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How Media Framing of Domestic Violence Influences Attitudes and Public Policies in a Texas Border-Town

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Introduction

Much like the nature of domestic violence, accurate information about the topic is hidden from public view. Prior research shows that it is not well understood among the public (Bems, 1999; Carll, 2003; Carlyle et al., 2008; Maxwell, Huxford, Borum, & Hornik, 2000). This research seeks to investigate how news media framing of domestic violence influences attitudes and public policies. In addition, this research looks to analyze perceived societal and situational factors associated with domestic violence perceptions.

According to Carlyle et. al (2014), how media portrays domestic violence cases significantly affects public perceptions toward the issue. With the proximity to the Texas-Mexico border, this study will explore how media shapes attitudes regarding public policies that protect survivors who are living in the U.S. without legal status.

Through a quasi-experimental design, this study seeks to investigate how media's portrayal of domestic violence influences the public's understanding of the issue. Moreover, it seeks to explore the attitudes the public holds when domestic violence is portrayed in a single-incident case affecting a specific demographic. Assessing media's influence towards domestic violence is paramount to understanding how the public thinks about the issue and gauges their willingness to advocate public policies that protect victims. Specifically, this research can potentially enable journalists and media outlets to report more responsibly and effectively on the complexities of domestic violence and the impact it has on survivors, children of survivors, and society overall. This understanding will guide journalists towards educating the public about how domestic violence is a public health issue, rather than a private issue that should be kept a secret between partners. Furthermore, the findings in this research can provide the public with media literacy skills when exposed to intimate-partner violence (IPV)-related news coverage. With media liter-

acy skills, the public can effectively engage in domestic violence prevention efforts and policies that protect victims and their children from abusive partners or ex-partners.

This study uses a quasi-experimental survey design to identify three areas in which attitudes of survey respondents' attitudes toward IPV differed based on exposure to media images of a real-life domestic violence incident. Ultimately, survey respondents who viewed images of a real-life IPV incident were more likely to agree that the media places blame on victims for not leaving their abuser, were less likely to agree that government should do more to protect non-citizens from violence, and more likely to define threats as a form of domestic violence. In the sections below, this study reviews existing research on this topic and outlines the theoretical expectations of the literature about media framing. Then, the following two sections outline the design of the quasi-experimental research design and the results of the survey experiment. Finally, this work concludes with a discussion of the implications of this research for our understanding of media framing and its effects.

Literature Review

Intimate partner violence (IPV) or domestic violence is defined as any physical and/or sexual violence, and mental or emotional, verbal abuse by a current or former partner regardless of gender or sexual orientation (Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon, & Shelley, 1999). Most prior research reports that an approximate 25% of women (Black et al., 2011; Brieding, Black, & Ryan, 2008; Coker, Smith, McKeown, & King, 2000) with young women in their 20s at highest risk for IPV victimization (Catalano, 2012; Jones, Gielen, & Campbell, 1999).

Carlyle et al. explains that “news media coverage of IPV contributes to the misconception that IPV is a personal problem by portraying IPV as a series of isolated incidents and omitting important contextual information from news coverage” (p.453). According to Carlyle et al.

(2014), domestic violence leads to severe negative consequences for both the victims and society. Victims of domestic violence may endure physical injuries, mental health problems, complicated pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, increased risk of unemployment, and isolation from social networks (Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002; Plichta, 2004; Warshaw, Brashler & Gil, 2009). Moreover, domestic violence can lead to negative community-level repercussions including violent crime, poverty, and social disorder (Benson, Fox, DeMaris, & Van Wyk, 2003).

Media frames events and issues to the public by selecting certain parts and neglecting other parts. Entman explains, “The power of the frame can be as great as that of language itself” (p. 55). For example, Sieff (2003) suggests that the public is more likely to adopt media’s frame for an issue, particularly if it is framed in a certain way often. Prior research suggests that media can influence public policy responses, which in turn, affects behavior (Sotirovic, 2003; Yanovitzky & Bennett, 1999). Researchers Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1984) concluded that the way an issue is framed has a significant influence on how the public responds to the issue.

In the cases of domestic violence, Carlyle (2008) suggests that media tends to frame cases of intimate partner violence by focusing on an individual while ignoring the social context of the issue. Findings from prior studies suggest that media coverage often portrays domestic violence falsely and inadequately, which perpetuates misconceptions about victims, abusers, and causes of domestic violence (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Carll, 2003; Carlyle et al. 2008; Lamb, 1991).

