

# Respectability and reputation: Tracing intersections of race, class and gender in news discourses of violence against women

## Abstract

*This paper investigates how gendered inequalities are reproduced in printed news media discourses of men's violence against women and how they intersect with the racial and classed dimensions of survivor and perpetrator identities in two Cape Town newspapers. A total of 113 reports on violence against women were collected from two newspapers that drew the largest readership in the Western Cape Province between 2011 and 2013. A thematic decomposition analysis revealed the presence of a discourse of respectability, which shed light on how pathologising representations "other" and blame victims who are thought to stray from respectability, particularly poor black women who find themselves on the periphery of this discourse of femininity. In contrast, perpetrators of violence against women were represented through the lens of race and class, and predominantly through reputable performances of masculinity, silencing their accountability. Understanding violence as an intersectional experience – defined by race, class, sexuality and gender in the context of post-apartheid South Africa – is central to the analysis. A critical comparison between the two newspapers' reporting styles is offered. Furthermore, the news media's tendency to reproduce racial and gendered stereotypes of victims and perpetrators of violence and to marginalise some voices over others is problematised.*

In March 2016, the South African public voiced shock and outrage at the rape and murder of two young women in

## Taryn van Niekerk

National Research  
Foundation (NRF) Scarce  
Skills Research Fellow  
Department of Psychology  
University of Cape Town  
Cape Town

## Keywords

*intersectionality, news  
media, perpetrators,  
victims, violence against  
women*

Cape Town. The crimes perpetrated against Sinxolo Mafevuka (19 years of age) – in the township of Khayelitsha – and Franziska Blöchliger (16 years old) – in the middle-class suburb of Tokai – were a week apart, and were only two examples of rape and violence against girls and women in early 2016 alone. In a country where violence against women is rampant, we are reminded that these are not exceptional cases but that they reflect two of approximately 500 incidents of intimate femicide that occurred in South Africa in 2013 (Abrahams et al, 2013; Mathews et al, 2014). Alongside the public outrage, opinions surfaced on the minimal media reporting afforded to female femicides, and in particular, the marginalisation of black<sup>1</sup> women’s experiences. In the case of Franziska Blöchliger police officials tracked the signal from her stolen mobile phone to locate the suspects within 36 hours of the murder, and in less than four days after the murder the suspects appeared in court. More than a week after the murder of Sinxolo Mafevuka, no arrests were made and it was reported that police statements were only taken from the family after public outcry and the intervention by Deputy Police Minister Maggie Sotyu.

Although both cases obtained much media attention, some public opinion suggested that the news media’s in-depth coverage of Mafevuka’s case was propelled by the attention on Blöchliger’s case. The media’s gaze upon Franziska Blöchliger and Sinxolo Mafevuka provides an example of the way in which the news media have the power to shape the kinds of messages about *victims*<sup>2</sup> and *perpetrators* of violence distributed to the public. Some have argued that institutions, such as the media, are complicit in practicing patriarchy in that they forge and reproduce gendered inequalities (Hearn & Kimmel, 2007). Through the employment of a feminist poststructuralist approach, this paper aims to investigate how these gendered inequalities are reproduced in printed news media discourses of violence against women and how they intersect with the racial, classed and sexualised dimensions of *victim* and *perpetrator* identities.

I explore how printed news media discourses of men’s violence against women emerge within a South African tabloid, **The Daily Voice**, and broadsheet, **The Argus** from August 2011 to February 2013. The way in which media messages frame, form and develop representations of violence against women are examined, and in particular, the way in which identity constructions of *victims* and *perpetrators* intersect and exist within divisions of gender, race, sexuality, and class. The implications of these constructions are

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I speak more inclusively to the experiences of “black” groups, thereby referring to all people oppressed under white domination. However, I acknowledge the importance of resisting the essentialist racial categorizations imposed by the apartheid government, yet also recognise the sense of solidarity between all of those who were, and continue to be oppressed.

<sup>2</sup> From a poststructuralist standpoint, the fluidity of subjectivity is acknowledged and thus terms such as victims/survivor and perpetrators are italicised to avoid fixed representations of those who have been victimised, or those who have perpetrated violence against women.

reflected upon, in their capacity to shape public discourse on violence against women, and to endorse or challenge oppressive ideas linked to *victims* and *perpetrators*.

## **Media representations of violence against women: Through intersections of race, class and gender**

Research on news media representations of violence against women have primarily adopted feminist approaches to the gendered analysis of *survivors* and *perpetrators* of this violence, with little focus upon how identity constructions of femininities and masculinities intersect with other differences and social oppressions (Connell et al, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn & Kimmel, 2007). Some key local studies have adopted an intersectional approach to investigating constructions of *survivors* and *perpetrators* of violence in the media. In a recent South African study on constructions of violence against women in a tabloid, Lewis and Orderson (2012) found that poor black women victims are stigmatised in relation to discourses that frame victims in a negative light – a sentiment echoed in US studies by hooks (1992) and Meyers (2004). Furthermore, Gibbs and Jobson (2011) found that news coverage of narratives of masculinity and AIDS in the **Daily Sun**<sup>3</sup> reinforced racist and classist stereotypes that over-represent working-class and black people (particularly men) as criminals, yet underrepresent them as victims. As hooks (1992: 2) argued, white male supremacist ideologies are grounded in the media, which manufacture “specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people”. South African media and intersectionality studies on constructions of masculinities, femininities and violence against women in the news media have thus far offered crucial insight into the interplay of gender and racialised dynamics of *survivors* and *perpetrators*. However, this research remains a growing body of work that requires expansion particularly in media research on gender-based violence against women. I therefore adopt an intersectional approach to examining discourses of *victims*, *perpetrators* and violence against women in the printed news media. I argue that the gender of *survivors* and *perpetrators* intersects and exists within divisions of race, heterosexuality, class and other social differences. Therefore, a single social context may constitute a diversity of discourses of *victims* and *perpetrators* (Connell et al, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn & Kimmel, 2007; Vetten & Ratele, 2013).

