

A Typology of Victim Characterization in Television Crime Dramas

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The purpose of this paper is to assess the nature of female victim blame in crime dramas. We focus specifically on how female victims of interpersonal violence, rape/sexual assault, and stalking are characterized in the 2003-2004 season of *Crime Scene Investigation*, *Law & Order*, *Law & Order-Special Victims Unit*, and *Without a Trace*. Using a content analysis, we examine statements made about victims and offenders and create a typology representing the characterization of female victims in relation to the characterization of offenders. We find that victim blame does not occur in an overt, direct manner. Rather, it occurs covertly through the relationship between victims and offenders. When offenders are characterized more positively, victims are portrayed negatively and as having some responsibility for their victimization.

Keywords: Victim Blame, Fictional Crime Drama, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Fictional crime dramas have been popular with the American public for decades. Approximately one-third of prime-time television programming since the 1980s has been devoted to crime-related shows (Estep & MacDonald, 1983). As reported by Rhineberger-Dunn, Rader, and Williams (2008), the three major networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC) alone offer a total of 19 crime dramas during the prime-time hours of 7:00pm to 10:00pm Central Daylight Time

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Monday through Sunday. This of course does not include programs appearing on cable networks or those appearing in syndication.

As most citizens have very little experience with crime directly, the mere presence of 19 viewable crime shows on three networks in one week provides the opportunity of cultivation, where people's primary source of knowledge on victims and offenders come from watching them on television (Bailey & Hale, 1998; Barak, 1995; Danner & Carmody, 2001; Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Potter & Kappeler, 1996; Sacco, 1992). Unfortunately, much of the crime-related knowledge gleaned from the media is inaccurate (for examples see Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Cavender & Mulcahy, 1998; Lichter & Lichter, 1983; Oliver & Armstrong, 1998; Pandiani, 1978), but may nonetheless influence citizens, regardless of its accuracy, such as by significantly impacting their fear of crime (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006; Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Felson, 1996; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1978; Goidel, Freeman, & Procopio, 2006; Heath & Petraitis, 1987; Reep & Dambrot, 1989; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). As Rhineberger-Dunn et al. (2008) report, some of the fictional crime drama literature supports the existence of a relationship between viewing crime dramas and attitudes toward crime, while others find no such relationship (Chadee & Ditton, 2005; Dowler, 2003; Eschholz, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2003; Holbrook & Hill, 2005; Oliver & Armstrong, 1995). Specifically, Mopas (2007) argues there is a relationship between viewing crime dramas and attitudes towards crime, finding that the depiction of forensic science techniques in NBC's *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)* is tangibly influencing the criminal justice system.

...by using 'CSI watching' as a point of reference for jury selection and trial preparation, lawyers are transporting the images of forensics into the courtroom and transforming the *CSI* effect into a legal reality. Consequently, the artificial distinction and separation between *CSI* 'on the screen' versus *CSI* 'in the courtroom' becomes heavily blurred. (Mopas, 2007, p. 114)

Therefore, our attitudes and behaviors may be influenced by the images of crime, victims, offenders and the criminal justice system presented to us in fictional crime dramas.

Further, and specific to our current study, these images may enhance viewers' understanding of victimization more generally by providing information about their likelihood of victimization, ways to prevent victimization, and victim culpability. As such, it is necessary to further understand the portrayal of victims and offenders in television fictional crime dramas.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the personal characterization of female victims in relationship to the characterization of their offenders in four fictional crime dramas: *Law & Order*, *Law & Order-Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)*, and *Without a Trace*. We focus specifically on analyzing the treatment of female victims of rape and sexual assault, intimate partner abuse/family violence, stalking, and sexual harassment in the 2003-2004 season of each of these four dramas and create a typology for understanding how crime dramas characterize female victims in relation to their offenders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A narrow body of literature exists analyzing various aspects of fictional crime dramas. Most of this literature consists of content analyses of current popular shows. Some studies are highly focused, such as those examining the depiction of murder (Soulliere, 2003b), the portrayal of mental illness (Gans-Boriskin, 2005), the characteristics of offenders (Pandiani, 1978), or the representation and use of forensic science (Mopas, 2007). Others have a more general purpose, analyzing the cultural meanings projected by these dramas or describing various characteristics of crime, criminals, and/or victims in fictional crime dramas (e.g., Barille, 1986; Britto, Hughes,