In 1992, the American Medical Association declared IPV as a public health problem. Current domestic violence-related news coverage, however, continues to portray IPV as a private

and individual issue, not a societal or cultural problem, while disregarding the widespread victimization and public tolerance of IPV (Bems, 1999; Carll, 2003; Carlyle et al., 2008; Maxwell, Huxford, Borum, & Hornik, 2000). Additionally, if IPV is viewed as a public health issue, it is likely that society will be more prone to view it as a national issue that needs to be solved rather than one that needs to be handled privately amongst the individuals dealing with abuse (Hammond, Whitaker, Lutzker, Mercy & Chin, 2006).

Researchers have identified problematic patterns in news coverage about domestic violence. For instance, news reports suggest that victims at least partially, are responsible for their fate (Meyers, 1997). This effect was exacerbated if the victims were poor or working class women/or women of color (Benedict, 1992; hooks, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Van Dijk, 1991). These patterns in news coverage places blame onto the victim: that she provoked her batterer or that she failed to take responsibility for leaving (Pagelow, 1981, p. 88).

Greater public awareness coupled with comprehensive and accurate knowledge of the issue might lead to stronger laws and more effective law enforcement against abusive acts or abusers. Most significantly, Hammond et. al (2006) suggests that “by reinforcing the idea that IPV is a societal public issue, policymakers can take a proactive stance rather than the more common reactive response to IPV.

Media’s framing of IPV plays a significant part in influencing public perceptions towards IPV perpetrators and victims (Bems, 1999; Bullock, 2007; Carll, 2003; Janiski, 2001; Lamb 1991; Lamb & Keon, 1995). News coverage’s content, wording, and format in relaying information can shape how individuals and the public interpret and form opinions. For instance, Sieff (2003) investigated the way media negatively covered mental illnesses. Sieff argues that negative frames perpetuate negative attitudes towards those with mental illnesses, mainly because majori-

ty of people do not have direct experience a mental illness; rather, they rely on media portrayals to formulate their opinions. In addition, media framing can direct the public towards thinking about domestic violence as an issue.

Methods

This study applied media framing theory to explore how a *Time Lightbox* published photo essay titled “Photographer as Witness: A Portrait of Domestic Violence” influenced participants’ attitudes towards the domestic violence. The photo essay by photojournalist, Sara Naomi Lekowicz, published on February 27, 2013 told the real story of a low-income, white, family from Ohio living through domestic violence.

The study was conducted in a public university in west Texas using quasi-experimental design. The university is located in a rural setting, 110 miles from the Mexican border. Approval for the study was obtained by Sul Ross State University’s institutional review board. Students were recruited from a diverse cross-section of the student body. Students in undergraduate and graduate courses were offered extra credit in exchange to attend. The survey was open to any student or community member who wanted to participate. Anonymity and confidentiality was protected as participants were asked to not give their names, and all data is reported at the aggregate level.

There were three versions of the survey instrument, and participants were selected to be placed into different groups. Photographs “Photographer as Witness; Portrait of Domestic Violence” were treated to test media’s influence on attitudes towards domestic violence. Participants were randomly selected to be placed into Group A, where they looked at photographs and a storyline portraying incidences of IPV of a white family from Southeastern Ohio living in poverty before answering the questionnaire. Group B looked at photos of the same family; however, pho-

tographs and a storyline portraying IPV were excluded. For the treatment of photos in Group B, a storyline of a family living in poverty was created. The participants in Group C, the control group, did not look at any photos. However, all three groups answered the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 30 Likert-scale questions to assess participants' attitudes regarding domestic violence and 10 personal and demographic questions regarding race, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and past experience with domestic violence.

A total of 250 students and community members from Sul Ross State University and Alpine, Texas participated in this study. The sample contained 130 females (46.5%), 116 males (52%), one transgender (.4%), and one individual (.4%) who did not disclose gender. The mean age of the sample was 21.91 ($SD = 7.35$, range = 18 to 70). The majority of participants identified as heterosexual ($n = 174$, 69.6%). The sample comprised mostly of undergraduate students, which included, freshmen ($n = 99$, 39.6%), sophomores ($n = 65$, 26%), juniors ($n = 38$, 15.2%), seniors ($n = 37$, 14.8%). A small number of faculty and staff ($n = 6$, 2.4%) of the university participated as well. There was low turnout for Alpine citizens ($n = 3$, 1.2%) who did not identify as a member of the Sul Ross community.