Importantly, the mass media need to be viewed as an outcome of the ongoing changes in the social, political and cultural climate of the context in which it emerges. During the apartheid period of oppressive laws and policies, subjects relating to sexuality and violence against women were stringently censored (Gqola, 2004; Lewis & Orderson, 2012). These subjects included the prohibition of interracial sex on account of the

---

<sup>3</sup> A tabloid newspaper that holds the largest readership in South Africa.

colonial discourses that *othered* black sexuality (Posel, 2004). From the mid-1990s, issues of sexuality and sex entered the public arena, however, the very imagery of sex, gender and sexuality tended to stereotype particular groups (Posel, 2004; Morna & Ndlovu, 2007; Sanger, 2008). The stories and needs of women (especially rural and poor women) are still marginalised and at times, distorted in public communication (Lewis & Orderson, 2012). In addition, the bodily integrity of women – some more than others – are compromised in the post-apartheid milieu despite the struggle for freedom and gender equality (Sanger, 2008). More investigation is therefore warranted into the social and cultural context in which the South African news media are positioned and the discourses of violence against women emanating from this political space.

The public who first encounter a crisis often do so by way of the news media, or through others who are imparting this information in the news (Joffe, 1998). Therefore, the news media become an important distributor of information that frame public thinking on a matter. This paper's investigation into the printed news media is therefore particularly vital in news media sources that have greater reach and accessibility for the wider public as they provide insight into dominant discourses of violence against women circulating in society. At the time of the commencement of this research (August 2011), statistics offered by the South African Audience Research Foundation (SAARF) All Media and Products Survey (AMPS) revealed that, from January 2011 to December 2012, **Daily Voice**<sup>4</sup> and the **Cape Argus**<sup>5</sup> (combined with the **Weekend Argus**) drew the two largest readerships of daily newspapers in the Western Cape region. It was calculated that during 2011 alone, the **Daily Voice** attracted an average of 556 000 readers, while the **Cape Argus** and **Weekend Argus** attracted an average of 287 000 and 304 000 readers, respectively. A year later, statistics calculated between June 2012 and July 2013 by SAARF AMPS, showed that the newspapers continue to lead in terms of readership popularity with an increase in average readership for the **Cape Argus** (303 000) and a slight decrease for the **Daily Voice** (528 000) and **Weekend Argus** (293 000). As newspapers demonstrating consistent leading readership statistics, I therefore focus upon discourses of violence against women in **The Argus** (a broadsheet) and the **Daily Voice** (tabloid).

## The tabloidisation of the media: A response to mainstream broadsheets

The tabloid emerged as a media format almost a decade after South Africa's democracy and this cultural phenomenon gained significant popularity and success, creating a "newspaper revolution" in South Africa (Steenveld, 2004; Wasserman, 2008: 786). The phrase *tabloidisation of the media* has encompassed this local and international trend,

---

<sup>4</sup> **Daily Voice** is a weekly, Monday-to-Friday, tabloid newspaper.

<sup>5</sup> **Cape Argus** and **Weekend Argus** are described as quality newspapers, distributed on weekdays and weekends, on a weekly basis.

indicating the significant increase in tabloid-style journalism in mainstream media (Morna & Ndlovu, 2007). Similar to the function of the British tabloid (Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002), Wasserman (2008) contended that South African tabloids have given voice to a segment of the population who find themselves on the periphery of the post-apartheid public sphere, indicating that the media can also be a space for social agency (Steenveld, 2004; Strelitz & Steenveld, 2005). Theorists have, however, expressed mixed reviews about the tabloid press in Africa, and internationally (Wasserman, 2006; Mabweazara & Strelitz, 2009; Lewis & Orderson, 2012).

Familiar criticisms offered by scholars is that this form of news has become associated with entertainment (or “infotainment”, as suggested by Steenveld, 2004: 105), vulgarity, gossip and with little political engagement (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004; Morna & Ndlovu, 2007; Wasserman, 2008). Objectivity, neutrality and so-called *truth-telling* that are assumed to be associated with journalism, are set aside by the tabloids’ over-exaggerated stories, their interest in sex and the objectification of women who are shown half-nude or skimpily clothed (Wasserman, 2008; Lewis & Orderson, 2012). South African organisations such as the professional journalist organisation (Sanef), media monitoring groups (e.g. Media Monitoring Africa, & Gender Links), and media and communication scholars have predominantly led these criticisms, arguing that the tabloid undermines the goals of the new democracy (Wasserman, 2008). More so, Lewis and Orderson (2012) added that gender justice, individuals’ bodily integrity, and respect for groups’ rights to privacy are compromised in tabloids.

Contrasting views have, however, been offered. According to Wasserman (2008), mainstream broadsheets have neglected a segment of the potential market for print media, which the tabloid press has addressed. Even with the changes in staff and editors to reflect racial “equity” post-1994 (Steenveld, 2004), mainstream broadsheet newspapers continue to favour the white and black middle-classes in their news values, and continue to report on beliefs, values and norms “from an elite perspective” (Wasserman, 2008: 788). In contrast, tabloids report on issues from the perspective of those that encounter such phenomena on a daily basis and represent the failures of the State in attending to the concerns of the disenfranchised public (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004; Wasserman, 2008). They also serve to increase accessibility by publishing in the languages of the target audience, and adopting a more conversational tone and egalitarian stance between journalists and readers (Steenveld, 2004; Strelitz & Steenveld, 2005; Morna & Ndlovu, 2007; Mabweazara & Strelitz, 2009).

Empirical studies on the tabloid media on violence against women in Southern Africa are growing, and the current study’s investigations into the printed media contribute towards this research base. In addition, the approach employed takes consideration

of the current debates levelled against South African tabloids and broadsheets and offers an analysis that is cognisant of the various forms of social power and oppression impacting on the knowledge production of these newspapers.

