prominent high profile cases that I reviewed were cases where young, pretty women met strange men at bars and either went home with these men or were kidnapped. While this narrative appeared in shorter articles about women who were not murdered, the primary discourse about this type of rape was when the young women was murdered, went missing, or was very brutally assaulted. For this reason, in this section I will primarily focus on those articles where women were very severely injured or killed. This type of narrative is currently the big news story for newspapers to cover, and I found that many of the very high profile cases were young female partiers who met their assailants in bars. This narrative was widely exploited for its sensational and dramatic nature.

The victims in these cases were typically young, pretty college-aged women, who met a strange man while drinking at a bar or club. The women then left with the
man, or he kidnapped her. The woman’s body was typically found later, with evidence of sexual assault present, or she escaped or was freed later. The perpetrator was usually dehumanized. To further explore this narrative, I supplemented my original data set with articles from three very high visibility cases. The victims in these cases were Imette St. Guillen, Jennifer Moore, and Laura Garza.

There are several reasons that this narrative was unique from most other narratives about rape, and further analysis of these high profile cases provided an interesting opportunity. While most cases only become news after the perpetrator is arrested and charged, these cases were publicized at every stage of the crime. Therefore, these articles were some of the only reports in which the suspect was not apprehended. In many cases, there were even articles before the police determined who the suspect was. This allowed for an interesting opportunity to see how newspaper reporters speculated about the event before the facts were uncovered. Speculating can often reveal biases, such as the immediate assumption that the perpetrator was a stranger to the victim, or the speculation that the perpetrator was a perverted sex fiend or monster. Another opportunity that is only realized when the victim is murdered is that the newspaper explored the victim’s life thoroughly. This was rare in other articles, which did not give the victim’s name and were careful about providing details that would identify her. The victim became a large part of these rape murder stories, and for this reason, her actions were often more openly and unabashedly questioned. Also, in these cases alcohol was often a factor. Examining these articles gave the unique opportunity to explore reporters’ biases about victim
intoxication. For all of these reasons, and because I strongly believe this is one of the most visible narratives on rape in the news today, I will explore it in great detail here.

I. Victim’s Looks and Dress

Very few of the articles in my original dataset discussed the victim’s looks or dress. However, in this narrative, the victim’s attractiveness became a main theme. These victims were frequently described as “pretty,” “beauties,” or “cute.” In the case of St. Guillen, articles routinely discussed her “petite” frame, her “raven hair,” her big brown eyes and her “smile [that] lit up every room she walked in” (Fargen, 2006; Burke & Hutchinson, 2006). Articles about Moore emphasized how “cute” she was, and how she attracted stares everywhere she went (Montefinise, 2006). Garza, too, was described as “stunning,” and “beautiful” (The charming & handsome pervert could even fool a cop, Daily News, 2008). Articles that emphasized the victim’s attractiveness in such depth seemed to imply that whether the victim was pretty or not was a factor in the crime, or at least relevant to the case. These articles also discussed how pretty females drew attention from onlookers, and stood out—suggesting that these women caught their attackers’ attention because of their beauty. The truth is that rape is most often a crime of opportunity. In the Jennifer Moore case, many reporters included the detail that she was wearing a “black halter top and a white miniskirt” (Jersey Journal, 2006). This repeated detail created the impression that Moore was dressed to attract sexual advances. Although never overtly stated, the prevailing notion seemed to be that her decision to dress in a sexy manor influenced her attacker. Many of these articles also discussed the general atmosphere of club drinking, and while the authors did not describe the typical male partiers’ outfits in
detail, they do describe the females’ outfits. This attention to the revealing clothes of women partiers insinuates that women who dress provocatively put themselves in danger by calling attention to their sexuality. One article about the atmosphere at the bar where St. Guillen was last seen alive gives a detailed description of a woman taking off her jacket to reveal bare shoulders, and all the male heads that turned to look at her (O’Donnell, 2006). Though it was rarely overtly stated, the implication seemed to be that these young women’s outfits and attractiveness were what made them “catch the eye of evil” (Eagan, 2006).

2. Speculation

In all three of these high profile cases, articles appeared before a suspect was determined or charged with the crime. This was quite rare, and offered a unique opportunity. Seeing the way that reporters speculated about who the rapist was often revealed a great deal about their underlying assumptions about rape. For example, in the St. Guillen case, one tabloid reporter went over a list of questions that “respected detectives” were asking about the case. These questions included “did she encounter some psychopath so charming as to fool even a bright” woman; “was she snatched off the street” by a predator?; “Did the assailant videotape the assault so he could replay it again and again?” (Daly, 2006). These questions immediately assumed that the perpetrator was a deranged stranger, with extremely perverse tendencies. The two possible locations discussed were picked up at a bar, and snatched on the street. This revealed that the reporter had a clear idea of who the perpetrator in this type of assault was. Also, the articles about the St. Guillen murder dehumanized the perpetrator a great deal before his identity was discovered, calling him a “sex sicko,” and
“psychopathic sex maniac.” Reports of the crime also speculated that the rapist had killed before, and had committed sexual assault before. There were even reports of an official psychiatric profile that warned that this killer would likely “strike again” (Gendar & Lisberg, 2006). These articles gave the impression that all brutal rapists were repeat offenders who could not be reformed, and who would inevitably rape again.

3. **SES and Race**

In the three high profile cases examined, the victims were portrayed as being of a high socioeconomic status. Often the wealthy communities and the high social status of these victims were included, and were made a part of the drama of each story. While victim SES rarely appeared in my original dataset, it was an important part of this narrative.

Interestingly, St. Guillen did not actually come from a very well-off background. She was squarely middle-class, and grew up in what one article called a “well-worn triple-decker” in the Mission Hill neighborhood of Boston (Eagen, 2006). This article, however, goes on to describe how she had attended the very “prestigious” Boston Latin High School, received excellent grades, and was living in a chic Manhattan apartment as a graduate student. Articles discussed how she had improved her social station, and that she had great potential to move up in the world. Several articles mentioned how she had “traded up” (Fermino, Weiss & Kranes, 2006). One article even asserted that St. Guillen, with her good friends, prestigious education, pretty apartment, and potential for success, was “a world away from” the street she grew up on. Also, instead of emphasizing her financial situation, which was
squarely middle-class, articles emphasized the prestige of her high school and graduate school. They frequently discussed her high grades ("dean’s list", “straight A student”), involvement in extracurricular activities, and how respected she was by her professors (Ellement, 2006). In other words, reporters focused on her extremely high social status, in lieu of her high economic status. Garza, too, was only an aspiring dancer, but articles painted her as making a life for herself in a cute, tidy New York City apartment. Jennifer Moore, on the other hand was described as being incredibly privileged and coming from a wealthy background. Articles described the “silver BMW” that she was driving the night of the crime (Montefinise, 2006). They also noted that her privileged background added to the surprise and tragedy of the event. One article reported, “suburban life is supposed to be quiet, safe” (A bloody summer, The Record, 2006). Moore was supposed to have been protected by her class background. The high social and economic statuses of all three of these victims became an important detail in the coverage of their respective cases. It is unclear whether or not these cases were big news because of these women’s socioeconomic statuses, but letters to the editor occasionally addressed this issue, asserting that these cases would not be so widely covered by the media had the victims not been white women of respected class standing.

