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Analyzing Media Representations of Male Rape and Debunking Myths on 'Law and Order Special Victims Unit'

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Description

The project that I have done shows the importance of recognizing that male rape does exist and that it is more frequent than people think. By using *Law and Order Special Victims Unit* I am able to portray how myths about male rape are debunked and how the show creates new ways of thinking about male rape. Little research has been conducted about male rape and what we do know comes from the myths that are created in society and reinforced by false representations in the media. The research also concludes that we need more research to fully understand the prevalence and effects of male rape. I conducted a content and media analysis of three episodes of *Law and Order Special Victims Unit*, in which the main focus was male rape by women. I have found that *Law and Order Special Victims Unit* fully represents the arguments surrounding male rape as well as the emotions that go into these discussions. In addition, this television show highlights the fact that these myths about male rape influence the way the police and judicial system interact with male victims and handle male rape cases. The literature that I have read about male rape and in the episodes that I have analyzed have also shown me that the way the police and judicial system handles male victims influences the way victims talk to the police or decide to press charges against their attackers. The analysis of *Law and Order Special Victims Unit* in combination with the literature that I have read shows that male rape does not only happen in prisons or is committed by gay males.

Location

Breidenbaugh 205

Disciplines

Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Film and Media Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Sociology | Television

Comments

Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Senior Capstone

**Analyzing Media Representations of Male Rape and Debunking Myths on Law and
Order Special Victims Unit**

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WGS 400 – Senior Seminar in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Gettysburg College

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Introduction

The contemporary discourse around gender, sexuality, and power has contributed to the lack of research on male rape and to how male rape is represented in media including on television shows. In addition, these ideas about gender, sexuality, and power influence the way that male rape victims deal with their experience. In most cases rape is all about power, and rape committed by women involves the power dynamic in their relationship with the male victim. Men feel that they are supposed to be strong and tough, so they are not supposed to be raped. Knowing the prevalence of male rape and recognizing that it actually happens will help us let go of stigmatizing representations of male rape victims in society and on television. This research on the representation of male rape on Law and Order Special Victims Unit provides a space for letting go of these myths.

I want to prove that the television show Law and Order Special Victims Unit debunks myths about male rape by creating new ways of thinking about rape and the way male rape can and should be handled in the institutions of the police and judicial systems. I hope to help us understand male victim experiences. It would be best if we had a better understanding of the reach of myths about male rape. Representations of male rape on the television show Law and Order Special Victims Unit can help us see the prevalence of these dominant perceptions and how the show attempts to break down or reinforce them. Throughout the paper I will be talking about the following: The impact of male rape myths on victims and the institutions that deal with male rape; representations of victims telling their stories to the police and in court; defense attorneys who use different legal methods to try and discredit the victim's story; and the police's initial reactions to the

disclosure of the attack. These elements will be evidence to show how Law and Order Special Victims Unit debunks male rape myths. By comparing these representations to the recent scholarly literature on male rape, we can conclude that both representations and scholarship on male rape are influenced by stigmatization, or the accusations that are made about male rape victims about their masculinity or what constitutes rape.

Theory Behind Masculinity

An ideology is a common belief held in society that can shape the way that community handles certain situations. There is a belief in society that men cannot be raped because they are men. Men are supposed to be strong and independent. They are not supposed to let anyone overpower and sexually assault them. This set of beliefs about a man's masculinity is an ideology. As an ideology, this idea of masculinity influences how people perceive the way men are supposed to act, which in turn influences the way that men see themselves. In "Practices of Looking", ideology is defined as "the broad but indispensable, shared set of values, and beliefs through which individuals live out their complex relations to a range of social structures" (Sturken and Cartwright: 21). Clearly, closely held ideologies are not easily broken or changed. So, because there is a widely held belief that men are supposed to be masculine, when they are sexually assaulted it is hard for people to wrap their head around the assault because it does not match their idea about "real" men. Another example would be the belief that women cannot be perpetrators of sexual assault or rape. As a society we do not believe that women are aggressors, so it would be hard to understand that a woman is able to rape a man.

Hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary U.S. is shaped by the ideology of masculine power that the dominant discourse has about masculinity. Hegemonic

masculinity, therefore, mandates that men be masculine and not let anyone take that masculinity away from them, which is exactly what occurs in a male rape situation. Thinking about hegemonic masculinity will help us understand the standards that society put on men to be masculine, and act a certain way. An understanding of the term hegemony will further inform our understanding of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemony means that one social group has power over another and they are able to decide what a common belief in society will be. This means that this social group will have a dominant role in the representation of any given group. The representation that is created will strengthen the hegemony of that dominant group. Stuart Hall writes "...the powerful and the powerless- [are] caught up, though not on equal terms, in power's circulation. No one-neither its apparent victims not its agents-can stand wholly outside its field of operation" (Hall, 1997: 261). Those who have the power are going to use it to their advantage and those who are powerless must do what they are told because they do not have the power to change the way situations are represented. People who do not fit into this idea that society has about masculinity, have no power to change this view.