## **Methodology**

The feminist poststructuralist approach was adopted as a theoretical framework. Feminist poststructuralism is described by Weedon (1987: 40-41) as a “mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change”. This theory deconstructs the humanist idea of the “rational subject” and understands subjectivity and consciousness as produced through language, struggle and as a site for potential change (Davies & Gannon, 2005). The goals of feminist poststructuralism are to develop scholarship that is committed to changing oppressive gender relations, to explain the workings of power, and is concerned with disrupting oppressive knowledges (Weedon; 1987; Gavey, 1989). Feminist poststructuralism is well-suited to this paper’s aims to examine theoretical concerns about social power, how power is exercised, and how social relations of gender, class and race might be transformed.

Within this paradigm of feminist poststructuralism, the analysis of data is furthermore inspired by intersectional theory. Intersectionality refers to the core theoretical tenet put forward by second wave black feminists who posit that social identities and oppressions derived from sexuality, ethnicity, gender, class, race, disability and so forth, intersect and are “interdependent and mutually constitutive” (Bowleg, 2008: 312; Crenshaw, 1994; Collins, 2000). The notion of intersectionality has been at the core of theorising in critical race studies, black studies, and postcolonial studies (Morrell & Swart, 2005; Ratele, 2013). This area of work on masculinities, femininities and intersectionality is of particular relevance in South Africa in which race has been a central marker of difference and deprivation (Moolman, 2013; Vetten & Ratele, 2013). In addition, an intersectional approach allows for practices of exclusion and inclusion to emerge more clearly in the investigation of discourses of violence against women in the printed news media.

### *Data collection*

The collection of media samples was restricted to the examination of printed forms of news media, which drew the largest readerships across the Western Cape. The time-frame for data collection began in August 2011 and ended in February 2013, which was largely dependent upon the time-frame for the larger project of which it formed part. In addition, the intention was to capture representative data over a lengthy time period and to assess news reports on violence against women beyond campaigns and national events. Earlier research by Gibbs and Jobson (2011) aimed to identify the

narratives of masculinity and AIDS in the **Daily Sun**. The authors conducted an intensive analysis over a period of five days surrounding the World AIDS Day campaign (Gibbs & Jobson, 2011). While such an intensive analysis produced valuable findings in the above study, this paper examines newspaper reports on violence against women during and outside campaigns. The kind of messages that are forged as well as how these messages are selected and crafted to serve particular interests are also explored.

A systematic search was employed that included articles related to all forms of men's violence against women (i.e., sexual, physical, verbal, psychological/emotional, financial), including cases of heterosexual intimate partner abuse and femicide. News reports that focused upon interpersonal violence (i.e., violence between men, violence between women) and cases of domestic violence which involved members of a household or family were eliminated as the focus of the study was on violence against women perpetrated by men. In addition, op-eds were excluded from the sample as an investigation of public opinion might have shifted from the focus on discourses of violence against women in news reports. An electronic search was conducted with the help of the Sabinet Reference (SA Media division) and the **Daily Voice** databases that made all newspaper editions available during the period of interest. A total of 47 **Argus articles** (a combination of the **Cape** and **Weekend Argus** reports) and 66 **Daily Voice** articles were gathered from the databases, after using particular search parameters. The following keywords were employed for this search: *violence, abuse, woman/women, man/men, partner, kill, and murder.*

#### *Data analysis*

Stenner's (1993) thematic decomposition analysis was employed to assist with the study of discourses in the newspaper data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 8) this approach is a specific form of "thematic discourse analysis which identifies patterns (themes, stories) within data, and theorises language as constitutive of meaning and meaning as social". Thematic decomposition draws upon a poststructuralist approach; one that places more emphasis upon language, power, subjectivity and the co-construction of meaning. This form of analysis has been employed in both discourse (Singer & Hunter, 1999; Taylor & Ussher, 2001) and narrative (Ussher & Mooney-Somers, 2000) inquiry studies.

My analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure for conducting thematic analysis, and Stenner's (1993) piece on thematic decomposition analysis. After the transcription, the coding process began and was followed by the identification and refinement of themes. The themes were further analysed from a poststructuralist stance, by acknowledging the centrality of language, subject positions, knowledge and power in shaping discursive practices, tensions and

complexities (Stenner, 1993). In its attention to power, the analysis also allows for a reading into the intersections of class, race, gender, heterosexuality, and other axes of power and inequality.

## **Respectability and reputation: An analysis and discussion**

The analysis of the data unpacks the discourses of *perpetrators* and *victims* of violence against women that were found to either endorse or challenge gendered and racial stereotypes. A discourse of respectability involved constructions of a worthy victim of violence, whilst pathologising and excluding black femininities that are thought to stray from respectability. Men's identities as perpetrators of violence against women were rarely the focal point of news reports. Rather, reputable masculine performances that may gain men respect from other men and women became central to news report narratives.

In terms of overall reportage, fewer reports on violence against women that were published in the **Cape Argus** in comparison to the **Daily Voice** were identified. These newspapers aim to draw different readerships; for example, **The Argus** describes itself as a “quality” newspaper, “unashamedly written for Cape Town’s broader middle to upper class”, while the **Daily Voice** tabloid is devoted to providing “outrageous, thrilling, and entertaining” reading for working class people, alongside the aim to capture everyday life of the Cape community. However, by making coverage on violence against women primarily available to readers of the **Daily Voice**, it may then imply that this violence predominantly concerns their working-class audience. In contrast, the silencing of news reports on violence against women in **The Argus** may insinuate that violence is not a problem for their primary readership of a middle-class audience. I argue that this unequal distribution of messages reinforces racialised, gendered and classed ideologies in the news media when describing *victims*, *survivors* and *perpetrators* of men's violence against women. Two discourses illustrate these constructions of *victims* and *perpetrators*, and are explored below.