While the SES of the perpetrator was not as consistent a theme in this narrative, it was almost always mentioned and dramatized. Darryl Littlejohn, St. Guillen’s murderer, was described almost uniformly as a “burly bouncer” or “muscle-bound ex-con” (Belenkaya, 2006). Articles delved into his past as a drug-dealer and bank-robber that had spent time in jail. One article talked about how his phonebook
contained the contacts “babymoma1” and “babymomma2” (Weiss, Celona & Mengelli, 2006). The majority of articles in my original dataset made no mention of the perpetrator’s SES, yet this reporter even detailed the perpetrator’s phone contacts to communicate just how low Littlejohn’s social status was. Jennifer Moore’s assailant was similarly portrayed as an ex-convict who dealt drugs and had a prostitute for a girlfriend. The articles described the “sleazy” motel that he was staying in, his debts, and his “hooker girlfriend” (Troncone, 2006). Garza’s alleged attacker was, on the other hand, dramatized as having a lot of money, even though he was not particularly wealthy. The articles discussed his nice clothes and his sports car.

Race also was mentioned in St. Guillen’s case frequently, because Littlejohn was a black man who cited racism as one of the reasons that he was originally suspected of the murder. One article made a point that it was not Littlejohn’s race that had convinced police and the general public that he was guilty. This article even cited a black man who thought Littlejohn was guilty to emphasize the point that racism was not involved in how harshly Littlejohn was being judged.

4. Community Emotional Response

Frequently, these narratives discussed the response of the victim’s families, the communities that they grew up in, their school communities, and the reactions of current friends and neighbors. St. Guillen’s death was described as an event that “rocked her family and close-knit Boston neighbored” (Celona, 2006). Jennifer Moore’s funeral was described in heart-wrenching detail, and there were many quotes from friends and family explaining that they could not sleep, or that they were
profoundly affected by the event. The fear of the community in which the crime occurred was also a main part of this narrative. The reaction of females residing in the areas where the crimes occurred were frequently quoted and discussed.

5. Sensationalizing and Dramatization

This narrative was frequently described in extremely dramatic and sensational language. Few other articles reached the same level of sensationalism as the articles about these three cases. Headlines such as “City Beauty Slain by Beast” (Belenkaya & Gendar, 2006), and terms such as “sadistic sicko” were typical. The articles were much longer than other types of narratives, and they told very complete stories of the cases—from the weeks after the crimes until after the last court cases. While most cases were only featured in one article that reported when the perpetrator was charged with the crime, or when the assault was reported, these cases took on a clear storyline. Even people who played minor roles in the crime, such as the cab-driver who dropped Moore off at the impound lot, Moore’s friend who left her alone, high school classmates of Garza’s alleged killer, and the owner of the bar where St. Guillen was last seen, became major characters in the stories of these tragic events. When all the articles were considered together, it was clear that there was a full cast of characters who played out very specific roles (the grieving mother, the guilt-wracked friend who wished she hadn’t left the victim alone, the perpetrator’s despicable girlfriend who may have helped cover up the crime). These cases were turned into dramas because of a strange stylized type of reporting that assumed that the reader had been following, or had some prior knowledge of, the cases. One article even began, “Night was a shadow of itself at the Pioneer Bar” (O’Donnell, 2006). These articles stopped
reporting facts, and began to write instead about the emotions surrounding the case and wild speculations.

6. Self-Awareness

Another notable aspect of these high-profile cases is that the reporters knew, often from the first few articles, that these were big cases that would attract a lot of attention. The Daily News even gave St. Guillen’s rapist the nickname, “the mummy maniac” after the first week of reporting. This showed that the Daily News was anticipating that this would be a recurrent case. Reporters often referred to these cases as the “mystery every detective in the city would dearly love to solve,” or “widely covered” or as “captivating the entire country.” The New York Times noted that “the murder of Ms. St. Guillen has received widespread coverage in the news media, in part because her killer has not been found and because many young women in New York have been in a similar position: spilling out into a dark Manhattan street after a night out with friends” (Baker & Santora 2006). This explanation raises many questions. If the mystery was a main part of the cases’ intrigue, why did this case continue to be big news after Littlejohn became a prime suspect, and then eventually convicted? Long after the media had painted Littlejohn as almost certainly the killer, articles still ran 1200 word stories about the case. Also, while the articles do seem to aim to inspire fear in female late-night partiers, are victims in other crimes less relatable? Do women never go on dates, trust their romantic partners, have ex-boyfriends or go to a friend’s house? This case became big news because it conformed to a narrative that newspapers can easily dramatize.
Articles about these three high-profile cases also often referenced each other, as well as other high-profile cases of young female partiers. The “preppie murder” case of Jennifer Levin was frequently referenced. The story of Natalee Holloway, the “blonde beauty” who disappeared after going out with friends in Aruba was also frequently referenced. One reporter stated, “This is how it always happens, isn’t it?” to preface a long list of women who disappeared after going out with friends (Eagen, 2006). This was a narrative that was very aware of its common storyline.

7. Club Culture: Wrong Place, Wrong Time

Another major theme in these club articles was the location of the crime. There was a large amount of focus on the “trendy nightspots,” where women were dressed provocatively and alcohol was being served in abundance, and men and women who barely knew each other were hooking up. In the Jennifer Moore case especially, the focus was turned on the “wild strip” of clubs in Chelsea. Because Moore was only eighteen, the newspapers, the public, and the police turned their blame on the clubs that served her alcohol without recognizing her fake ID. “Clubland” was seen as raucous and unsafe. Articles frequently discussed the “out-of-control night-life scene” (Chelsea blocks drown in flood of booze; witness to rise, fall of club row, *The New York Post*, 2006) and the “dangers of nightlife in the big city” (Belenkaya, 2006b). In St. Guillen’s case, many female (always female) “late night revelers” at clubs were interviewed about how they felt about St. Guillen’s disappearance. Reporters treated the world of clubs as a bizarre foreign territory; a place where anything goes and people were completely out of control. *The Daily News* frequently published entire articles made up of unsettling details of female
partiers completely unrelated to the crime—discussing the danger that females face in clubs. These articles described women throwing up in alleyways, drunk women crying with mascara running down their faces, and girls stumbling into the night as they walked away from a bar. One headline announced “Danger amid the dazzle; Underage, overindulgent teens drawn to N.Y. Clubs” (Boburg & Michaels, 2006). The articles seemed to be a crusade against the culture of young female drinkers. Although the cultural aspects of violence against women were never explored in any articles, the nightlife culture was thoroughly examined and criticized as a potential explanation for why these crimes occurred. The focus then, was not on cultural contributions to the perpetrators willingness to commit the crime. Instead, the focus was on cultural factors that led up to the woman being in the position to become involved with the perpetrators.