Myths about male rape are tools that play a role in hegemonic masculinity, which in turn reinforces the "truth" of the myths. Myths are ideas about a certain topic or situation that may or may not be true. Myths about hegemonic masculinity are ones that put unnecessary pressure on men to be masculine. For example we believe that a man is not a man if he is sensitive, vulnerable, and not able to physically protect or take care of himself. An example of a male rape myth is that if a man has an erection during the assault then it must have been consensual sex. Other examples of male rape myths include: Only gay men rape men; and gay men are the ones who are sexually assaulted

(Katy, 2009). Stuart Hall explains how the myths and ideas that a person has about a situation will influence the way that they view or give meaning to this situation. In an exercise from the book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practice* he asks readers to look at a picture and then he asks, “How do you ‘read’ the picture-what is it saying? ...What is its ‘myth’-its underlying message?” (Hall, 1997: 226). When we “read” the underlying message in a picture of myths of male rape, we can ask what is really being said about male rape victims and about male rape. The quote above shows that myths could be a way of denying that male rape happens and a way to ridicule the victims because they did not defend themselves. The “reading of male rape” shows that myths play a larger role in reinforcing the power structure of hegemonic masculinity, and that proper readings of myths are important in order to change the dominant discourse on male rape.

Incorrect representations about male rape can reinforce harmful myths and in turn, add to the power of hegemonic masculinity. Representation is about creating feeling and emotion. A representation of something is supposed to be the truth about an object, person, or idea. The combination of the truth and emotion will make a representation seem authentic. In today’s society, we understand that an “authentic” representation of hegemonic masculinity is one that portrays the characteristics of a “real” man and one that portrays the emotions that men are allowed to show. Individuals who create advertisements and television shows are very careful about how they represent certain ideas and concepts because they want the viewers to receive a specific meaning from them. The way something is represented is not based solely on images or words. There

has to be a combination between the two in order for the viewer to access and understand the meaning.

However, even when an advertiser or producer carefully represents certain ideas, there is no clear way of knowing whether or not the viewer will understand the image or show the way that they are intended to. For example, when producers of television shows write episodes about male rape and their attacker being a woman, the viewers may not see the episode as evidence towards the fact that male rape does happen and women can be attackers; they may see it as a fictional story with no basis in reality behind it. After all, false representations permeate today's society. False representations are usually used "to lure people into holding beliefs that may compromise their own interests" (Sturken and Cartwright: 21). False representations created by a hegemonic masculine society about male rape can influence the way that viewers are going to respond when they hear that a man has been raped and his attacker was a woman. Our powerful hegemonic masculine ideology may lead us to believe that the male victim is wrong and that it is not possible for him to have been raped, especially not by a woman.

However, individuals who do not hold the power in representation may also resist the masculine hegemony that has the power. When power over a person or group is being represented, it "...produces new discourses, new kinds of knowledge, new objects of knowledge, it shapes new practices, and institutions" (Hall, 1997: 261). Some representations of male rape cases highlight the fact that men can be victims and women can be rapists. How institutions, like the police, will handle this new knowledge is affected by hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic thinking is going to be challenged and the situation of male rape will be given a new meaning. When male rape is portrayed

accurately on television, we step away from false representations in order to prove that male rape does occur. With this in mind, we can understand the ideologies and meanings behind a show's representations of male rape. In Law and Order Special Victims Unit these myths are clearly highlighted and disproving them is made a central part of the episodes.

What Do We Know About Male Rape

The existence of false representations of rape can be connected to the fact that discussions surrounding rape are mostly about women and their experiences. There is no room for discussion about rape for men, especially in a society that believes that "sexual assault is an important global health problem that overwhelmingly impacts the lives of women and girls," which, while true, makes no mention of men and boys who are victims of rape (Du Mont et al., 2013: 2677). This focus on women and the myths surrounding male rape have strongly hindered research about male rape. We need acknowledgement that "even outside prisons males are victims of rape" (Caspers, 2011: 1261). We still need more information on the prevalence of male rape and the situations in which it occurs, including those where women rape men. According to "several population based studies...the prevalence of male ASA [adult sexual assault] is between 0.8% and 11%, with some clinic based research reporting rates as high as 18%" (Du Mont et al., 2013: 2677). But "studies of ASA at specialized hospital sexual assault services show that men comprise approximately 5% of all victims seen," showing that few male rape victims seek help (Du Mont et al., 2013: 2677). The research that has been done about male rape is very little and fairly recent. More research needs to be done to get a bigger picture about how important knowledge about male rape is. A little more knowledge about male

rape can go a long way, considering how the little knowledge that we do have about male rape has allowed us to “witness increased scientific and societal awareness of the psychology of the offense, the dynamics of the offense, the impact of sexual assault on the victim, and cultural and social factors contributing to this behavior pattern” (Smith et al., 1988: 101). And more research stepping away from women being the only victims of rape will help researchers gain more information about different rape experiences.

The change in the legal definition of rape

The 1927 legal definition of rape in the United States did not provide a space for discussion of different sexual acts that could happen in a rape experience. It only focused on women as victims and the sexual encounter being forced. It said that rape consisted of “non-consensual penile-vaginal intercourse” (Rumney, 2008: 141). This highlighted the belief that rape consisted of men as the perpetrators and women as the victims. In 1984 there was debate around the definition of rape to be more gender neutral. Then in 1986 the U.S. federal law defined sexual abuse in gender-neutral terms by including,

...contact between the penis and the vulva or the penis and the anus...between the mouth and the penis, the mouth and the vulva, or the mouth and the anus; the penetration however slight, of anal or genital opening of another by hand or finger or by any object, with an intent to abuse, humiliate, harass, degrade, or arouse or gratify the sexual desire of any person (Bullock and Beckson, 2011: 200).