### *1. Respectable femininities and pathological black bodies*

Women victims of violence were often represented through a lens of respectability, where deviant femininities were positioned as pathological, and respectable femininities as worthy, legitimate victims of violence. Some newspaper reports had a tendency to report on female homicides with graphic descriptions of the murder scene and vivid article titles (e.g., “Killer gut mom: her breast and foetus were cut out and thrown over a wall”) as well as details about the deceased women's sex-life and drug habits:

#### *Extract 1.1*

*“In Jo-Anne's case, cops have not ruled out the possibility that her killer also raped her. A*



*condom was found on the grim scene. And she was known to operate as a sex worker to pay for her drug habit [...] Police spokesperson Colonel Tembinkosi Kinana says a resident walking to work spotted Jo-Anne's corpse lying in bushes early yesterday. She was wearing shorts, T-shirt and was barefoot, and dried blood streaked her face and hair."*

*("Anene all over again: another girl found violently murdered and raped in bush", **Daily Voice**, 13 February 2013)*

#### *Extract 1.2*

*"Plato visited Marshay's grieving family on Sunday – two days after the mom and baby's badly decomposing bodies were discovered in dense bushes near their home. Their bodies were in such a bad state of decomposition that maggots had already begun eating away their faces [...] Clumps of hair and bloody clothing were also found at the scene. [...] 'Family have admitted and confirmed she was a known drug user'"*

*("Dan: Dead mom was a druggie", **Daily Voice**, 12 April 2012)*

The above excerpts, alongside three similarly themed articles, appeared in the **Daily Voice** edition on female homicides. The writing style adopted in these news reports and headlines could be viewed as sensationalist, shocking, and particularly revealing due to the emphatic focus upon the murder scenes – a critique frequently levelled against tabloids (Wasserman, 2008; Lewis & Orderson, 2012). Although the imagery in newspapers were not included in this study's analysis, it was observed that reports about women's violent deaths were often coupled with gratuitous images of the corpse along with bold headlines, such as "CAPE RAPE HORROR" (which appeared within a series of February 2013 editions). Furthermore, the attention placed upon the murdered women and the information provided about them (i.e., "*she was known to operate as a sex worker to pay for her drug habit*"; "*bad state of decomposition that maggots had already begun eating away their faces*"; "*Dead mom was a druggie*") are largely negative and stigmatising.

The language adopted in these news reports could be interpreted through a particular discourse of femininity, the Madonna-whore binary in which women are positioned according to two extremes, either as sexually pure (the virgin) and obedient or sexually impure (the whore) (Macdonald, 1995). However, this language of "druggie" victims could also be interpreted through a lens of respectability. The notion of respectability is situated within a discourse of asexual femininity, in which women virgins are considered respectable whereas women who are constructed as promiscuous are thought to stray from respectability (Lindegaard & Henriksen, 2009). The position of unrespectable femininity is constructed through the language of victims as "druggies" and statements, such as "*she was known to operate as a sex worker to pay for her drug habit*" and "*admitted and confirmed she was a known drug user*". These statements provide very little constructive information about the crime but rather serve to position the women within

broader discourses of victim-blaming – where victims are constructed as responsible for the violence perpetrated against them. Such constructions of a feminine subjugated sexuality also serve to justify sexual violence against women (Boonzaier, 2008).

News reports also constructed certain victims as more likely to encounter violence at the hands of men. In one of the few **Cape Argus** articles on violence against women, the focus was placed upon two particular matters: 1) alcohol abuse as a significant contributing factor to the perpetration and victimisation of violence against women, and 2) coloured<sup>6</sup> women as the most vulnerable group of victims in the context of male-perpetrated violence in the Western Cape:

### *Extract 1.3*

*“Alcohol continues to play a key role in gender-based violence in terms of both perpetrators and victims, with coloured women still the most vulnerable, says respected forensic specialist and academic Professor Lorna Martin [...] They were also seeing that victims often had a high alcohol content in their bloodstream. Coloured women remained particularly vulnerable, as previous findings had shown.”*

*(“Alcohol key factor in gender violence”, **Cape Argus**, 27 October 2011)*

The article above – which provides a one-dimensional explanation on coloured women’s vulnerability to violence – situates *victims* within a discourse that pathologises and positions their very racial identity as a risk factor for violence and alcohol abuse. Research has focused on the disinhibiting effect of alcohol abuse and the implications it has for the perpetration of violence (O’Neill, 1998; Sawyer-Kurian et al, 2009). However, given the low frequency with which the **Argus** publishes reports on violence against women, linear messages distributed to readers result in reproducing rather than deconstructing myths about violence against women. Although intersectional feminists have pointed to the matrices of domination that black women face in their experiences of intimate partner violence (Crenshaw, 1994), it is important to caution against perpetuating myths that violence is only a problem for particular racial or classed groups (Bendall, 2010). As Berns (1999: 87) noted, articles which simplify domestic violence appear “very clear” because of the narrow focus expected from authors, however, a complex problem such as domestic violence deserves a less limited approach. Furthermore, by reporting only on violence against women in cases where working-class black women are largely the victims – particularly for an audience of middle class readers – reinforces the misconception that this violence is predominantly a problem for the working-class.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Coloured” is a racial term created during Apartheid that referred to people of mixed race origin and grouped particular South African citizens according to their skin “colour” (Hendricks, 2001). Since the abolition of Apartheid, this term is still in use; however, it is predominantly conceived of as a social construction that serves particular political purposes.

Throughout history, and still today, colonial discourse serves to *other* black women's bodies, which positions them as deviant and inferior to "pure" white bodies (Lewis, 2011: 17; Crenshaw, 1994). The focus on black bodies in the context of a representation of respectability has further implications for victim subject positions. Lindegaard and Henriksen (2009), for example, contend that black women have been disparaged for lacking respectability; yet, white South African women have been represented as naturally inhabiting respectability. For the sake of being regarded as respectable and moral, black women are compelled into refashioning their behaviours in order to meet a white "standard" of respectability (Lindegaard & Henriksen, 2009). In many ways, the notion of respectability serves to reproduce colonial discourses of black deviance (see Hendricks, 2001; Lewis, 2011).