Clubs were also portrayed as a dangerous territory for women. In one article, clubs were obliquely referred to as “hunting grounds,” and women were warned to avoid them. These articles suggested that even going out drinking with friends where there were strange men was opening the doors for an assault to occur. This discourse was similar to the language and arguments used to keep women behaving ‘decently.’ If women behave in a way deemed inappropriate—binge drinking and partying—they could suffer some terrible fate. And, importantly, this fate could have been avoided if these women had stayed home.

8. Alcohol

In cases where the victim was intoxicated, this often became a major theme in the coverage of the crime. In many cases, articles carefully detailed the amount that
the victim drank, and what she was drinking. These details stand out, especially in relatively short articles. For example, in one article that was under 400 words, the reporter described the ingredients in the mixed drink that the victim had been drinking. The reporter also mentioned that this drink was called ‘the heartstopper” (Bigham, 2008). The detail that the victim had been drinking is therefore portrayed as very relevant and meaningful. The mention of the amount of alcohol consumed appeared frequently in murder cases, too. Establishing that the victim had been drinking then, was not a question of whether she was too drunk to consent to sex—instead it functioned to call her behavior into question, and in some way seems to explain how the assault was able to take place. One headline read, “Kids + Booze = Mayhem” (The New York Post, 2006).

In the case of Jennifer Moore, alcohol was a major theme because the victim had been drinking when she was underage. There were a lot of reporters that blamed the bar for allowing her to drink, and there were many suggestions that Moore made herself vulnerable to the attack by becoming intoxicated. Articles frequently described Moore as drunk, and “stumbling” down the street. In fact, no one saw Moore walking down the street when she was abducted, so this detail was completely fabricated, used only to dramatize her intoxication. St. Guillen was also described as being highly intoxicated, and some articles implied that the alcohol may have impaired her judgment, and directly led to her rape and murder. Other articles were less subtle. One article quoted a female college student, asserting “getting drunk at a bar alone is stupid” (Bard, 2006). One headline read, “In murder and mayhem, should we blame victims?; When they’re drunk they bear partial responsibility”
(Grand Rapid Press, 2006). These articles claimed that because drinking can make women vulnerable and less able to defend themselves, women should know better than to get drunk. These articles also ignore the problem of male drinking or intoxication. The focus is entirely on preventing women from binge drinking.

9. Warning to Young Women

A large portion of the articles in the later stages of these cases—once the case has already become big news—claimed that women should learn from the mistakes of young women like St. Guillen, Garza and Moore, and should behave in a more careful manner. In many instances this warning was overt. For example, one article entitled “A holiday reminder to young women,” warned that around the holidays college-aged women can “overindulge” and become victims of sexual assault. It described a bar that used coasters that say, “you have the power to prevent sexual assault” (Lonetree, 2008). These messages are directed at the young women, asserting that these women should protect themselves from sexual assault by drinking less. This makes it primarily the responsibility of the woman to protect her own body from violence and violation. One article that related St. Guillen’s tragedy warned, “we snub the lesson of St. Guillen at our own peril,” and alerted girls to be aware that there are monsters out there, and to “stay away from their hunting grounds” (Fitzgerald, 2006). Many of the Moore articles also warned against visiting Clubland, and getting drunk amongst strangers. One friend of the victim was quoted repeatedly as advising young women to “make good choices.”

Although articles that discussed this narrative were not the only articles to warn women to be careful and to try to avoid sexual assault, it was the only narrative
where this warning was so extremely prevalent, and was such a major theme. However, in reality being sexually assaulted by a stranger after a night of drinking is a relatively uncommon occurrence. Articles that described sexual assaults by relatives or friends do not contain the same warnings, and yet these circumstances are more common. Women who read newspapers are being told to be afraid, and to try to actively avoid, this one specific type of rape much more than they are being warned about other rapes. Possibly, that is because this type of rape was seen as more preventable.

10. Questioning the Victim’s Behavior

Because this type of rape was considered somewhat avoidable, the behavior of the victims was often questioned. While many of the articles had disclaimers, promising the reader that the author does not condone victim blame, these same articles often went on to call the victims’ actions into question, and to assert that most smarter women would not have put themselves in the position to be assaulted. Garza was last seen “dancing, flirting, talking” with the person of interest in her case, and then left the bar with him (Grisly clues in hunt for missing beauty; Sicko sex offender key suspect in mystery club disappearance, Daily News, 2008). Because of this, Garza was called “naïve,” and portrayed as an out-of-town Texan who did not know about the risks of New York City life. This same article quoted a friend who came to Garza’s defense, arguing “it’s not like her to do anything stupid like this, to leave with a guy from a club.” Although her friend is not saying that the victim is responsible for her actions, she is arguing that if Garza hadn’t been “stupid,” she could have avoided her fate. So in that way, she was implying that Garza was
partially responsible. Moore was also depicted as partially responsible for her own victimization—for choosing to drink as an underage woman, for dressing so provocatively, for leaving her friend and walking alone at night, and for being a partier. Articles asserted that because of her decision to walk alone at night in the city, Moore “made a terrible mistake” (Salamone, 2006). St. Guillen, because her case was the most widely covered, suffered many accusations as well. John DePetro, a radio talkshow host made the controversial remark that St. Guillen was “asking for trouble.” Letters to the editor struck up a dialogue about whether or not St. Guillen’s actions should be criticized, and the victim should be partly blamed for the crime. Most articles suggested that St. Guillen could have avoided her fate, if she had only acted more prudently and responsibly. One article said, “foresight might have saved her,” if she had avoided the “insidious drug” of alcohol” (Fitzgeral, 2006). One article entitled “Fearless in the City” derisively discussed how “women still party as if invulnerable,” and accused women of St. Guillen’s generation as trusting strangers too much (Slack, 2006).

Many articles interviewed female patrons of bars, or other female partiers, asking if they would behave the same way that St. Guillen did. Inevitably, the women interviewed said that they would never have behaved in such a careless way. One reporter interviewed girls at Fitchburg State College, asking them if they would stay out alone at night. She reported, “every student who spoke to [me] said that is something they just would not do” (Bard, 2006). One of these woman said she always stays in groups, because “things like [St. Gullen’s murder] happen when you don’t.” These women clearly were implying that St. Guillen was victimized because
of a choice that she made that directly led to the sexual assault. Notably, reporters only interviewed women, asserting that this sort of victimization can only happen to women.

Articles that asserted that the victim was partially responsible for her fate very often did so to establish that other women could avoid the victim’s fate. If a woman thinks that she would act differently in the same situation as Moore, St. Guillen, or Garza, she can believe that she would have been saved. Blaming the victim allows the reader to continue believing in a just world, where victims deserved their fate in some way (Lerner, 1980). In this case, the belief is not that St. Guillen, Garza or Moore were bad people who deserved their fate because of their character flaws, but instead that these women deserved their fate because they made fatal mistakes.