This change in the language allowed men to be seen as rape victims in 1994 (Rumney, 2008; Bullock and Beckson, 2011: 200). The definition now includes different types of penetration, like “penile-anal intercourse of a male or female victim” (Rumney, 2008: 142). The definition of rape was further extended in 2003 due to a Home Office ‘Review of Sex Offenses’. It included more “types of bodily penetration” (Rumney, 2008: 142).

Gender inclusivity of the legal definition of rape changed the way rape was viewed and handled in the court system. Rape was no longer legally about the hegemonic ideas in society, including those that say women are weak and are the only ones who are affected by rape. This new legal definition in turn helped debunk the ideas that people had about rape at that time and which contributed to how differently male and female victims have been treated. The current legal definition also recognizes that men can be victims of rape, therefore it enhances the mandate for the police are supposed to treat every rape victim with the same care and respect. This change in the definition came about because of an “attempt to reflect more modern understandings of the purpose of rape law, that is, the protection of sexual autonomy from the harm of non-consensual penetrative sex acts” (Rumney, 2008: 141). The increased research and the changing times have shown that male rape does take place. “If one is prepared to acknowledge that a man can be raped, then one also has to consider how the criminal law should label that experience,” a step that the U.S. legal system has already taken (Rumney, 2008: 141).

Similarities and differences between male and female victims

There are aspects that male and female rape victims share through their experience and there are aspects that they do not share. The language used to describe an assault is different for male and female victims. A critical difference is that women will say that they were raped and male victims usually say “he touched me or he made me touch him” (Stiles, 2014: 2). Research has shown that “The word “rape” is not associated with male victims. As a result, many male clients had a difficult time describing their assault as rape, because the word just didn’t fit with what happened to them” (Stiles, 2014: 2). Because of language differences, the person offering the victim services has to

recognize what language to use, or the victim will completely shut down. Attention to language by coalitions and people who offer services helps provide better prevention strategies by making sure that “every survivor of sexual violence is welcomed and receives the services he or she deserves” (Stiles, 2014: 3) and help male and female victims deal with their situation. This contributes to how comfortable a victim feels talking to a counselor. If a victim does not feel welcomed they will most likely handle their assault in a destructive manner. Feeling comfortable to talk about your experience is the best way to deal with the assault as well as get justice for what happened.

If there was more knowledge about male rape, male victims would be able to talk about their assault more openly and the individuals to whom the victim tells their story would be able to help him in a constructive fashion. Male victims would be able to trust that they would be taken seriously and their masculinity would not be questioned. A parallel can be drawn to female rape victims when they are ridiculed for what they were wearing, whether or not they were drinking, or whether or not they had a sexual encounter with the person prior to the rape. This assumption placed on male and female victims makes them feel like they are being told that they asked for the assault to happen, or they knew what the consequences would be because of their actions. Looking at these similarities highlights the hegemonic ideology that is so highly practiced in society.

Not only do male and female victims talk differently about their assault and experience differently, but the way that the police and the court system interact with male victims also influences how much trust victims have in the system. This trust is the reason why victims report their assault and are willing to go forward with a trial against the perpetrator. Unfortunately, there are “law enforcement officials and feminist-based

rape crisis centers and or hotline workers...[who do not] believe that men can be sexual assault victims or, in the former case, tend to believe that male victims are invariably homosexual and either actually wanted to be assaulted or that the assaults are reported in the context of a lover's quarrel" (Bullock and Beckson, 2011: 200). Similarly, police officers and court systems that repeat stereotypes related to masculinity make male victims feel like they asked to be raped. Examples of these stereotypes include: "men who are sexually assaulted by men must be gay, men are incapable of functioning sexually unless they are sexually aroused, men are less affected by sexual assault than women," according to research with police officers (Chapleau et al, 2008: 603). Because of this sexist behavior, male victims, like female victims, are likely to feel blamed for being assaulted. Studies have shown that male victims have reported "being shouted at, assumptions being made about their sexual orientation, and assertions made about their occupations. It was also taken as a given that the survivor would want a female liaison officer (the implication that they would be more 'caring' and 'sensitive' to the survivor)" (Jamel et al., 2008: 500). Some male law enforcement officials "may interpret unwanted sexual incidents by other men to be more serious violations, perhaps because female offenders do not threaten their heterosexual identity" (Weiss, 2010: 286). These assumptions made about male victims by the police and the court system explain why male victims usually do not report their assault. They do not want to be judged for being assaulted and they do not want people to make assumptions about their masculinity, especially from individuals who are not supposed to cast judgment on them. In addition, even though male and female victims have assumptions made about them when they

report their assault, male victims are less likely to be taken seriously, which creates another incentive for men not to report their assaults.

The Representation of Male Rape in the Media

The myths or assumptions about male rape, the way that male and female victims describe their attacks, and the change in the legal definition of rape are present in the representation of male rape in the media. The way that male rape is portrayed on television and in other media, including in print news media, influence the ways that people see the topic in their everyday life. On Law and Order Special Victims Unit the representation of male rape consists of defense lawyers asking the victim whether or not they work out and how much they weigh, drawing conclusions as to whether or not the victim could have fought off their attacker. These questions are supposed to show the jury that it is impossible for the female attacker to have raped the victim because of his weight. However, this conclusion does not take into account the context of the attack and the chain of events prior to the attack. Even though a man may be strong, he may not know how to handle a situation where he is being attacked. Law and Order Special Victims Unit plays a role in the wider media representation of male rape and influences the ideas in society.