There were instances, however, where black survivors of violence were not represented as pathological but instead constructed as respectable. As Gilchrist (2010) noted, binaries of pure/impure or good/bad are mutually dependent upon one another. The signifier "whore" only generates its meaning when its difference is highlighted amongst other signifiers of femininity such as "virgin" or "mother" (Weedon, 1987). Therefore, for a pathological victim to exist, there must simultaneously be a respectable victim against which the pathological victim can be measured. In the current data, I found that survivors' physical attractiveness represented a signifier of respectability:

*Extract 1.4*

*"This pretty woman's face was set alight by two suspected gangsters because she would not have sex with them [...] 'It is heartbreaking that such a pretty girl now has to look like this:'"*

("Human Torch: girl set alight for refusing to have sex", **Daily Voice**, 7 June 2012)

*Extract 1.5*

*"This is the plush Cape Town guest house where the notorious Facebook killer lured, raped and murdered a beautiful young model [...] The pretty model from Honeydew in Gauteng had been raped before being murdered."*

("Horror hotel", **Daily Voice**, 30 September 2011)

*Extract 1.6*

*"Police are on the hunt for two pigs who tossed acid into the face of a pretty young woman."*

("Acid Attack", **Daily Voice**, 2 September 2011)

**Daily Voice** journalists were found to construct and name women survivors of violence as “pretty”. In reminding the readers of the physical attractiveness of these women, it allowed for them to be seen as more “valuable” and more respectable, and for the crime to be considered more tragic than in the case of a non-“pretty” woman. The language employed in the extracts above (e.g., “plush”, “young model”, “young woman”, “pretty girl”) further indicate that the intersections of class, youth and physical attractiveness work to ensure respectability. It also serves to position the young women within broader cultural discourses that construct them as “worthy” and “legitimate”, rather than pathological victims of violence.

Stereotypical naming allows, not only that the other takes on negative characteristics but it also naturalises the discourse (Höijer, 2011). Gekoski et al (2012) and Lloyd and Ramon (2016) found that in their analysis of tabloids and broadsheets in the United Kingdom the notion of the “ideal” versus “undeserving” victim became apparent. Characteristics of the “ideal” victim include being young, female, white, middle-class, respectable and physically attractive (Gekoski et al, 2012) – a finding echoed in the current study.

Journalists tend to write in ways that ensure that their articles are well-received and relatable to an audience (Berns, 1999). In doing so, it is necessary that the audience is able to relate to the *victim*, and to see the *victim* as “people like us” (Washer & Joffe, 2006: 2151). In representing female survivors as “pretty” and physically attractive, I contend that emotions of compassion and empathy are likely to be triggered amongst readers and consequently, constructions of worthy *victims* are reinforced. In addition, much of this study’s data referenced constructions of *victims*, yet few articles gave voice to *perpetrator* accountability. Discourses of masculinities and perpetrators are explored further below.

## *2. Reputable masculinities and silenced perpetrators*

Much of the talk about perpetrators of violence against women tended to foreground men’s reputability; yet, a language of perpetrator accountability was often silenced:

### *Extract 2.1*

*“She argued that more weight should have been placed on the fact that Mangena was a 44-year-old first offender, grew up poor, had six children, was ordained as a priest in the Catholic church in 1978, had been a member of the ANC’s armed wing Umkonto weSizwe since 1989 and was involved in a stormy relationship with Vuso (late wife).”*

*(“Killer begs reprieve from life sentence: ex VIP cop ‘not inherently violent’”, **Cape Argus**, 26 January 2012)*

### Extract 2.2

*“An ANC Member of Parliament is accused of klapping<sup>7</sup> a woman in a road rage incident. [...] The Herald newspaper reported on Tuesday that Litho Suka hit Nolusindiso Mazantsi, 35, after accusing her of reversing into his car at a car wash in KwaZakhele last week. Suka says: ‘She [Mazantsi] was swearing at me... I lost the plot and klapped her [Mazantsi].’”*

(“MP: I hit vrou at car wash”, **Daily Voice**, 28 September 2011)

The extracts above provide illustrations of how men who perpetrate violence against women are represented through more widely acceptable forms of reputable masculine subjectivities. In Extract 2.1, subtle rhetorical devices are drawn upon in an attempt to position the perpetrator as an *object* and a victim of his circumstances (i.e. “grew up poor”, “involved in a stormy relationship”), allowing for the lines between *victim* and *perpetrator* to become blurred. Intersections of class and race work to construct a version of a reputable Black masculinity, depicting Mangena as a family man, a religious man, and a struggle hero, inviting readers to empathise with him. These subject positions align Mangena with respectable subjectivities that distance him from his shamed perpetrator identity.

In Extract 2.2, the slapstick language (i.e., “klapping a woman”) is used to position the man’s violence in a humorous light, and the subject position of the “cheeky” woman provoking the man makes the violence appear permissible, and even justified.

The notion of reputation is closely aligned with social constructions of hegemonic masculinity. The accomplishment of this thriving masculinity involves practices of domination over women and other men, patriarchal privilege, heterosexuality, wealth, education, the performance of violence and aggression, toughness, the avoidance of vulnerability and weakness, and is defined in opposition to femininity as if the categories of “man” and “woman” are mutually exclusive (Connell, 1987). Stereotypical understandings of perpetrators as “justified” therefore feed into hegemonic constructions of masculinity that build reputation and status. However, these masculine subject positions also serve to minimise men’s violence.