The majority of participants self-identified as Hispanic or Latino ($n = 133$, 53.2%), followed by White ($n = 59$, 23.6%), Black or African-American ($n = 22$, 8.8%), American Indian ($n = 3$, 1.2%), Asian or Pacific Islander ($n = 1$, .4%), and other ($n = 4$, 1.6%). Eleven percent ($n = 28$) did not disclose their race. The majority of participants self-identified as Catholic ($n = 111$, 44.4%), followed by Protestant ($n = 56$, 22.4%), Other Christian denomination ($n = 34$, 13.6%), and Atheist or Agnostic ($n = 30$, 12%).

Results

The results of the survey are presented below. These results focus on five survey questions about attitudes toward victims of IPV, abusers, and media portrayal. Appendix A provides a more detailed discussion of the data analysis and results.

Question 13: Women who go back to their abusive boyfriends multiple times are stupid.

A majority of people said “Agree” (33.2% of all respondents) or “Strongly Agree” (28.8% of all respondents) to the question about whether women who return to their abusers are stupid. There was no statically significant difference between answers for people who saw survey version A, B, or C.

Table 1: Attitudes toward Women who Return to Abusers
Question 13: Women who go back to their abusive boyfriends multiple times are stupid.

	Survey Version A	Survey Version B	Survey Version C	All Respondents
Strongly Disagree	11%	0%	5%	5%
Disagree	15%	24%	17%	18%
Undecided	9%	13%	18%	14%
Agree	32%	28%	37%	33%
Strongly Agree	33%	34%	23%	29%

Based on the results of an ordered logistic regression, younger people were significantly less likely ($p > |z| = .033$) to respond positively to Question 13, after accounting for survey version, gender, religion, ethnicity, and personal experience with domestic violence. Twenty-two year olds were 3% less likely to agree or strongly agree with this statement than 18 year olds, when all other variables were held constant at their median.

Additionally, the ordered logistic regression results show that, all else equal, people who have personal experience with domestic violence were 13% less likely to agree or strongly agree

with this statement than people who had no experience with this issue, after controlling for other personal and demographic factors. This is a statistically significant relationship ($p > |z| = .039$).

Question 14: The media places blame onto the victim for not leaving an abuser.

A majority of people said “Agree” (46.8% of all respondents) or “Strongly Agree” (10.4% of all respondents) to the idea that the media places blame on victims for not leaving an abuser.

Table 2: Media Blame on Victims
Question 14: The media places blame onto the victim for not leaving an abuser.

	Survey Version A	Survey Version B	Survey Version C	All Respondents
Strongly Disagree	8%	2%	4%	4%
Disagree	8%	9%	12%	10%
Undecided	24%	31%	29%	28%
Agree	50%	42%	48%	47%
Strongly Agree	11%	16%	7%	10%

There was a statistically significant correlation (based on the results of an ordered logistic regression, all else equal, $p > |z| = .067$) between viewing a photo essay about domestic violence and responses to this statement. People who saw pictures of a real-life domestic violence incident (survey version A and B) were 10% more likely to express agreement with this statement, relative to survey respondents who did not see the photo essay. In sum, 33% percent of people who did not view the photo essay expressed strong agreement with this statement, compared to only 26% of people who did view the photo essay.

Based on the results of an ordered logistic regression, younger people and women were significantly more likely ($p > |z| = .000$ and $p > |z| = .003$, respectively) to respond in agreement with Question 14, after accounting for survey version, religion, ethnicity, and personal experience with IPV. In particular, women were 16% more likely to express agreement with this statement than men were.

The ordered logistic regression also showed that Catholics were 13% more likely to express agreement with this statement than non-Catholics ($p > |z| = .003$), while people who had personal experience with domestic violence were 15% more likely to express agreement with this statement ($p > |z| = .015$). Finally, people who attend religious services several times per week were 19% less likely to express agreement with this statement than people who do not attend religious services regularly.

Question 21: The NFL should allow players who reportedly hit their wives to continue playing football.

A majority of people said “Disagree” (22.4% of all respondents) or “Strongly Disagree” (46.8% of all respondents) to this statement about whether the NFL should allow abusive players to continue playing in the NFL. There was no statically significant difference between answers for people who saw survey version A, B, or C.