Law and Order Special Victims Unit

Law and Order Special Victims Unit is part of the very successful Law and Order franchise created by Dick Wolf in 1999. However, SVU is also the only series of the franchise where new episodes are still being aired. This is a testament to the popularity of

the show. Not only is the show popular, but it is aired on a major network, NBC, rather than a channel requiring a fee, such as HBO. This means that many people are able to access this channel and have the potential to watch this show. Because so many people watch SVU there will most likely be a larger impact when challenging male rape myths. There have been three hundred eighteen episodes over the course of seventeen years, since it started in 1999. The main goal of the show is to raise awareness about rape. Dan Florek, who plays Captain Craigen, has commented that “[SVU] stimulates conversation, it makes people aware of issues they should be aware of... I think this is one of the reasons we’re still around.” (Harnick, 2013: 2) SVU has touched on various contexts where sexual abuse or rape can happen; who the perpetrator of the abuse could be; and the various ways that the court system deals with rape cases.

The formula for Law and Order Special Victims Unit Episodes

Watching many episodes of Law and Order Special Victims Unit reveals to me that men are assumed to be the bad guy in most episodes, so police officers do not believe them when they say that they were attacked. Hard evidence is required before a rape is said to have happened. This has been the formula for the show since its beginning in 1999. In the seventeen years since its release the formula has changed a little bit. Now the bad guys are the ones who are thought to be guilty when the police first get the case.

Why I chose Law and Order Special Victims Unit

I chose Law and Order Special Victims Unit not only for its popularity but also because this show does a good job of highlighting the current discourse about male rape and how people deal with it. I chose three episodes to analyze: Ridicule (1999); Design (2005); and Parole Violations (2015), because their main focus was on male rape

committed by women. These three episodes highlight the fact that male rape does happen. The episodes also represent how hard it is to bring a male rape case to court. When a male rape case is tried, the prosecution tries to make the victim believable. On the other hand, the defense tries to discredit the victim by using stereotypes about men and their masculinity. The defense tries to convince the victim and the jury that the rape was the victim's fault and not the defendant's. The defense continually tries to make the victim feel bad for what happened and emphasizes the idea that his being more masculine would have changed the outcome of the assault. The detectives in the episodes represent society's conversation around whether or not male rape is even possible. Because the detectives are the ones investigating the crime, they are able to see that a crime has occurred and that a woman has committed the crime.

Methods for Analysis

I identified the three episodes for analysis by visiting lawandorder.wikia.com and checking every synopsis of the three hundred eighteen episodes to verify whether or not male rape played a role in the episode; and then again to see whether or not male rape was the main focus of the episode. After finding the three episodes where male rape was the main focus, I watched the episodes to analyze them, taking notes on what was happening. Then I identified three areas of interest in each episode: the court system, the police and the experience of the victim. In these three sections I connected what happened in the episodes to the literature that I have read on male rape. In addition I created a section where I wrote out my feelings and reflected about what happened in the episodes. The focus of this paper is to show how Law and Order Special Victim Unit is representing and dispelling the myths about male rape. Analyzing episodes where male

rape is the main focus will help us better understand what is being done with the representation.

Analysis of “Design”, “Ridicule”, and “Parole Violations”

This section of the paper describes my analysis of the three episodes of SVU. The three episodes that were chosen for analysis include: Ridicule from December of 2001, Design, which aired in September of 2005, and Parole Violations from 2015. In selected scenes from these three episodes, myths are highlighted and then debunked because of evidence that supports the victim’s story. Because SVU has moments where myths are broken down, it shows that these myths are not true. SVU also shows that male victims should be taken seriously when they report an assault. The representations of the myths in the show also shaped the way the male victim handled the attack and what was done when he came forward and a trial started. Representations of race and class also played a role in who the victim and who the rapist were.

The first episode that I analyzed was titled Ridicule (2001), from season three. In this episode, a woman is found dead and tied up in a sexual position. When the detectives investigate to find out if the victim’s death was an accident, the victim’s husband points the detectives to a male stripper, Peter, who says that his wife and two other women at a bachelorette party raped him. At first no one believed Peter, but when the detectives found evidence to support his story, they charged the two women with rape. Throughout the episode all of the characters have different opinions about whether or not the women should be charged with rape. In the end, one of the women is found guilty of assault and not rape and then is later charged with the murder of the woman who was found in the

beginning of the episode. This happens even though the other woman, who was on trial, took a plea deal on the rape and testified against the first woman.

This episode highlights the legal issues around charging women with rape. One scene that highlights the main points of the episode is when the prosecution and the defense are arguing their cases in front of a judge who is going to determine whether or not the charges will be dismissed against the female defendants. It begins with a wide shot of the courtroom and then a close up of each of the women's faces. When the defense starts to argue her position, she says that rape is penetration and that women lack the mechanics to penetrate men. The prosecution argues that rape is not about sex, it is about power, fear and control. The prosecution also brings up that a woman can be charged with forcible fondling of a man even though she is not the penetrant, as well as mentioning scientific studies that disprove the defense's position about arousal meaning consent and that a vocal no means nothing. She also argues that until recently "we didn't believe that mothers can kill their children, but now they are the first people we look at." After this argument the defense says that only women are victims of rape and that charging a woman with rape will continue to make her a victim. The judge rules that the case will not be dismissed and the defense cannot argue that women can be equal in some situations and not others.