It worth noting that a few articles, mostly letters to the editor, or responses to more provocative articles that blamed the victims outright, argued that these young women should not be criticized for their behavior. A few articles quoted rape victim advocates, or rape crisis centers. This was highly unusual, and only a few articles in these narratives did so. However, it is important to note that this response was present. One particularly eloquent article noted that we should “look at the broader context in which violence against women occurs” before blaming the victim (Heslam, 2006). This was the only article that noted that an aspect of American society could be responsible for the perpetrator’s behavior.

11. Blame

Blame was not assigned only to the victim, by any means. These narratives included a much greater number of accusations of blame than any other category of
articles. The implication was that someone had be at fault for such pretty, upstanding women to be harmed in this terrible way. The taxi driver who dropped Moore off should have taken her all the way home (against her will?), her friend should not have let her walk off alone, the bar should not have served her alcohol. St. Guillen’s friend should have forced her to come home earlier, bar employees should have made more effort to ensure that St. Guillen was safe, the bar should have done a more thorough background check and discovered that Littlejohn was an ex-convict before hiring him. One headline aptly asks, “Jennifer is dead. Who is to blame?” (Lovett, 2006).

12. Particularly Tragic

These high profile cases of young women were portrayed as being particularly tragic. The cases were described as “pulling at the heartstrings” of the country, inspiring the police to work extra hard to solve the case, and as being especially difficult for friends and family to move on from. A main reason for this, I believe, is that these young beautiful women were at an age where they were accomplished, but also full of potential. Because they were described as being from a higher class, and even moving up in the world, it was established that they could have done so much more with their lives. Also, because all these girls were “bright,” “vivacious,” “popular,” “well-liked,” even “perky,” their deaths supposedly touched more people from their community. Of course, these women’s sexual assaults and murders were not more tragic than those of other women and men, whose cases were not as highly visible.
I have paid so much attention to this narrative for several reasons. I believe that it is the most high profile and dramatized narrative in the media currently. In addition, there are many issues with the way this narrative is written about. Specifically, the extreme dehumanization of the perpetrator, the romanticizing of the victim, the high levels of victim blame, and the targeted warnings to women to stay out of a dangerous territory are all highly problematic. And the question remains, why is this narrative so prevalent in the news? Perhaps the best explanation is that this narrative conforms very neatly to a type of rape that our society is not as uncomfortable with. Newspapers portray this rape as being avoidable, perpetrated by monstrous fiends with no emotions, and occurring to women were not necessarily to blame, but made many mistakes. This type of rape can be avoided if women are smart. Also, these types of rapes are pertinent to the crusade against female binge drinking and irresponsible partying. These cases are easily dramatized, and conform to our society’s preconceived notions of rape.

4.3 NARRATIVES OF ACQUAINTANCE RAPE

Although the majority of victims of rape and sexual assault know their attacker in some way, there were slightly more articles that focused on stranger rape than acquaintance rape. Articles about acquaintance rape (mean word count = 305 words) were shorter on average than articles about acquaintance rape (mean word count = 363 words), but this relationship was not significant (t(99) = 1.25, p = .214).
There were several different types of relationships within the category of acquaintance rape (See Fig. 19). Acquaintance rapes were grouped into the following categories: Relative or Family Member; Date, partner, or ex; friend, acquaintance or peer; institutional relationship such as teacher and student; and other.

As I mentioned earlier, there was a big difference in the way articles discussed victims of stranger rape and victims of acquaintance rape. These narratives had vastly different tropes, styles, and characters. Acquaintance rape narratives were rarely populated by monsters or fiends. Perpetrators of acquaintance rape were portrayed as bad and sometimes despicable, but they were not dehumanized as much. There was also significantly less fear evoked, and less sensationalizing. One interpretation could be that acquaintance rapes are less scary. Another explanation is that people are less likely to be afraid of an acquaintance rape happening to them, so reporters do not think evoking fear will be effective. Also, considering how little attention is paid to the systemic problem of violence against women, warning women to be afraid of their male relatives would not conform to the norm of discussing sexual assault. The few times articles warned residents to be careful and aware of acquaintance sex crimes

![Figure 19. Breakdown of victim perpetrator relationship when the victim knew the perpetrator. Proportions reflect the relative frequencies in articles on acquaintance rape.](image-url)
were when the crime took place in an institutional setting. In this case, the reporter would warn the public to have caution with teachers or other authorities.

It was difficult to find examples of high profile acquaintance rapes. The few cases that were high visibility were either institutional crimes or instances where the perpetrator was of a very high SES. Many of the acquaintance narratives were covered by brief articles, or were barely covered at all. In other words, most victims of acquaintance rape did not have their stories told. If the public does not hear their stories, victims of these crimes may appear to be less legitimate victims. If their stories are not seen as typical, these victims may not be seen as real victims.

In this section I will outline the main themes that appeared in narratives about acquaintance rape, and then I will explore the most highly visible narratives that emerged.

**Questioning the Victim’s Credibility**

A main theme that emerged was doubting the victim’s credibility, and suggesting that she might be lying. 19.6% of the 140 articles questioned the credibility of the victim, and almost one third of the acquaintance rape articles did so (See Figure 20). Articles where the victim knew her attacker were significantly more likely to call the victim’s credibility into question ($\chi^2 (1) = 6.3, p < .05$).

![Figure 20. Presence of doubting the victim’s credibility as a function of victim perpetrator relationship. ($\chi^2 (1) = 6.3, p < .05$)](image-url)
Therefore, doubting the victim was primarily a part of the discourse of acquaintance rape. For this reason, I am considering doubts of the victim’s credibility to be primarily a part of the way newspapers discuss acquaintance rape. If newspapers are the main way the public learns about sex crimes, the public may more readily believe victims of stranger rape than acquaintance rape. This differentiation in the treatment of victims could profoundly affect the experiences of victims of acquaintance rape.

Examples of doubting the credibility of the victim were if a witness “called the woman’s testimony unbelievable,” or if “the defense attacked the girls’ credibility.” Another common sentiment that was almost exclusively found in acquaintance rape articles was establishing that it was completely normal to question if the victim was lying or not. For example, in one article, the reporter described a “routine assessment of credibility” (Drug-rape claim against Tribeca hot spot, New York Post, 2008). Another article explained that charges against the perpetrator were dropped, because “cases usually require forensic evidence or an admission of guilt. Not the word of the victim” (Bernstein, 2008). It seems only victims of acquaintance rape can’t be trusted at their word alone. The very idea that assessing credibility is “routine” implies that the public’s and the police’s first reaction is to doubt the word of the victim. In one case, where a ruling was overturned due to evidence that the victim had lied about a previous rape case, the article talked about “new evidence surfacing” about the perpetrator’s “accuser” (Gifford, 2008). It is clear in this article that both the perpetrator and the victim were on trial. In fact, the victim was being judged more harshly than the perpetrator, because evidence about her previous transgressions was admissible in court.
Another familiar trope that showed up in these articles was the notion of a “he said/she said case” (Gunderson gets probation, *The Times-Standard*, 2008). This phrase showed up again and again in many different types of acquaintance rape and sexual assault. The mere fact that there was a common term used to describe a case in which the victim’s word was in doubt shows how much this notion of a lying victim has become a main part of the public’s discourse. This phrase is also specific only to rape and sexual assault when the victim is female and the perpetrator is male. I already mentioned that questioning a victim’s credibility is significantly related to whether or not sympathy is expressed for the victim. So calling a victim’s credibility into doubt hurts the victim’s image and the reporter’s opinion of her. The litany of doubt was so repetitive that it was clear that this was a normal, if intensely problematic, part of the discourse on acquaintance rape in newspapers. A victim, who needs to be supported and have her reports to the police taken seriously, should not be met with doubt and the assumption that she is not being truthful.