Saltzman and Stroh, 2007; Cavender and Deutsch, 2007; Deutsch and Cavender, 2008; Eschholz, Mallard, and Flynn, 2004; Estep and Macdonald, 1983; Pollak and Kubrin, 2007; Rhineberger-Dunn, Rader, and Williams, 2008; Soulliere, 2003a).

A handful of the aforementioned studies include a discussion of crime victims. These discussions, however, tend to focus on a more quantitative description of victims' race, gender, and age. While a few studies specifically examine or include a discussion of how fictional crime dramas portray crimes against women (e.g., Britto et al., 2007; Cavender, Bond-Maupin, & Jurik, 1999; Cuklanz and Moorti, 2006; Soulliere, 2003a), a thorough examination of the personal characterization of victims in fictional crime dramas is missing from the literature.

Media Images of Violence against Women

Previous literature focuses on the ways that victims have been constructed more generally (Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007; Holstein & Miller 1997; Kennedy & Sacco, 1998) and through the media (Berns, 2004; Best, 1999; Caringella-MacDonald, 1998). These works find that the media influences public opinion about offenders and victims, especially for those who have no direct experience with crime. Furthermore, the information public audiences receive about victims is limited and provides only one viewpoint on victims – one which often portrays victims as unlike themselves (Best, 1999; Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). This viewpoint can lead audiences to engage in victim blame where audiences view victims as somehow responsible for their victimization. This is especially the case for victims of crimes against women (Kennedy & Sacco, 1998). Some research suggests that audiences blame victims not in malice but to retain a belief that the world is just and that those who fall victim to crime are somehow to blame for their own victimization (Franiuk, Seefeldt, Cephress & Vandello, 2008).

A substantial body of literature exists on rape and rape myths in the media (for examples, see Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-Macdonald, 2002; Benedict, 1992; Brinson, 1992; Bufkin and Eschholz, 2000; Cuklanz, 1998; Franiuk et al., 2008; Grover and Soothill, 1996; Moorti, 2002; Projansky, 2001; Schwengels and Lemert, 1986). A recent print journalism study analyzed articles on the Kobe Bryant case (Franiuk et al., 2008). Franiuk et al. (2008) conclude audiences are exposed to rape myths that blame the victim, and that “exposure to rape myths reinforces people’s prototypical representations of sexual assault, making them more likely to dismiss or explain away claims of sexual assault that do not fit their narrow definitions” (p. 300). Although various articles analyze myths in various media outlets, few studies include a discussion of violence against women in fictional crime dramas, the focus of this paper (e.g., Britto et al., 2007; Cuklanz and Moorti, 1999; Soulliere, 2003a). Although this literature is sparse, we focus the remainder of this review on articles with this focus.

Soulliere (2003a, 2003b) analyzes the 1999-2000 season of *Law & Order, The Practice*, and *NYPD Blue*. Britto et al. (2007) and Cuklanz and Moorti (2006) both analyze the popular drama, *Law & Order-Special Victims Unit*, with Britto et al. (2007) examining the fifth season (2003-2004) of the drama and Cuklanz and Moorti analyzing the first five seasons. Both Britto et al. and Soulliere examine victims and offenders more generally in these crime dramas, but also include a focused discussion of violence against women. Cuklanz and Moorti’s study differs in that it does not systematically discuss the characteristics of victims and offenders. Rather, the focus is on explaining the presence of feminist ideology within the depiction of sexual assault.