Throughout this scene there are close ups of each woman when they are talking. Only one man is in the scene and there is a distance between him and the camera even though there is a close up of the prosecutor, Alex Cabot's, face. This close up shows the eyes of all the women and you can see that each of them thinks the other one's argument is ridiculous. Throughout the scene you can see the prosecution and the defense rolling

their eyes at each other because they don't agree with what the other is saying. The clothing the lawyers were wearing is also of importance to the scene. Alex was wearing a grey skirt suit and the defense attorney was wearing a pink skirt suit. This can be interpreted as the lawyers trying to represent that the case has turned into a woman's issue. In this scene, the change in the definition of rape was not brought up as it was in another scene in the episode, allowing the defense to make the argument that women are victims of rape and that they don't have the "mechanical equipment to rape" anyone. The argument in this scene is not about the legal definition of what constitutes rape; it is about what would happen to other women if this one woman were charged with rape. The defense lawyer is using a feminist argument about violence against women; many feminists argue that "rape [is] a product of a male-dominated society that tacitly condones rape, [is] therefore ideologically at odds with the idea of males as victims, and furthermore [we] fear that acknowledging males as victims would co-opt publicity and resources away from female victims" (Bullock and Beckson, 2011: 200-201). Once this woman was charged with rape it could set a precedent for other women to be charged with rape. The defense lawyer said that a ruling against the defense would distract from the fact that women are usually the victims of rape, connecting it back to her feminist argument. It was also interesting to see that in this scene, women took the forefront, and the only man in the scene took a back seat. It further highlights how the scene or the episode can be portrayed as a woman arguing for the equality of women and not thinking about the facts of the case, what happened to Peter, and how to defend her arguments by using legal rhetoric rather by arguing about what could happen socially if the women were convicted of rape.

In the episode Design from season seven, in 2005, a pregnant woman named April threatens to jump off a roof because she was raped. As the episode goes on, the police find out that April was not raped and that she has been sexually assaulting men who are considered highly intelligent so that she can get their sperm; she used a process called electro ejaculation, which consists of inserting a vibrating rod into the anus to provoke ejaculation, in this case while the men were unconscious. Throughout the episode, the detectives are trying to figure out whether or not April was actually raped, and to understand why they cannot find evidence to corroborate her story that a man named Barclay Pallister raped her. The situation changes when they find out that April promised multiple couples her baby for fifty thousand dollars and lied about her mother being dead. When the detectives meet April's mother, she tells them about a safe deposit box, where they find photos of different men, including Pallister. After they talk to all of the men, they learn who April really is: a woman working for a fertility clinic led by her father, who is interested in "designer babies", and targeting highly successful men as sperm donors without their consent. They are not able to charge April with a crime as part of a deal to get April's baby back from her and her mother.

One scene highlights what happened when the men were sexually assaulted; the detectives interview the men from the photos in April's safe deposit box. In this scene there are cut-aways from Detectives Munch and Fin talking to some of April's victims and Detectives Benson and Stabler talking to others. Each of these cut-aways begins with the detectives intruding on the victim's work. One victim is a baseball player who is signing autographs, and another is relaxing at a bar. The detectives ask if the men remembered April and what happened when they met. They all told the same story: April

bought them a drink when they met and the next thing they remember was waking up in their own beds. They also remember how beautiful, money hungry, and knowledgeable she was about their private information. After the detectives realize that all of the men were drugged, Detective Stabler goes to Pallister's job to talk to him. Stabler pleads with him to answer his questions and affirms that he believes Pallister when he said he does not remember anything. Throughout this scene there are a lot of cut away and close up shots. All of the victims in the scene finish each other's sentences, showing the connections between their stories. This shows that April had the same routine for every victim and that they were all targeted in the same way.

The most interesting part in this scene was when each victim was describing April. They all said that they remembered her because of how beautiful and confident she was. They did not even think that something was wrong when they woke up and they did not remember what happened; it was as if they did not care that they were sexually assaulted. One of the men even knew that he was drugged, but he still did not report the assault. Hearing the connections between the victims' stories combined with their nonchalant reactions to the news that they were sexually assaulted shows the men's inability to grasp the idea that men, especially when they are personally involved, can be victims of sexual assault. Livia Gershon writes about how our society does not take male rape seriously. She discusses how the questions that are asked about female victims are not raised about male victims. She also discusses her understanding of society's assumptions about male and female sexuality. Her research on male rape highlights the fact that "Americans are more likely to find coercion of men by women more acceptable, compared with the reverse." Gershon also touches on how "we're also more apt to label

an incident of heterosexual sex as rape if it involves a male aggressor and female victim, perhaps, in part because men are seen as more threatening” (Gershon, 2014: 2). So, the men to whom the detectives talked in the episode and Gershon’s discussion of perceptions of gender and sexual aggression give the impression that women are not seen as aggressors and it is considered acceptable if a man is coerced into sex. The men did not think that anything bad happened to them, even after the detectives told them that they had been drugged, highlighting the fact that women are not seen as aggressors or bad people. This scene also highlights the myth that men are supposed to like sex, no matter what the circumstances were.