This data suggests, however, that there are also certain conditions under which the violence perpetrated by men are considered shameful. For example, in Extract 2.2, Mangena attempts to distance himself from the potentially undesirable notion of violence as an “inborn, fixed quality”; as illustrated in the title of the article, “ex VIP cop ‘not inherently violent’”. This “notorious” violence could be explained through

---

<sup>7</sup> An Afrikaans term for ‘slapping’.

pathological influences such as “abnormal personality traits, faulty marital systems, abusive families of origin” (O’Neill, 1998: 460). Furthermore, in Extract 1.5 the “Facebook killer” is positioned as a deviant masculinity, one that “lures” and “stalks” women, which feeds into broader public discourse on pathological perpetrators of sexual violence.

The data suggest that disreputable perpetrator subjectivities are more often drawn upon in the context of sexual violence cases against women and femicide, rather than in cases of heterosexual intimate partner violence. Scholars have shown that particular kinds of violence are considered more newsworthy than others (Greer, 2003; Dowler, 2004; Jewkes, 2004). For example, perpetrators of sexual violence – unknown to the victim – receive increased sensational media attention (Jewkes, 2004). Furthermore, Buthelezi (2007) found that sensationalist reporting on rape in the **Isolezwe** and **Ilanga** newspapers (circulated in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal) involved focusing on cases of young girls who were victims of rape by older men. Through the media’s constructions of “hierarchies” of violence against women, certain kinds of perpetrator subjectivities are deemed more notorious – and therefore, more newsworthy – than others.

In the above extracts and more broadly in the media data reviewed for this study, black men were largely the focus of reports on perpetrators of violence against women, while only one case related to the perpetration of violence by a white man was noted. This silencing of white men’s violence in this study’s data possibly feeds into wider stigmatising discourses that stereotype black men as violent and dangerous (Morrell & Swart, 2005; Billings, 2011), and appear to be reproduced by news reports. In 2013, one of the high-profile cases that entered the South African media and news arena was the shooting of Reeva Steenkamp by her boyfriend, Oscar Pistorius. One of the **Daily Voice** news reports immediately following the event focused upon Pistorius’ intimate relationships with women:

#### *Extract 2.3*

*“OLYMPIC superstar Oscar Pistorius has had a string of love affairs with local and international beauties that have ended in heartache. And the man known around the world as the Blade Runner could also be dubbed the Heart Breaker [...] In an interview with a Joburg newspaper Samantha claimed Oscar was a ladies’ man. At the time she was quoted as saying: ‘Oscar has such a way with women.’”*

*(“Oscar plays the track and field: Olympian has dated a string of sexy women”, **The Daily Voice**, 15 February 2013)*

The above article provides a narrative on Pistorius’ romantic relationships, reputedly positioning him as a charming, “ladies’ man” (i.e., “Oscar has such a way with women”, “Olympian has dated a string of sexy women”). Surrounding this article were four

individual pictures of Pistorius with his previous romantic partners and two larger graphics of Steenkamp copied from the men's lifestyle magazine **FHM**, evidencing Pistorius' intimate quests and reinforcing perceptions of Pistorius as a "stud". In this way, male sexuality is more permissively represented through the "male sexual drive" discourse where men are admired for taking multiple partners (Hollway, 1989). The news report above achieved a way of representing Pistorius through a more widely endorsed form of hegemonic masculinity, rather than through his subjectivity as perpetrator – one that is unfavourable to the broader public.

The distinction between heterosexual men and women's respectable performances becomes prominent in Extract 2.3, especially when comparing gendered representations of Pistorius and Steenkamp. Pistorius is positioned reputedly as the "heart breaker" and "hunk" whilst Steenkamp is constructed through sexualised images that distance her from the pure, asexual representation of respectability. Respectability theorists have largely noted these distinctions in constructions of men and women's gendered performances and bodies. For example, research on male sexuality has reported on the pressures experienced by heterosexual men to achieve sexual prowess and to build a reputation in their youth, which can be practiced by being "great studs, drinkers, fighters and gamblers" (McDowell, 2002: 78; Wilson, 1969; Shefer & Strebels, 2012). In addition, Sanger (2009: 140) illustrated how ideal black and white heterosexual masculinities are constructed in men's magazines in South Africa, in terms of "(hetero)sexual prowess, abilities and successful careers". In contrast, Sanger (2008) showed how women's bodies are sexualised in men and women's magazines, which is similar to the sexualised constructions of *victims* in this study's data. Women *victims'* respectability is therefore measured differently to men *perpetrators* in these news reports. Some men perpetrators are more likely to be positioned within respectable subjectivities, thereby distancing them from their "spoiled" perpetrator identities.

This lack of perpetrator accountability language has implications for the gendered underpinnings of men's perpetration of violence against women. Very few reports in both newspapers in this study's sample point to power and control over women, patriarchy, and misogyny as prominent explanations for men's violence against women. Lewis and Orderson (2012) argued that the dominant discourses of violence against women – and the way in which they emerge in the media – are a reflection of the laws that control this institution. In order for newspapers to sell, reporters and editors avoid covering topics that are perceived as having little political power (Lewis & Orderson, 2012). In excluding a focus upon the gendered aspect of violence against women, the complex issues constituting violence against women are simultaneously silenced (Buiten & Salo, 2007). The implications of these messages are discussed below.

## Conclusions

The intersectional approach employed in this paper offered insight into the constructions of *victims* and *perpetrators* of violence against women and how they emerge within discourses of respectability and reputation. Notions of respectability inflict restraints on women's behaviours, and more importantly, make women responsible for their own victimisation. Furthermore, pathologising representations that blame victims who stray from respectability were largely targeted at marginalised black women who generally find themselves outside the realm of a discourse of respectability. Perpetrators of violence against women were represented predominantly through reputable subjectivities, sidestepping their identities as perpetrators and limiting a language of accountability. Disreputable perpetrators were found to emerge predominantly in the context of reports on sexual violence against women and femicide, thereby reproducing the "stranger-danger" public discourse and reinforcing the idea of deviant masculinities. Furthermore, dominant norms of masculine and feminine heterosexuality emerged in news reports, showing how respectability is measured differently for women victims – who are stigmatised for their engagement in sex – whilst men perpetrators were admired for having multiple partners, a finding similarly noted by Shefer and Strebel (2012).