Britto et al. (2007) found that the patterns associated with sexual assault in *Law & Order-Special Victims Unit* did not accurately reflect the reality of this crime. Specifically, they found that one-third of sexual assault victims were male, nearly all victims were white and were

victimized by strangers. Soulliere's (2003a) results more closely mirror reality, in that the majority of victims were female, white, under age 25, and knew their offenders, while the majority of offenders were male, white, and young. Additionally, she found that two of the eleven sexual assaults were falsely reported, and that in three of the eleven cases alcohol and/or drugs were present, but in all cases the victims had been drugged by the offenders. Both Britto et al. and Soulliere found that many of the rape victims were also murdered.

A small number of studies also cover other specific crimes against women in the media, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and stalking (Black and Allen, 2001; Bullock and Cubert, 2002; Ryan, Anastario and DaCunha, 2006; Lowney and Best, 1995; Sptizberg and Cadiz, 2002; Chancer, 1998; Finn, 2004; Kasinsky, 1998). However, to date no studies can be found on sexual harassment and stalking in fictional crime dramas and only one study includes a discussion of domestic violence. Soulliere (2003a) includes a discussion of domestic violence in her analysis of one season of *Law & Order*, *NYPD Blue*, and *The Practice*. She found that only two acts of domestic assault were portrayed outside of the 11 acts of spousal murder.

A handful of other fictional crime drama studies include either a focus on or a direct discussion of crime victims more generally. The majority of these studies find that victims are overwhelmingly portrayed as white males (Britto et al., 2007; Eschholz, et al., 2004; Estep and Macdonald, 1983). However Barrile (1986) and Soulliere (2003a) both found that the majority of victims were portrayed as female. Victims in crime fiction also tend to be older, usually over 30 years of age (Barrile, 1986; Estep and Macdonald, 1983; Soulliere, 2003a), and the vast majority are murder victims (Barrile, 1986; Eschholz et al., 2004; Soulliere, 2003a).

Clearly missing from the literature is an in-depth analysis of the characterization of female victims of these gendered offenses. We add to the existing media and crime literature by

focusing our research on the personal characterization of female victims in four fictional crime dramas: *Law & Order*, *Law & Order-Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)*, and *Without a Trace*. To understand if this portrayal contributes to victim blame, we ask one overarching research question: ‘How are female victims portrayed in popular crime dramas?’ In answer to this research question, we create a typology that illustrates the relationship between the characterization of female victims and their offenders as found in these four crime shows. The ramifications of this typology on blaming female victims for their victimization are discussed below.

METHODS

Sample

Data were gathered from the 2003-2004 season of four crime dramas: *Law & Order*, *Law & Order-Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)*, and *Without a Trace*. These four dramas, this particular season, and the included episodes were purposively chosen rather than randomly selected. *Law & Order* is “the longest-running crime series and the second-longest-running drama series in the history of television”, and touts itself as covering crimes that are “ripped from the headlines” (NBC, 2009). *Law & Order-SVU* was chosen because of its stated focus on “the elite squad of detectives who investigate sexually based crimes” (NBC.com 2007). Of the many forensics-based fictional dramas, the original *CSI* (Las Vegas) routinely ranks in the top ten of the broadcast Nielsen Ratings,² and represents the forensics-based shows currently on television. Lastly, *Without a Trace* was chosen to represent the more psychologically-based crime dramas (CBS.com 2007). We chose to use the 2003-2004 season as DVDs were available for all four shows for this particular season. Each of these four

² This assessment is based on a review of the Nielsen Ratings as reported in *USA Today* from January 2007 to August 2007.

shows has been on the air for different periods of time. The 2003-2004 season corresponds to the 14th season of *Law & Order*, the fifth season of *Law & Order-Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, the fourth season of *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)*, and the second season of *Without a Trace*.