The last episode that I chose to analyze is Parole Violations from season sixteen in 2015. In this episode, a parolee named Tommy, who is also the husband of detective Carici’s sister, says that his parole officer, Donna, made him have sex with her at gunpoint. Tommy gets arrested for disorderly conduct after he was assaulted and when Carici bails him out of jail, Tommy tells him that he was forced to have sex with his parole officer and that his parole officer is a woman. In the beginning Carici did not believe that Tommy was raped. He thought that Tommy cheated on his sister and felt bad about it. Tommy is embarrassed about what happened and he does not want his wife or anyone else to find out. He does not even want to press charges. Tommy feels firstly that he will get sent back to prison if he presses charges and secondly that he was not raped, the situation was just a parole officer using their power over a parolee. When Carici realizes that Donna has forced other parolees to have sex, he believes Tommy’s story. But when Tommy’s wife finds out what happened she says that Tommy cheated on her and that he must have wanted it if he was able to have an erection. When Donna is

charged, Assistant District Attorney Barba and the police are able to show that Donna did rape Tommy and got her to take a plea.

The myth of erection meaning consent is highlighted in this episode. This is possibly the hardest myth about male rape to dispel. Most people believe that erections are voluntary, so men cannot be forced to penetrate and therefore cannot be raped by a woman. On the contrary, the body is just reacting naturally to the stimulation that it is receiving. Bullock and Beckson's analysis of research that has been done on erections during an assault conclude that "sexual arousal may be provoked by extreme anxiety" (Bullock and Beckson, 2011: 203). This is what happened to Tommy in the episode. Tommy was so nervous about having a gun pointed at him and Donna threatening him with going back to prison, that his body just reacted to what was happening. It is imperative that this is understood in order for "victims of male sexual assault [to] receive justice in legal settings and appropriate services in the community" (Bullock and Beckson, 2011: 204).

The fear male victims have of not being believed is highlighted in one scene in this episode. In this scene, Sargent Benson and Detective Amaro go to interview Tommy when he is at work. When they bring up what happened, Tommy says that no one will believe him and that everything is okay because he did not get hurt. A close up of Tommy's face is seen at this moment. You can see how scared he is about pressing charges and his desperation to put everything behind him. Benson and Amaro tell him that "just going on with life will not make him forget what happened". Then there is another close up of Tommy's face; you can see that he is thinking about what Benson and Amaro are telling him. Amaro tells Tommy to go to the hospital to get checked out for

sexually transmitted diseases or other injuries, and asks him to come into the precinct the next day with the clothes he was wearing when he was assaulted and give them his statement. At the end of this scene Tommy walks away, and the camera does a close up shot of Benson and Amaro looking at each other with the hope that Tommy will come in to talk to them.

This scene provides an example of how the myths of male rape can affect the lives of the victims. Many male victims feel that no one is going to believe them if they say they were raped, or they feel that because they were not physically hurt, then nothing bad actually happened. A research study by Karen Weiss shows that “men’s lower reporting may be more reflective of the difficulty men have recognizing or acknowledging that what happened to them was a reportable crime” (Weiss, 2010: 285). She has also found that “men’s reluctance may be exacerbated by a sense of shame for not fulfilling their masculine role that dictate they be in control and take care of matters themselves” (ibid). So, it is important to have police officers, like the ones on SVU, help the victims to understand that the assault was not their fault and the best thing for them to do is to talk about what happened so that they can heal and move past it. Psychologists Jamel, Bull, and Sheridan (Jamel et al, 2008), conducted a study on the difference in the way that police officers handle male and female rape victims. They found that it is less likely that men will report their assault because of their lack of trust in the judicial system. However, when a male victim did report their assault and they were treated with respect, they found that the victims felt a sense of “validation...when the police believed their description of events” (Jamel et al., 2008, 502). If victims do not talk about what happened to them, regardless of whether their attacker goes to jail, they will not be able

to heal emotionally or mentally because they will not be able to work through all of the thoughts that are going through their heads. Having an officer believe their description of events makes it easier for victims to report their assaults and feel supported throughout the process (ibid).

Race, Class, and Gender in Law and Order SVU

Race and class play a significant role in the three episodes. They were determining factors in whether or not the victim was believed and taken seriously. The three episodes that I have analyzed do not represent men of color being the victims of rape or rapists. When men of color are represented as rape victims on the show they are usually in prison. Riggs, a gay African American filmmaker and gay rights activist, describes the idea of what it means to be a real black man, which informs the fact that male rape is looked down upon in black communities and the men who have been raped feel less than men. He says “Black Macho prescribes an inflexible ideal: Strong Black Men-“Afrocentric” Black Men-don’t flinch, don’t weaken, don’t take blame or shit, take charge, step to when challenged, and defend themselves without pause for self-doubt” (Riggs, 1991: 394). Riggs is saying that to be a real African American man you have to have all of these qualities, in order to represent true masculinity. Black men, according to Riggs, are not supposed to let anything get the best of them. They are supposed to keep their eyes open for anything or anyone that tries to challenge that masculinity. A conclusion that could be drawn by looking at Riggs’ work as well as SVU is that when a man of color is raped, his masculinity is taken away from him and the community will look down on him because he has been raped. There will be an assumption that he was not a real man because he was not able to protect himself physically and take charge of

the situation. Not representing black male rape victims in the three episodes, SVU does not deal with the way that rape is seen in the black community.