**Conflating Rape with Sex**

Another common theme in the articles reviewed was describing rape in a sexual way. Although the relationship between using sexual language and whether the victim knew her perpetrator did not reach significance ($\chi^2 (1) = 2.192, p = .139$), a higher percentage of acquaintance rape articles were guilty of this (See Fig. 21).
Articles that conflated rape with sex did not distinguish clearly between the two acts. In reality, rape and sex are mutually exclusive, and should never be confused. However, in a large number of articles where adult perpetrators were sexually assaulting teenage or even early adolescent children, the article claimed that the man was accused of “having sex” with the victims. It is not until later on in the article that the reader would discover that this perpetrator was actually being charged with very serious crimes, such as forcible rape or forcible sodomy. This language robs the act of the extreme violence and emotional trauma inherent in any sexual assault. A possible explanation for why newspapers use this language is that describing acts in a sexual manner allows the reporter to avoid the difficult task of describing the brutality of rape.

One woman, when describing an attempted rape she successfully resisted, claimed that the perpetrator “wanted to have sex with me” (Rathbun, 2008). The woman goes on to explain how the perpetrator beat her and threw her to the floor when she resisted him. This perpetrator wanted to force himself on the victim without her consent, and without her consent the act can no longer be considered sex. Similarly, articles where the victims were young children also described the acts

Figure 21. Using language that conflates rape with sex broken down by whether the victim knew the perpetrator or not. $\chi^2 (1) = 2.192$, $p = .139$
using sexual language. The phrase, “seen having sex with children” (Prosecutors offer life-terms deal to Carroll, *Austin American-Statesman*, 2008) is innately contradictory, as children can’t consent to sex. However, it was used in several articles that I reviewed. Not only does this language imply some degree of consent, it makes it seem like the victim and the perpetrator both played a role in the act. One sexual assault report described how a perpetrator “forcibly kissed” the victim (Bjelland, 2008). This language is confused, and ambiguous. If the perpetrator is forcing the woman against her will, it is not a kiss—a kiss cannot happen without two willing partners.

The fact that using language that conflates rape with sex occurred more frequently with acquaintance rape is also alarming. It implies that if the victim knows the perpetrator, the act is on some level more wanted or consensual than if the perpetrator was a stranger to the victim.

**Sympathy for the Perpetrator**

Although explicit and expressed sympathy for the perpetrator was not very common, only present in 7.9% of the cases, it was present in 18% of the articles on acquaintance rape or sexual assault. The article was significantly more likely to express sympathy for the perpetrator if he knew his victim ($\chi^2 (1) = 7.5, p < .01$).
The media is not only treating victims of these assaults differently, the perpetrators are also getting differential treatment (See Figure 22). In this case, perpetrators of acquaintance rape are occasionally seen as redeeming in some way. This is drastically different from the common notion that strangers who rape are evil to their core and dangers to society. One factor that may partially account for this disparity is that acquaintance rape were sometimes depicted as innocent of the crime, even before the verdict was announced. These perpetrators who were deemed likely to be innocent were of course given more sympathy than other perpetrators. And almost all of these perpetrators who were presumed innocent were being charged with acquaintance rape.

How much sympathy the public feels toward a perpetrator of a certain crime can have enormously important implications. If perpetrators of acquaintance rape are seen as more sympathetic, jurors might be less likely to find them guilty, and they might be assigned less jail time than perpetrators of stranger rape. This also indicates that newspapers are treating stranger and acquaintance rapes as very different crimes. Acquaintance rape seems to be portrayed as more understandable, and less severe of crime. The fact that perpetrators are more sympathetic certainly implies that the crime is more forgivable.
Acquittal

Of course suspects in stranger rapes and assaults are sometimes acquitted, however in the dataset examined, the vast majority of perpetrators who were acquitted, exonerated or found innocent in some other way (the charges were dropped, etc.), knew their victims. In fact, no articles featured a perpetrator of stranger rape who was acquitted, while 16% of the articles on acquaintance rape and sexual assault featured perpetrators who were acquitted. Of course, not all the perpetrators of stranger rape are found guilty—nor were all of the perpetrators featured in these articles acquitted. Instead, the acquittal of an alleged perpetrator of stranger rape was not news, whereas the acquittal of a perpetrator of acquaintance rape was news. Often, articles seem to agree with the court’s decision to acquit or dismiss charges. The acquittal usually resulted from a lack of physical evidence, or a disbelief in the victim’s word. Also, the newspapers often showed the responses of the perpetrator’s family and friends, and celebrated the acquittal, instead of questioning the verdict.

Partner/Date/Ex

Although the narrative of a victim who was or had been in some way romantically or sexually involved with the perpetrator was almost completely absent from the articles reviewed (only 6 articles of 140 discussed a case of partner or ex-partner rape), it did occasionally show up. In the rare instances when a partner sexual assault was written about, the details provided were almost always profoundly problematic.
Partner rape was barely considered a crime until fairly recently (Benedict, 1992). The general consensus was that if a woman was involved with a man sexually or romantically, a rape simply could not occur. Until 1976 marital rape was legal in all fifty states (Benedict, 1992).

Although there were only a small number of articles about partner or ex-partner rape, the details of these cases were presented in a very uniform way. For example, the physical injury that the victim sustained was commonly very severe, and the focus of the article was mostly on these injuries. The reason for this was probably that cases of partner rape or assault where the physical abuse was not as severe were not considered newsworthy.

Articles about partner rape were also generally very short, and less than 250 words. In almost all cases of partner rape reported on, the perpetrator was acquitted of the sexual assault and rape charges. Interestingly, in many of these cases the perpetrator was still found guilty of the charges relating to physical abuse. There was only one mention of spousal rape, and in this case the husband was found to be innocent of rape—but guilty of battery. In one especially troubling case where the charges were dropping, the article stated, “the prosecutor had several factors that led to the reduced charges, including the fact that Aguilar and the victim had a 3-year relationship at the time of the assault” (Former ROTC instructor sentenced to 60 days in jail, The Associated Press State and Local Wire, 2008). The mere fact of their relationship negated the idea that the sex was unwanted. However, charges of rape should only depend on whether or not the woman consented to that one act, and not whether she had consented to sex with the perpetrator on previous occasions. This
narrative is remarkable because it is so neglected, and because the few short articles that exist are so problematic. Newspapers treat partner rape as if it were not a crime.