Within the 2003-2004 season, a purposive sample of episodes was drawn for inclusion in the analysis. Each episode in this season was previewed by a trained graduate student to determine if one of the four crimes of interest was present and had a female victim (see Appendix A for definitions). Any episode that the student was unsure about was included in this screening process so that the primary researchers could make the final decision on whether or not the episode met the inclusion criteria. Of the twenty-four 2003-2004 *Law & Order* episodes, nine were screened for potential inclusion, with five final episodes (20% of the total episodes) meeting our criteria for inclusion. As for *Law & Order-SVU*, there were twenty-five episodes in the 2003-2004 season. During the screening process, thirteen episodes were identified for possible inclusion and seven episodes met our inclusion criteria (28% of the total episodes). There were twenty-three episodes in the 2003-2004 season of *CSI*, with twelve episodes screened as a potential episode for inclusion. Eight of these episodes (35% of the total episodes) met the criteria for inclusion in this study. Finally, *Without a Trace* aired twenty-four episodes in the 2003-2004 season. While nine episodes were screened for potential inclusion, seven episodes met our criteria (29% of the total episodes). In total, 27 episodes out of 96 across the four dramas (28%) had at least one female victim of one of the four crimes of interest.

We chose to limit our analysis to female victims of four specific crimes: rape and sexual assault, intimate partner abuse/family violence, stalking, and sexual harassment. This deliberate selection rests on two assumptions. First, that victimization and victim blame is gendered. The extant literature indicates that women experience victim blame for intimate crimes that are

predominately committed by loved ones and acquaintances and where the offender is generally male with a female victim (Franuik et al., 2008). Second, the expressive nature of these crimes differs significantly from the more instrumental nature of property crimes and random assaults, where the relationship between victims and offenders is less intimate (Belknap, 2007).

All female victims of the four crimes of interest were included, even if they were not the primary victim on which the episode revolved. The primary unit of analysis was the crime victim. There were 38 total individual victims and 42 total individual offenders. However, as four victims were victimized by two separate offenders for two separate crimes, these victims were counted twice. Therefore, our total victim–offender incident count for this project was 42. Of these victims, 25 (60%) were victims of rape/sexual assault, 14 (33%) were victims of intimate partner abuse/family violence, 0 (0%) were victims of sexual harassment, and 3 (7%) were victims of stalking.³

The code sheet was organized to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Two sets of quantitative data were collected: 1) statistics on each victimization incident for the crimes outlined above⁴, 2) basic demographic information for both victims and offenders.⁵ Open ended-questions were used to provide thick description on the characterization of victims and offenders of rape/sexual assault, intimate partner abuse/family violence, and stalking in crime dramas. As transcripts are difficult to obtain, we used the subtitle/closed captioning function on the DVDs to

³ Since there were no sexual harassment victims, the remainder of the paper will not focus on this crime.

⁴ Coders indicated the type of weapon used, the time of the offense (day/night), the location of the offense, relationship between victim and offender, and described briefly what happened in the incident in question.

⁵ Categories used included: Sex (male or female), race (White, Black, Asian, Other), ethnicity (Hispanic/non-Hispanic), age (numeric age), socioeconomic status (lower, lower-middle, middle, middle upper, upper), education level (high school dropout, high school, Associate's degree, trade school, Bachelors degree, Graduate or specialist degree), employment status (unemployed, part time, full time), marital status (married, divorced, widowed, single/never married), and if they had children. Additionally, an open-ended question was used to indicate the primary motivation for the offense. The categories were determined based on appearance of the character or dialogue about the character throughout the episode.

gather quotes reflecting the characterization of the victim and offender. A quote was written in the code sheet anytime that the victim or offender was mentioned in the episode by any character, including the victim, the offender, criminal justice professionals, or others (e.g., family members, coworkers, neighbors).

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were utilized to analyze the data. For the quantitative portion of the analysis, an excel spreadsheet was created to organize demographic characteristics, incident-specific information regarding the victim and offender and the relationship between the two characters⁶. The qualitative portion of the analysis consisted of coding the quotes in the codebook. Both researchers coded every episode and double checked to ensure that no quotes were left out of the codebook. The quotes were independently analyzed by both researchers to create a description of the victim or offender in that quote. Next, the researchers presented their descriptions to each other to ensure that both agreed on each description, resulting in 100% intercoder reliability. The results of the quantitative analysis and the qualitative typologies are presented below.