The three episodes that I analyzed also do not include representations of black women as rapists. Hegemonic ideas and representations about Black women as hypersexual and aggressive abound in contemporary US society. But black women are not represented as rapists on SVU. This could be interpreted again as a lack of attention to the experience of male rape in the black community. Indeed, SVU could have included these experiences to debunk the racist stereotypes of hypersexualized and aggressive black women. Dispelling such stereotypes may be difficult in the context of the representation of a black woman raping a man. The lack of representation of black women as rapists may be interpreted as a positive choice on the part of the SVU team, in that it avoids reinforcing racist stereotypes of Black Women. A more extensive analysis of race politics on the show would allow us to tease out this complex issue but goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Class can also be seen in the three episodes focusing on male rape. In the episode Design, class is highlighted by the fact that April only assaulted famous, rich, and smart men. Class is also seen when the detectives go to the clinic where April works. In this clinic the doctor is inseminating women with sperm from intelligent and creative men. The doctor says that he is creating the smartest generation. One of the victims, Barclay Pallister, is happy that he is able to have the child that he had with April. He says that because of his and April's IQs the baby will be very intelligent. In the episode Parole Violation we see class being played out because Tommy is working class and Donna is middle class. In this episode Donna describes Tommy and other parolees like him as

damaged and low class. She continually tells detectives: “How can you believe someone like him instead of someone like me?” Donna portrays Tommy as someone who is not worth believing. In the episode *Ridicule*, the male victim is a young man from a middle class family who has a job as a stripper so that he can pay his bills and pay for school. The women who are accused of raping him are upper class women with successful professional careers. These women are able to hire a good lawyer to defend both of them in court. But the victim, Peter, had to hire a lawyer to help him find out who raped him and he is ridiculed for it because he asked for money to be compensated for the trauma of the rape. The defense lawyer tried to show that Peter only made these allegations when the defendants would not pay him a settlement. In all of these episodes the woman perpetrator has been beautiful and of a higher or equal socio-economic status than the male victims. The men in the episodes have differed in economic status, but the women have taken advantage of their class position and privilege. The women have used their power and influence over the men.

It is interesting to note that the female perpetrators in the episodes are all white, beautiful, and middle to upper class. Because the show presents this representation in the three episodes in which a woman rapes a man, I can draw the conclusion that it would be easy for a beautiful white woman, who is also well off, to sexually assault a man. Their whiteness and beauty make them initially non-threatening and when it is discovered that a beautiful, white, well-off woman has assaulted them, the male victims do not initially believe it. The women think that they can get away with assaulting these men. White, beautiful, middle class, women are usually depicted as the victims, so the police and even

the male victims themselves may not believe that the woman has sexually assaulted anyone.

Besides race and class, gender also plays a multifaceted role on the show. On SVU the police are generally very sympathetic towards the female victims that they encounter. On the other hand, sympathy for male victims only occurs when it becomes obvious that they have been attacked or assaulted. When a male victim discloses that he has been sexually assaulted the female detectives on the show are the ones who initially believe the victim, and the males on the show are skeptical. But after evidence has been found that the victim was telling the truth, the males on the show feel bad because they did not initially believe the victim. Females on SVU are upset because they were tricked into thinking that the woman was the victim and the perpetrators are not found guilty or able to be charged with rape. Research has demonstrated that, in real life as well, men and women are not equally sympathetic to male victims. Psychologists Davies, Rogers, and Bates (2008) have investigated “the impact of victim sexual orientation, the degree of victim physical resistance, and respondent gender on attributions of blame and assault severity in a hypothetical case of stranger perpetrated male rape” (Davies et al, 2008: 533). They found that male research participants considered the assault to be less severe and blamed the victim more than female research participants did. Another finding was that “men’s blame toward the male victim depended on his degree of resistance as well as his sexuality” (Davies et al., 2008: 541). These research findings are mirrored on the show. In addition, the female rapists in all three episodes were not charged and convicted of rape. This illustrates how prevalent and difficult it is to dispel the myths and that in

many cases women are getting away with raping men because they are not seen as being able to rape men.

Reception and Impact of Law and Order Special Victims Unit

The producers of the show have done a lot to make sure that the portrayals of rape experiences are accurate. Law and Order producers make a “conscientious effort to not glamorize rape and to portray punishment of the crime” (Gilbert, 2015: 3). One thing that the show does well is representing how stories that have happened in real life, some of which have made headlines, are important to the overall discussion of rape. The show is known for “taking stories from the headlines and putting new spins on the real-life situation” (Harnick, 2013: 2). Using real life examples in the episodes but presenting them in a new light creates a new understanding of that event. The viewers will be able to compare what happened in the real life event with what happened in the show and they will be able to compare the differences in the outcomes. The shows’ alternate endings highlight the fact that hegemonic masculinity do not have to influence the way that we view men if they are sexually assaulted. It also shows that rape can happen in different circumstances and that women can be perpetrators of rape.

The actors on SVU feel that it is “more than just a television show”, according to Richard Belzer who plays Detective John Munch (Harnick, 2013: 2). They feel that it goes above and beyond anything that they could have dreamed. The cast also feels that the show touches on important topics and that the writers and producers for SVU do a good job with dealing with these tough subjects. Danny Pino, who plays Detective Nick Amaro, says that “one of the best things the show does is it shines light on the darkest part of the human condition and in doing so, I think it also is life affirming. It’s not just

exploiting it or trivializing it.” Dan Florek goes on to say that “SVU stimulates conversation, it makes people aware of issues they should be aware of. I find parents talk to their kids and address things, ...I think it’s one of the reasons we’re still around” (Harnick, 2013: 2). These comments show that the actors believe in what they are doing which helps with the portrayal of the producers’ message that rape does not always have to be seen in one way. Having actors who believe in what they are doing makes a show successful. Also, some of the actors have been a part of the franchise since the very beginning, like Mariska Hargitay and Ice-T, revealing their commitment to the show and its message. Mariska Hargitay’s commitment also shows in the work with the Joyful Heart Foundation, which she started and is all about rape victim experiences and allowing a safe space for victims to talk about their experience as well as offer services to them.