Table 3: NFL Policy toward Abuse

Question 21: The NFL should allow players who reportedly hit their wives to continue playing football.

	Survey Version A	Survey Version B	Survey Version C	All Respondents
Strongly Disagree	49%	46%	46%	47%
Disagree	15%	22%	27%	22%
Undecided	21%	18%	15%	18%
Agree	9%	10%	7%	8%
Strongly Agree	6%	3%	5%	5%

Based on the results of an ordered logistic regression, women were significantly less likely ($p < .000$) to respond in agreement with this statement, after accounting for survey version, age, religion, ethnicity, and personal experience with IPV. All else equal, after controlling for other personal and demographic factors, Women were 11% less likely than men to express agreement with this statement. Catholics were 4% less likely to express agreement with this statement than non-Catholics, all else equal ($p < .014$).

Question 23: The government should protect non-citizens if they are victims of domestic violence.

A majority of people said “Agree” (36.14% of all respondents) or “Strongly Agree” (29.32% of all respondents) to the statement that government should protect non-citizens if they are victims of domestic violence.

Table 4: Government Protection of Non-Citizens

Question 23: The government should protect non-citizens if they are victims of domestic violence.

	Survey Version A	Survey Version B	Survey Version C	All Respondents
Strongly Disagree	3%	4%	3%	3%
Disagree	9%	4%	3%	5%
Undecided	20%	34%	25%	26%
Agree	40%	33%	36%	36%
Strongly Agree	28%	24%	33%	29%

There was a weak but statistically significant correlation with viewing a photo essay about domestic violence and responses to this question. People who saw pictures of a real-life domestic violence incident (survey version A and B) were 10% less likely to express agreement

with this statement, relative to survey respondents who did not see the photo essay. Thirty-three percent of people who did not view the photo essay expressed strong agreement with this statement, compared to only 26% of people who did view the photo essay.

Based on the results of an ordered logistic regression, people who saw no pictures (Survey C) were significantly more likely ($p > |z| = .098$) to respond positively on Question 23, after accounting for age, gender, religion, ethnicity, and personal experience with IPV.

Younger people and women were significantly more likely ($p > |z| = .034$ and $p > |z| = .025$, respectively) to respond positively to Question 23, after accounting for survey version, religion, ethnicity, and personal experience with IPV. In particular, women were 10% more likely to express agreement with this statement. Catholics were 11% more likely to express strong agreement with this statement ($p > |z| = .056$).

Finally, all else equal, after accounting for other personal and demographic variables and holding all variables at their median value, people with personal experience with domestic violence were 14% more likely to agree with this statement ($p > |z| = .036$).

Question 24: If a partner threatens to beat up their partner, it is not considered as domestic violence.

A majority of people said “Disagree” (35.20% of all respondents) or “Strongly Disagree” (31.6% of all respondents) to the idea that threats are not considered domestic violence.

Table 5: Threats and Violence

Question 24: If a partner threatens to beat up their partner, it is not considered as domestic violence.

	Survey Version A	Survey Version B	Survey Version C	All Respondents
Strongly Disagree	38%	24%	32%	32%

Disagree	40%	28%	37%	35%
Undecided	9%	22%	15%	15%
Agree	11%	19%	14%	14%
Strongly Agree	3%	6%	3%	4%

There was a statistically significant correlation with viewing a photo essay about domestic violence and responses to this question. People who saw pictures of a real-life domestic violence incident (survey version A) were 11% less likely to express agreement with this statement, relative to survey respondents who did not see the photo essay or who saw a less violent series of pictures (survey versions B and C). Twenty-five percent of people who saw less violent pictures Agreed or Strongly Agreed with this Statement, compared to only 14% of people who saw the violent photo essay.

Based on the results of an ordered logistic regression, people who saw IPV pictures (Survey A) were significantly less likely to respond positively to Question 24, after accounting for age, gender, religion, ethnicity, and personal experience with IPV ($p > |z| = .041$).

Additionally, based on the results of an ordered logistic regression, people with personal experience with domestic violence were 12% less likely ($p > |z| = .030$) to respond positively to Question 24, after accounting for survey version, religion, ethnicity, and personal experience with IPV.