This paper offers a theoretical contribution to literature by going beyond a gendered analysis of representations of violence against women towards unravelling the complex web of social power and oppression achieved through intersectional analyses. An intersectional approach to understanding violence against women allows that hegemonic stereotypes that frame public thinking on the matter are called into question and deconstructed. This study, however, also reveals that newspaper conventions tend to perpetuate stereotypical constructions of *victims* and *perpetrators* of violence that oversimplify the issue and pathologise certain groups. As Bendall (2010: 100) noted "There are a number of mistaken ideas about [violence against women], such as that only poor women get beaten, or that battered women ask for it", and these stereotypes appear to be prevalent within the printed news media reviewed here, with a considerable number surfacing within the **Daily Voice**. Such representations have implications for how the wider public, who access these newspapers, respond to violence against women. Future research might tap into lay representations of news reports on violence against women to gauge reader interpretations of media discourses. In addition, a continuation of intersectional work on violence against women is necessary to fully grapple with the complexities of the problem, and to expand the analysis of news media to other local sources and television.

The printed news media have the power to shape public thought, and with this, comes great responsibility to ensure that these dominant messages of violence



against women are challenged rather than perpetuated. There is opportunity to offer counter-discourses that serve to dismantle, deconstruct and shift forms of public thinking that silence survivors and protect perpetrators. In the **Argus**, the op-eds (which were not included in this study's sample) provided a space and voice for the public to critically engage with counter-narratives of gender and violence against women. It is important that these spaces of resistance are taken up particularly in news sources that have a wider public reach, and where counter-discourses will have the impact of reproducing alternate forms of knowledge and infiltrating public thinking on violence against women.

## References

- Abrahams, N, Mathews, S, Martin, L J, Lombard, C & Jewkes, R (2013) Intimate partner femicide in South Africa in 1999 and 2009. **PLOS Medicine**, **10(4)**, e1001412.
- Bendall, C (2010) The domestic violence epidemic in South Africa: Legal and practical remedies. **Women's Studies**, **39**, 100-118. DOI: 10.1080/00497870903459275
- Berns, N (1999) "MY PROBLEM AND HOW I SOLVED IT": Domestic violence in women's magazines. **The Sociological Quarterly**, **40(1)**, 85-108.
- Billings, G L (2011) Boyz to men? Teaching to restore black boys' childhood. **Race Ethnicity and Education**, **14(1)**, 7-15. DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2011.531977
- Boonzaier, F (2008) "If the man says you must sit, then you must sit": The relational construction of woman abuse: Gender subjectivity and violence. **Feminism and Psychology**, **18**, 183-206.
- Bowleg, L (2008) When Black+ lesbian+ woman≠ Black lesbian woman: The methodological challenges of qualitative and quantitative intersectionality research. **Sex roles**, **59(5-6)**, 312-325.
- Braun, V & Clarke, V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. **Research in Psychology**, **3(2)**, 77-101.
- Buiten, D, & Salo, E (2007) Silences stifling transformation: Misogyny and gender-based violence in the media. **Agenda**, **21(71)**, 115-121.

Collins, P H (2000) **Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment**. New York: Routledge (1990).

Connell, R W (1987) **Gender and power: Society, the person, and sexual politics**. Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press.

Connell, R W, Hearn, J & Kimmel, M S (2005) Introduction, in Kimmel, M S, Hearn J & Connell, R W (eds) (2005) **Handbook of studies on men and masculinities**. Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Publications.

Crenshaw, K (1994) Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color, in Fineman, M A & Mykitiuk, R (eds) (1994) **The public nature of private violence**. New York: Routledge.

Davies, B & Gannon, S (2005) Feminism/poststructuralism, in Somekh, B & Lewin, C (eds) (2005) **Research methods in the social sciences**. London: Sage Publications.

Gavey, N (1989) Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis: Contributions to feminist psychology. **Psychology of Women Quarterly**, **13**, 459-475.

Gekoski, A, Gray, J J & Adler, J R (2012) What makes a homicide newsworthy? UK national tabloid newspaper journalists tell all. **British Journal of Criminology**, **52**, 1212-1232.

Gibbs, A & Jobson, G (2011) Narratives of masculinity in the *Daily Sun*: Implications of HIV risk and prevention. **South African Journal of Psychology**, **41(2)**, 173-186.

Gilchrist, K (2010) "Newsworthy" victims? Exploring differences in Canadian local press coverage of missing/murdered Aboriginal and White women. **Feminist media studies**, **10(4)**, 373-390. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2010.514110

Gqola, P (2004) Where have all the rainbows gone? Memory. **Rhodes Journalism Review**, **(24)**, 6-7.

Greer, C R (2003) **Sex crime and the media: Sex offending and the press in a divided society**. Portland: Willan Publishing.

Hearn, J & Kimmel, M S (2007) The sociology of men and masculinity, in Bryant, C D & Peck D L (eds) (2007) **21<sup>st</sup> Century sociology: A reference handbook (Vol. 2)**. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Hendricks, C (2001) Ominous liaisons: Tracing the interface between 'race' and sex at the Cape, in Erasmus, Z (ed) (2001) **Coloured by history, shaped by place: New perspective on coloured identities in Cape Town**. Cape Town: Kwela Books & South African History Online.

Höijer, B (2011) Social representations theory: A new theory for media research. **Nordicom Review**, **32(2)**, 3-16.

Hollway, W (1989) **Subjectivity and method in psychology: Gender, meaning and science**. London: Sage Publications.

hooks, b (1992) **Black looks: Race and representation**. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Jewkes, Y (2004) **Media and crime**. London: Sage Publications.