**Institutional**

The acquaintance rape narrative that received the most attention, and was the most visible, was institutional rape and sexual assault. A case was defined as “institutional” if the victim knew the perpetrator in some setting that could be considered an institution. For example: a school, church, jail, daycare, or some healthcare environment would all be considered institutions. These instances were notable, because the perpetrator was abusing the power of a situation in which he had control.

Of the articles reviewed, 26.8% of the articles featured institutional rapes or sexual assaults. Because of the nature of this crime, all were acquaintance rapes. Almost half (46%) of articles on acquaintance rape featured institutional assaults. These articles were also significantly longer than articles about other assaults ($t$ (135) = 2.36, $p < .05$). This type of high visibility narrative was very unusual for acquaintance rapes. In these cases, the victims were sometimes children, and sometimes adults. Occasionally these were serial cases, but often there was only one victim. The coverage of individual cases within this general narrative actually often varied a great deal, unlike many of the other narratives I’ve mentioned. However, there are important similarities that I will discuss here.

The most common perpetrator in these institutional cases was a teacher, professor or daycare provider. The institution of school may have come up so often
because a large percentage of the population is somehow involved with schools, and because the victim was often a child. Parents trust schools with their children, and there is a lot of anxiety about the dangers that affect children when a parent cannot be there to supervise. One very brief article outlined a case where a young adolescent was attacked and sexually assaulted on the street. There was no suspect, and the girl was not badly injured. This case would rarely make it to the news. The article focused on the fact that the girl had been attacked near a school. The article did not specify if it was her school, but it was clear the girl was not in school at the time. So the mere suggestion that a perpetrator of sexual assault was near a school was enough to be the main focus of an exceedingly short article. Another article, where the perpetrator was accused of raping a relative, was entitled, “Man held on molestation charges is school aide” (The Associated Press State and Local Wire, 2008). The crime in no way involved the man’s profession, and did not take place at school. However, the idea that a perpetrator of assault was involved in the institution of school was seen as noteworthy enough to warrant a headline. This means that the reporter thought this was the most important, most newsworthy, and most attention-catch- ing fact of the case. The man’s profession was deemed more important than any of the facts of the crime itself. The main point of these cases, therefore, seems to be to catch the attention of concerned parents. The warning personally affects any individual who is involved with that particular institution, and would therefore probably have increased readership.

Other common perpetrators were clergy, the police or prison guards, and healthcare providers, such as orderlies at nursing homes. A notable theme that ran
throughout many of these articles was that the focus was squarely on the institution. The crime itself was often somewhat moved to the background. For example, one particularly lengthy article about serial sexual assaults and abuses that occurred at a juvenile detention center for boys focused almost entirely on describing the center itself, and the staff and the daily activities of the boys. It seemed to be constructing an impression of the center, instead of the crime. This theme was also abundantly clear in articles about the clergy, or other religious authorities. Often, the entire institution, such as the Catholic Church was called into question. Similarly, in one high profile case of a young man who was sodomized with a baton by police officers, the focus of many of those articles was on the New York City police in general. These cases may be so highly visible because they so often are made to be about important institutions generally, instead of the individual case.

Another related theme that emerged from these articles was the notion that some unspoken pact of trust was broken, and that the transgression was exacerbated by the fact that the perpetrator was in some position of power. In the high profile police case just mentioned, a lot of quotations from community members expressed distress that a group that was supposed to be trustworthy could commit such a terrible crime. One article speculated that the victim would probably “never be able to trust the police again” (Celona, 2008). Many of the articles focused primarily on how respected the perpetrators of these crimes were.

These cases were depicted as if they affected a larger population than other sexual assaults and rapes, because readers are more likely to be directly involved with an institution. If a reader had a child in school, or a parent in a nursing home, or went
to the doctor’s office, or even perhaps knew someone in jail, then these narratives affected him. These cases can draw a larger readership because of their direct relevance to many people’s lives.

**Perpetrator’s Fall From Grace**

Many of the higher visibility acquaintance rape cases involved perpetrators of a high socioeconomic status, because these perpetrators were often in positions of power, and sometimes a local celebrity. In fact, many high SES perpetrators were also involved in institutions. For this reason, the narratives of high SES perpetrators falling from grace overlaps with the previous narrative of institutional rape. However, this narrative also includes a much wider scope of cases, and is worth discussing separately.

These cases, which focus on perpetrators of a very high SES, were very high visibility, because the perpetrator was usually a well-known community member. Because of this, reporters may have deemed the case relevant to a lot of people. If a reader recognizes or knows of the perpetrator than he may be more interested in the case. Examples of perpetrators that would fit into this category were: mayors, veteran police chiefs, judges, very famous doctors, very well-respected professors, and celebrities. For the most part, the articles I included in this category explicitly mentioned the good standing of these perpetrators, and highlighted their accomplishments. For example, if the article briefly stated that the perpetrator was a police chief, I did not consider this especially noteworthy. But most of the time, the
article would highlight the success of the perpetrator. These articles made a point of emphasizing the previous good standings of these perpetrators.

One very sensational and dramatic article described a professor at a famed University who had recently been accused of sexually assaulting a female student. The University was called a “flagship” University, and the professor was described as “renowned” and “well-respected” (Jaccarino, Boyle & Connor, 2008). The article goes on to describe how the professor killed himself before he could be indicted on the charges. The focus of the article was on this professor’s extreme fall from grace, and the shame that surrounded such charges. The focus in these articles is rarely on the victim. The focus is on the perpetrator and, often, on how his life will be changed because of the accusation.

This code almost universally involved perpetrators of acquaintance rape. The notion that these perpetrators fell from their high status seems contingent on the assumption that these perpetrators were basically respectable and good men, who could not control their sexual desires. If these men were guilty of stranger rape, the judgment of them would be much harsher, and they would not seem as simply falling from respectability. Instead, the repercussions would be much more severe, and the perpetrators would be seen as horrifying. There would not be the same sort of understanding and focus on the perpetrators’ personal lives.
4.4. NEGLECTED NARRATIVES

There were several types of rape that were almost universally left out of the newspaper reports. Part of the reason these cases were ignored is that certain types of cases are not uniformly reported to the police, and so they are neglected systemically, and not just ignored by newspaper reporters. However, the public will still not gain knowledge or understanding of these types of rape from newspapers, and for this reason the repercussions of neglecting certain narratives are enormous. Certain victims will not have their experiences heard, and therefore they may not be considered real or legitimate victims. The public will not be aware of certain prevalent instances of rape and sexual assault, and therefore there wont’ be any attempt to try to prevent these assaults on a societal level.

For these reasons, it is worth briefly mentioning the types of rape that the public does not hear about from newspapers, but that are still relatively prevalent in the United States. I mentioned earlier that although sexual assault and rape when the perpetrator is the victim’s relative were sometimes reported on, rape by an immediate family member was almost never mentioned in the articles reviewed. The relatives were usually uncles, foster brothers, or older cousins. Part of the reason these cases were left out is because victim’s identities are almost never revealed, and revealing a father’s identity implicates his daughter. Newspaper articles prefer to name the perpetrator, so that they may discuss one of the characters involved with the case. However, articles could report on immediate family sexual assaults by leaving out both the identity of the victim and the perpetrator. Narratives where the victim is a male adult were also for the most part left out of newspaper coverage, unless the case
was very unusual or bizarre. Partner rape, also, was rarely written about, and marital rape was almost never reported on. And importantly, narratives of partner rape where the perpetrator was found guilty were even more rare. In addition, it interesting that although cases of college-age female victims of stranger rape often received a lot of attention, cases of college-age acquaintance rapes were almost never reported on. Rapes in the military, as well as rape in prison, were also rarely written about, even though both are somewhat prevalent, and they are both very important systemic problems in the United States.