Conclusions

These findings correlate with prior research (Carlyle; 2008) that suggests the public perceives domestic violence as a private issue rather than a public health issue. The patterns found also raises concern that the majority of respondents believed that “women who return to their

abusers are stupid.” It can be inferred with these findings and prior research that the public is not receiving accurate information regarding the complex and life-threatening challenges domestic violence victims and survivors deal with on a day-to-day basis even after leaving an abuser. Researchers have seen problematic issues in news coverage about domestic violence. For instance, news reports suggest that victims at least partially, are responsible for their fate (Meyers, 1997). This effect was exacerbated if the victims were poor or working class women/or women of color (Benedict, 1992; hooks, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Van Dijk, 1991). These patterns in news coverage places blame onto the victim: that she provoked her batterer or that she failed to take responsibility for leaving (Pagelow, 1981, p. 88).

Domestic violence survivors might choose to return to the abuser because children, financial stability, and/or precarious life-threatening situations are involved. The victim feels like their abuser can manipulate a relationship with their child, upheave financial status, and put the victim (and her children) in a lethal predicament. A victim or survivor of physical, emotional, or domestic violence endures and processes trauma on a level that makes the severity of their reality incomprehensible. Ironically, for that reason, the public might have a tendency to assume the fault lies in the victim, not the abuser, for returning to a emotionally and/or physically violent intimate relationship and getting hurt or killed. It is the job of the news media to properly handle coverage of the complexities and universality of domestic violence.

This study identified that a majority of respondents felt that “media places blame onto victims for not leaving their abusers.” Future research should examine this cause by conducting a content analysis focused study to provide a foundation towards understanding what media outlets portray domestic violence victims and abusers inaccurately, leading to a perpetuation of misinformation. Making connections with data, media, public health, public opinion, and policy can

result in moving towards a solution that improves the wellness of society and protection for victims of abuse.

References

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Appendix A

The results discussed above were analyzed using Stata 12.0. The answers for each Likert-survey question were coded on a scale of 1-5, where 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, and 5=strongly disagree. The dependent variable in each statistical analysis was the survey respondent's answer to the Likert-survey question. Because of the categorical nature of the dependent variable, ordered logistic regression analysis was used. The independent variables included the survey version (A, B, or C), personal experience with IPV, and demographic characteristics (age, gender, religion, race and ethnicity, the respondent's age, the respondent's

gender, religiosity (frequency of attendance at religious services), and the highest level of education completed by the respondents mother. Predicted probabilities for key independent variables were calculated using Clarify in Stata 12.0. Additional details about the data analysis are available upon request. The table below (Table A.1) presents the results of the ordered logistic regression for five Likert-survey questions.

Table A.1: Ordered Logistic Regression Results

	<i>Question 13</i>			<i>Question 14</i>			<i>Question 21</i>			<i>Question 23</i>			<i>Question 24</i>		
	Coeffic	SE	P> 												
Survey Version	-0.221	0.271	0.417	-0.506	0.276	0.067	-0.083	0.270	0.759	0.437	0.265	0.099	-0.731	0.358	0.041
Age	-0.033	0.015	0.033	0.048	0.014	0.000	0.005	0.019	0.773	0.030	0.015	0.051	-0.517	0.321	0.107
Female	-0.424	0.286	0.139	0.791	0.269	0.003	-0.911	0.268	0.001	0.460	0.263	0.080	-0.030	0.200	0.131
Catholic	0.279	0.272	0.306	0.837	0.284	0.003	-0.748	0.306	0.014	0.529	0.276	0.056	-0.599	0.276	0.030
African American	0.413	0.535	0.440	-0.371	0.495	0.453	0.823	0.535	0.124	0.152	0.450	0.735	-0.176	0.282	0.534
Hispanic	0.395	0.338	0.242	0.391	0.350	0.263	0.404	0.342	0.238	0.333	0.314	0.289	0.188	0.403	0.641
Personal Experience with IPV	-0.558	0.270	0.039	0.685	0.281	0.015	-0.323	0.270	0.232	0.616	0.293	0.036	0.087	0.335	0.795
Religiosity	-0.087	0.115	0.449	-0.248	0.210	0.041	0.099	0.126	0.433	0.023	0.111	0.835	-0.063	0.270	0.816
Mother's Education	-0.131	0.135	0.334	0.066	0.145	0.647	0.057	0.157	0.719	-0.132	0.131	0.314	0.062	0.114	0.589
N	212			212			212			211			212		