Joffe, H (1998) Social representations and the AIDS field. **PINS (Psychology in society)**, **24**, 21-39.

Joffe, H & Haarhoff, G (2002) Representations of far-flung illnesses: The case of Ebola in Britain. **Social Science & Medicine**, **54(6)**, 955-969.

Lewis, D (2011) Representing African sexualities. **African sexualities: A reader**, 119-216.

Lewis, D & Orderson, C (2012) Digital activism and violence against women: Changing landscapes of feminist activism in Southern Africa [Think piece]. [www.gender-IS-citizenship.net](http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net)

Lindgaard, M R & Henriksen, A (2009) Sexually active virgins: Negotiating adolescent femininity, colour and safety in Cape Town, in Donnan, H & Magowan, F (eds) **Transgressive sex: Subversion and control in erotic encounters**. New York: Berghahn Books.

Lloyd, M & Ramon, S (2016) Smoke and mirrors: UK newspaper representations of intimate partner domestic violence. **Violence Against Women**. DOI: 10.1177/1077801216634468

Mathews, S, Jewkes, R & Abrahams, N (2014) "So now I'm the man": Intimate partner femicide and its interconnections with expressions of masculinities in South Africa. **British Journal of Criminology**. DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azu076

Mabweazara, H M & Strelitz, L N (2009) Investigating the popularity of the Zimbabwean tabloid newspaper uMthunywa: A reception study of Bulawayo readers. **Ecquid Novi, 30(2)**, 113-133.

Macdonald, M (1995) **Representing women: Myths of femininity in the popular media**. London: Edward Arnold.

McDowell, L (2002) Masculine discourses and dissonances: Strutting 'lads', protest masculinity, and domestic respectability. **Environment and planning D: Society and Space, 20**, 97-119. DOI: 10.1068/d43j

Messerschmidt, J W (2005) Men, masculinities, and crime, in Kimmel, M S, Hearn, J & Connell, R W (eds) (2005) **Handbook of studies on men & masculinities**. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Meyers, M (2004) African American women and violence: Gender, race, and class in the news. **Critical Studies in Media Communication, 21(2)**, 95-118. DOI: 10.1080/07393180410001688029

Moolman, B (2013) Rethinking "masculinities in transition" in South Africa considering the "intersectionality" of race, class, and sexuality with gender. **African Identities, 11(1)**, 93-105.

Morna, C L & Ndlovu, S (2007) **Mirror on the media: Gender and advertising in Southern Africa**. Johannesburg: Gender Links.

Morrell, R & Swart, S (2005) Men in the third world: Postcolonial perspectives on masculinity, in Kimmel M S, Hearn, J & Connell, R W (eds) (2005) **Handbook of studies on men & masculinities**. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

O'Neill, D (1998) A post-structuralist review of the theoretical literature surrounding wife abuse. **Violence Against Women, 4**, 457-491.

Örnebring, H & Jönsson, A M (2004) Tabloid journalism and the public sphere: A historical perspective on tabloid journalism. **Journalism Studies, 5(3)**, 283-295.

Posel, D (2004) 'Getting the nation talking about sex': Reflections on the discursive constitution of sexuality in South Africa since 1994. **Agenda, 18(62)**, 53-63.

Ratele, K (2013) Subordinate black South African men without fear. **Cahiers d'Études africaines, LIII (1-2)**, 247-268.

Sanger, N (2008) 'There's got to be a man in there': Reading intersections between gender, race and sexuality in South African magazines. **African Identities, 6(3)**, 275-291. DOI: 10.1080/14725840802223598

Sanger, N (2009) New women, old messages? Constructions of femininities, race and hypersexualised bodies in selected South African magazines, 2003–2006. **Social Dynamics, 35(1)**, 137-148. DOI: 10.1080/02533950802667301

Sawyer-Kurian, K M, Wechsberg, W M & Luseno, W K (2009) Exploring the differences and similarities between black/african and coloured men regarding violence against women, substance abuse, and HIV risks in Cape Town, South Africa. **Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 10**, 13-29.

Shefer, T & Strebel A (2012) Deconstructing the 'sugar daddy': A critical review of the constructions of men in intergenerational sexual relationships in South Africa. **Agenda, 26(4)**, 57-63. DOI: 10.1080/10130950.2012.760837

Singer, D & Hunter, M (1999) The experience of premature menopause: A thematic discourse analysis. **Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology, 17(1)**, 63-81.

Steenveld, L (2004) Transforming the media: A cultural approach. **Critical Arts, 18(1)**, 92-115.

Stenner, P (1993) Discoursing jealousy, in Burman, E & Parker, I (eds) (1993) **Discourse analytic research: Repertoires and readings of texts in action**. London: Routledge.

Strelitz, L & Steenveld, L (2005) You can't be serious: It's all about Africa. **Rhodes Journalism Review, (25)**, 35-36.

Taylor, G W & Ussher, J M (2001) Making sense of S&M: A discourse analytic account. **Sexualities, 4(3)**, 293-314.

Ussher, J M & Mooney-Somers, J (2000) Negotiating desire and sexual subjectivity: Narratives of young lesbian avengers. **Sexualities, 3(2)**, 183-200. DOI: 10.1177/136346000003002005

Vetten, L & Ratele, K (2013) Men and violence. **Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity, 27(1)**, 4-11.

Washer, P & Joffe, H (2006) The “hospital superbug”: Social representations of MRSA. **Social Science & Medicine, 63(8)**, 2141-2152. DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2006.05.018

Wasserman, H (2008) Attack of the killer newspapers! The “tabloid revolution” in South Africa and the future of newspapers. **Journalism Studies, 9(5)**, 786-797.

Weedon, C (1987) **Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory**. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wilson, P J (1969) Reputation and respectability: A suggestion for Caribbean ethnology. **Man, 4(1)**, 70-84.