The fact that these stories don’t exist in the news is important, because these victims have been denied a voice. The public is not as aware of the prevalence of these instances of rape and sexual assault, and is therefore less likely to take action to prevent these types of rape. Not only that, victims of these crimes may not receive the same amount of understanding, sympathy and support that other rape victims do. Also, on a basic level, newspaper reporting should give the public an accurate understanding of crime, and not only discuss certain types of crimes.
5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With this topic, which so often denies victims the right to have their stories heard and their experiences understood, I cannot help but feel that I have left so much out. There are so many narratives that I could not explore because I lacked data or time, and could not do a more detailed analysis. For the sake of widening the scope of the types of rapes and sexual assaults I was examining, I was not able to explore each narrative in as much detail as I would have liked. Future studies could examine each individual narrative in the news, in order to have a greater understanding of the unique tropes and styles of writing that apply to that story. For example, researchers could focus on narratives of home invasion, or stories about child victims.

It is also worth individually examining the neglected narrative of male victims. Male victims of rape and sexual assault have frequently had their stories and their experiences ignored—by the media, the police, and too often, social scientists and victims’ rights advocates. When rape and sexual assault began to fall under the umbrella category of violence against women, the study of rape was taken up as part of the feminist cause and movement. In doing so, male victims of rape fell into a unique category. If rape was a systemic crime of sexism, where did male victims fit in? Often social psychologists and sociologists put male victims of rape into an entirely different category from female victims. And since male victims are a relatively small group, and not a particularly vocal one, male victims are too often ignored. I fear that I, in my very brief attempt at breaching the subject of gender in
rape, am also guilty of this error. An important avenue for future research is a closer look at media portrayals of male victims of rape.

While I am generally pleased with my methodology and my results, there are several flaws in my study design that are worth discussing here, for the benefit of those wishing to further explore this fruitful topic. Although I tried to maintain strict and consistent standards for coding such potentially subjective codes as “sympathy expressed,” or “fear evoked,” and attempted to make these standards as clear as possible to the reader in this paper, it is possible that my coding was inconsistent or skewed because of my own decision-making. In retrospect, I would have checked for the reliability of these codes with other research assistants, but time and the time-consuming nature of this type of research prevented me from doing so.

Also, while I strongly believe that the sample size for my original dataset was sufficient for my purposes in this thesis, there were several analyses that could not be calculated because of the small cells involved. For example, while I had more than sufficient data to compare articles about male victims of rape to articles about female victims of rape, I did not have sufficient data to explore the sub-set of male victims. I was not able to examine the difference in reporting instances of male child victims of rape and male adult victims of rape. For the purpose of a more in-depth and thorough study, a larger dataset would be needed. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample size.

Due to the constraints of time and the scope of my study, I did not choose to look at how the coverage of rape and sexual assault has changed over time. I strongly believe that an exploration of how rape coverage has developed would yield abundant
and interesting findings, and urge future researchers to look more deeply into this topic. Newspapers and the media reflect the dominant beliefs and ideologies of the time, and taking a historical perspective would allow the researcher to see how attitudes about rape in general have developed and changed over time.

It is worth discussing one more caveat. Print newspapers are already losing their authority, and are considered a dying institution by some. Although I gathered my articles using the online database, Lexisnexis, and many of these articles are available online, I limited my study to only those articles that appeared in print. Many people exclusively get their news from online sources now, but I did not include blogs and online newspapers in my study, so as to not complicate and dilute my sample. However, it is certainly worth exploring whether internet news sources are sending the same messages as newspapers. If they are not, how do these sources differ? If online news and blogs are the future of crime reporting, future research on this topic should reflect that.

Another avenue for future research that is well worth exploring, and indeed has been explored somewhat, is how fictional media, such as television crime dramas, movies, and talk shows portray rape and rape victims. Fictional media representations of crime, criminals and victims are extremely prevalent, and have large audiences. Television and movies, especially, are an important medium through which the public learns and understands crime.
6. CONCLUSION

Newspapers are a primary means through which the public learns about crime, criminals and victims. This may be especially true for how people learn about rape, because rape is normally considered a taboo subject, and is rarely discussed. Walby et al. (1983) suggested, “Newspaper reports of rape are an important medium in which the dominant discourse on rape is articulated” (86). Newspapers are often assumed to be objective, and articles about the news, in particular, are written in a style that conveys an impression of impartiality; reporters appear to be giving the reader all of the pertinent facts. However, newspaper articles frequently are imbued with the authors’ personal biases, as well as broader cultural biases. My study revealed that newspapers do indeed systematically reflect cultural biases in their coverage of the crime of rape.

Rape myth, the body of widely held misconceptions about rape, can affect the “breadth and narrowness of rape definitions,” and have been shown to affect the outcome of mock trials (Burt, 1980). Newspapers contribute to rape myth by influencing the public’s attitudes and understandings of sex crimes. The overrepresentations of certain kinds of rape, and the way newspaper reporters ascribe motives and judge perpetrators, can impact perceptions of both victims and perpetrators, and have extremely important legal implications. If belief in rape myth can affect the outcome of trials, then it is imperative that researchers examine the public’s attitude about rape and sexual assault. The public, as jurors, community members and voters, makes decisions based on their beliefs that affect victims and
perpetrators of this crime. Because rape is one of the few crimes where the victim falls under intense scrutiny, the public’s understanding of sex crimes affects not only law enforcement, but also the experiences of victims. Rape is an extremely underreported crime, in part because victims feel they won’t be believed, or that their characters will be impugned (Gavey & Gow, 2001). Unfortunately, victims may be correct in assuming that their quest for retribution and support from their communities and family may indeed be met with doubt and even blame. Also, certain victims may be afforded more sympathy and understanding than other victims.

My study revealed that there were indeed certain types of rapes that emerged as high visibility narratives. It also became clear that there were certain problematic themes, such as conceptualizing rape as primarily a sexual experience, dehumanizing the perpetrator, and questioning of the victim’s credibility, that were important and recurrent parts of the discourse of rape in the news. Other important themes were the sense that crime was individualized and the idea that perpetrators were motivated by sexuality, insanity, or intrinsic evil and not the desire to inflict pain, to humiliate and to dominate. By not addressing the social conditions and gender-based power inequities that can lead to willingness to rape, newspapers deny society’s complicity in a long history of violence against women. Because newspaper editors are so selective of the cases that receive coverage and the details that are reported, they create an incomplete and biased picture of rape in America.