Viewers of SVU like it because of the excitement the show brings. Along with this excitement SVU facilitates a space where viewers can debunk rape myths and create new ways of thinking. Viewers also like the show because of the different experiences that it portrays. The blog website IMDB.com creates a space where viewers can go and comment on a particular episode or comment on another viewers’ thoughts. One review said “I like that episode. It had twists and turns. Rape by a woman is rare. Most of the rapes are done by men.” Another review said “there were many twists and turns which I thought were great. We’re led to believe that this renowned doctor is a rapist only to find out that the girl he supposedly raped is in a way, the rapist! It was actually kind of fun to see the other side win for once. It rarely happens on the show, but when it does it truly makes for a great episode” (IMDB.com 2016). Such reviews show that people like SVU because of the content and because it is surprising. The episode exposes these viewers to

experiences that they never thought could happen, opening their minds to new ways of thinking. Some viewers have had the realization that men can be raped and women can be rapists. Other fans feel however, that the episodes are not realistic. Fans have started conversations with each other when they do not agree with someone else's review of the episode. One fan criticizing another fan's review replies that it is

[An] interesting episode that showed women can also be manipulative abusers and think they can get away with it due to their positions of power in society. Really not shocked that another reviewer here thinks that it is OK for male strippers to be raped since "sex is implied" due to the "sexual nature" of that job. I doubt that they would feel the same about female strippers being raped. Rape isn't about how you can get sex just because someone takes their clothes off and by virtue do anything for money (or not). (IMDB.com 2016)

Sparking conversations in spaces like this helps to educate people about what rape is. In these online spaces many people are able to easily come together and have these conversations. This makes it easier for many different opinions to be heard. It also creates a space where people who have the same opinions to bond and learn from others. Because the show has sparked this type of response from its viewers, it shows that it is doing a good job of educating people about rape.

Shows like Law and Order Special Victims Unit have been shown by researchers to help break down myths about rape and educate people about rape and victim's rape experiences (Fisher and Pina, 2013). A study conducted by communications scholars at Washington State University that includes Law and Order reveals how the show indeed helps break down these myths for viewers (Hust et al, 2015). In this study, 313 first-year students were surveyed about whether or not they watched Law and Order, CSI, or NCIS. Then the students were asked how much they agreed with statements about rape-myth acceptance, intentions to seek consent for sexual activity, and intentions to refuse

unwanted sexual activity. The study found that “exposure to Law and Order was associated with “lower rape-myth acceptance,” greater intentions to seek consent for sexual activity, and greater intentions to adhere to decisions related to sexual consent” (Gilbert, 2015: 2). This illustrates how SVU is having a positive impact on society’s hegemonic beliefs about rape. This development takes the form of new understandings about rape. Because more people are informed about consent and what it means to have consent, our society is rewriting hegemonic ideas about rape. Viewers are also able to relate to the characters and develop as they develop. As the characters investigate the crime and find evidence, viewers are able to better understand what happened and relate to the emotions that the characters are feeling.

In her report on the Washington State University study, journalist Sophie Gilbert concludes with the fact that even though

Law and Order: SVU, the only show in the franchise still in production, certainly isn’t perfect, and the way in which it shows police officers doggedly investigating sex crimes and handling victims with the utmost care and attention certainly defies the real-life experiences of many survivors. ...[SVU] offers such explicit and incontrovertible definitions of what constituted sexual assault, [so it] might nevertheless make it a valuable and productive show for cultural consumers (Gilbert, 2015: 4).

Law and Order Special Victims Unit has become a medium in breaking down myths about rape. There is no reason to believe that the show’s representation of male rape (including by women) does not equally impact viewers to understand that all rape victims are not the same and that not all rape incidents can be interpreted in the same way. Viewers are also able to relate to the characters and develop as they develop. As the characters investigate the crime and find evidence, viewers are able to better understand what happened and relate to the emotions that the characters are feeling.

Conclusion

Myths about male rape are part and parcel of our society's construction of hegemonic masculinity. This ideology about masculinity impacts whether or not men report that they have been assaulted and how the police, justice system, and rape-counseling services deal with the victims. In most cases, male victims feel like no one is going to take them seriously and believe them. They feel as if they are not going to be treated with the same kindness and courtesy that female victims are supposed to get when they report their assault. But acknowledging that male rape does happen and is prevalent will help us to see that we need to change the way that we think about men and their masculinity. Law and Order Special Victims Unit clearly shows that male rape does happen and hints at new ways to think about rape, masculinity, and the justice system.

Law and Order Special Victims Unit has had a strong impact on the way that people discuss rape and domestic violence. Dick Wolf, the producer, stated that police officials have come up to him and said that sex crime reporting has gone up because of the show. Mariska Hargitay also said that people are disclosing their experiences to her and she sees how the episode that was aired the previous night creates conversations about these unpopular issues (hulu.com, 2016). Viewers of the show start to realize that all rape cases are not the same and that they should not believe everything they hear about rape victims. SVU's representations of male rape allow viewers to see that masculinity has nothing to do with how a male victim handles an assault. Rape is about

power and control, and the way that rape is represented on SVU, regardless of the victim being male or female, breaks down the hegemonic definition of rape held by society.

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