The notion that crime is individualistic and that societal norms do not impact crime is a widely held belief (Marsh, 1991). The newspaper articles I reviewed gave the impression that rapists are at odds with our societal values and ideologies. They
never mentioned how widespread violence against women is, nor talked about rape as a systemic crime. The motives ascribed to perpetrators were always individualized. For example, the most frequent explanations for why the perpetrator committed the rape were sexual desire, mental instability or insanity, and his own evil character. There was no discussion of how social norms can produce or support criminal activity or rape. In fact, the rapist was always put squarely outside the realm of society, and often outside the bounds of humanity. This was especially clear in articles that dehumanized the perpetrator. Articles never discussed how social norms and cultural messages could contribute to the alarmingly high rates of sexual assault in the United States, even though it has been demonstrated that adherence to masculine ideology does lead to an increased willingness to rape and increased sexual aggression (Murren et al., 2002). Reinholz et al. (1995) argued, “every man who grows up in America ….learns all too much to …structure his experience of women and sex in terms of hostility control, and dominance” (6). Thus, although social scientists have found that certain societal values can in fact lead to a higher likelihood of rape, the public does not learn this through newspaper coverage of the crime.

Although I set out to look at how newspapers cover rape in general, it became clear that newspapers do not present all instances of rape in the same way. The primary division that I observed was that newspapers had completely different discourses for discussing instances of stranger rape and instances of acquaintance rape. These types of rape and sexual assault were essentially treated as two different crimes. Articles about stranger rape were significantly more likely use language that could evoke fear, dehumanize the perpetrator, sensationalize the crime and ascribe
some sort of motive to the perpetrator. Articles about acquaintance rape were
significantly more likely to call the victim’s credibility into question, feature a case
that resulted in acquittal, and express sympathy for the perpetrator. Stranger rape is
represented as a more frightening, and more dramatic crime than acquaintance rape.
Acquaintance rape is portrayed as more forgivable and more ambiguous than stranger
rape.

The enormous difference in the way newspapers talk about these crimes has
extremely important implications for the legal system. The law does not distinguish
between stranger and acquaintance rape, and therefore under the law perpetrators of
these crimes should receive the same punishments and be judged and treated equally.
However, jurors, after being exposed to such different narratives about the two
crimes, may find stranger rape to be a worse and more horrific crime than
acquaintance rape. They may be more likely to view the perpetrator as a monster, or
a fiend who cannot change his ways, because this is indeed the picture that
newspapers paint. A perpetrator of acquaintance rape, on the other hand, may be
viewed in a more sympathetic light, and may be seen as less guilty, because the
public often considers acquaintance rape to be an ambiguous ‘he said/she said’
situation. Because acquaintance rape articles create the impression that all cases of
this type of rape are ambiguous, and that it is reasonable to question the victim’s
credibility routinely, the press contributes to a legal system in which reasonable doubt
is intrinsically present in all cases of acquaintance rape. Thus, perpetrators of
acquaintance and stranger rape may not be treated equally by the criminal justice
system.

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Victims may also not be treated equally because of the differences in these two narratives. Victims of stranger rape are portrayed as significantly more likely to be telling the truth, and therefore may be more likely to be believed. Victims of acquaintance rape may be seen as less reliable, even though false allegations of rape are exceedingly rare (Benedict, 1992). Also, stranger rape may be seen as more traumatic experience to have lived through, because it is portrayed as more frightening, and the perpetrators are seen as so evil and inhuman. Therefore, victims of stranger rape may be given more support from their communities. Victims of every type of rape and sexual assault should be uniformly supported by their communities, and should always have their allegations taken seriously. However, this is often not the case, due, in part, to the false impressions created by newspapers.

Another important finding from the present study was that the narrative of the young woman who met her assailant at a bar was a highly visible narrative, and these cases were extremely high profile. This narrative seems to be the current “big news” story. In an extensive review of the literature, there was no study that focused on this narrative, or its overrepresentation. For this reason, it seems this storyline is a relatively new high visibility narrative, and therefore its overrepresentation reflects current attitudes and beliefs about rape. The way that articles discussed this type of rape was very problematic. The coverage of these cases was generally very sensational and dramatic. The perpetrator was depicted as an evil sex-obsessed monster, and the victim as a highly attractive, naïve, carefree woman who made several mistakes and wrong decisions that led to her victimization. The victim’s careless intoxication was a common theme in these articles, as was the notion that
these women showed poor judgment and should have been exercising more caution. The articles tended to evoke fear in the specific demographic of young females who frequent clubs and bars. The suggestion that women need to be protected from these dangerous environments was a prominent feature in these articles, as well.

I believe that this narrative was so highly visible because it conforms very neatly to an understanding of rape that our society is more comfortable with. The victims were attractive and desirable, the perpetrators portrayed as fiends and psychopaths. The perpetrators were also portrayed as twisted and extrasocietal, so these cases do not lead to criticism of American culture and ideology. The assaults, while scary and horrific, were portrayed as avoidable, and the victims were depicted as making several key mistakes. This portrayal of the crime as avoidable is especially comforting, and conforms neatly to the notion that victims deserve or bring about their own fate. Rape can remain a monstrous crime that occurs in dangerous environments, and still seem like an event that a responsible, safe woman can avoid. Other narratives, which would challenge this less disturbing understanding of rape, such as rapes by immediate family members and marital rape, were almost entirely absent from my sample. In other words, newspapers’ coverage of rape is consistent with, and thus affirming of, conventional beliefs about rape and sexual assault rather than newspapers primarily discuss narratives of rape that do not challenge conventional beliefs about rape and sexual assault.

This thesis has identified and analyzed ways in which newspapers can cause harm by reinforcing certain society values. My primary goal is to add to the body of social science research that is attempting to shed light on this problem so that the
public may be more informed, and be wary of the myths and messages about rape that the media is perpetuating. Additionally, this thesis identifies aspects of newspaper reporting that can and should be changed. I encourage a continuing dialogue between media analysis researchers and newspaper reporters and editors. In the words of Heath & Gordon (1991), the media can still improve “the accuracy of the vicarious reality they impart.”

Newspapers have the power to greatly influence public attitudes about rape and sexual assault. Although many people think that newspapers are accurately and objectively portraying instances of crime, it is clear that newspaper articles have been presenting a biased and inaccurate picture of who is raped, who rapes, and the situations in which one might be raped. In addition, the press coverage of rape, when considered as a whole, identifies which victims are worthy of sympathy, which victims are more likely to be telling the truth, which perpetrators are monsters, and which perpetrators can perhaps still be redeemed. Rapists are viewed as acting completely outside of society, and the crime of rape is completely individualized. Newspapers almost never address the issues of violence against women, societal influences over criminals, and how to understand rape within the context of American society.

As readers of newspapers we must challenge these misconceptions and myths about rape. We must broaden our narrow definition of who is raped and under what circumstances, we must address the societal influences that lead to a willingness to rape instead of merely blaming the individual, and we must treat all victims of rape with compassion and understanding.
7. REFERENCES


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8. APPENDIX A: Newspaper Article Reference List

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