FINDINGS

All demographic information concerning the victim is included in Table 1. All victims were female (selected by researchers), and the majority were white (85%) and under 21 (48%). Further, 69% of the victims were single and did not have children (67%). We were unable to determine the social class of nearly 40% of the victims based on the information provided in the episode, with the next largest group portrayed as lower class (19%). Although education was not

⁶ Four categories were created for victim-offender relationship which included strangers, intimate romantic partners, non intimate family member, and other. Spouses, partners, and dating couples were included in intimate romantic and any non-intimate familial relations such as parent-child, siblings, etc was included for non intimate family member.

discussed for the majority of victims (57%), the remaining victims were either in high school or had less than a high school education (31%). Finally, employment status was also difficult to determine in 43% of the cases, with the remaining victims almost evenly split between working (26%) and non-working (31%).

Table 1: Victim Demographics

Race	Total Number	Percent (%) of Total
White	36	85
Black	2	5
Other	4	10
Age		
Under 21	20	48
20's	13	31
30's and above	6	14
Age Unknown	3	7
Marital Status		
Married	8	19
Divorced/Widowed	1	2
Single	29	69
Unsure	4	10
Children Status		
Yes	10	23
No	28	67
Unsure	4	10
Socio Economic Status		
Lower	8	19
Lower to Middle	3	7
Middle	7	17
Middle-Upper	6	14
Upper	2	5
Unsure	16	38
Education Status		
less than or in High School	13	31
Higher education	5	12
Unsure	24	57
Employment Status		
Working	11	26
Not Working	13	31
Unsure	18	43

Thematic characterizations emerged based on the quotes obtained from the episodes for victims and offenders of crime dramas. We began our analysis with an initial categorization of the quotes as describing either positive or negative attributes of the characters. We placed these quotes in separate word documents for victims and offenders.

Once this was completed, we went through each file and looked for themes regarding these attributes. However, it quickly became clear that the characterization of victims and offenders was more fluid than the dichotomy of positive and negative attributes. For example, it was clear that not all victims were portrayed as either completely innocent or completely “bad” or deserving of their victimization. Similarly some offenders were portrayed as sympathetic and some as evil predators, but some offenders did not fit into either of these two categories.

Therefore, we went back to the dialogue previously collected to distinguish if recurring categories existed between the dichotomous positive and negative characterizations. Based on this analysis of the data, repeated patterns of categories emerged through the data which resulted in one typology for victims and one for offenders presented below.

The victim typology includes four categories: ‘innocent’ (victim presented by the episode as completely faultless for the crime as well as perfect in character), ‘innocent with character flaws’ (victim who is portrayed as faultless for the crime itself but is also portrayed as having slight problems in character), ‘unlikable but not culpable’ (victim portrayed as extremely unlikable but not portrayed as responsible for their victimization), and ‘manipulative’ (victim viewed as contributing to or lying about her victimization). The offender typology includes four categories: ‘sympathetic’ offenders (offenders portrayed as relatable or with extenuating circumstances for their crime), ‘unlikeable’ offenders (offenders portrayed as having major personality flaws or other unlikeable characteristics), ‘manipulative’ offenders (offenders

portrayed as manipulating their victims or the criminal justice professional in the episode, and ‘predators’ (offenders portrayed as committing particularly vicious crimes, often with multiple victims and usually sexual in nature). (See Appendix B for examples of characters that fall into the above typology.)

Table 2 presents the results of the typology associated with victims from the targeted crime shows. First, it is important to note that for 7 (16.5 %) of the 42 victims, there was not enough information provided by the episode to place these victims in any category and they were therefore excluded from the typology⁷. Of the remaining 35 victims, we place 13 victims (37%) in the innocent category, 7 victims (20%) in the innocent with character flaws category, 8 victims (23%) in the unlikeable but not culpable category, and 7 victims (20%) in the manipulative category. These numbers suggest that victims were most likely to be portrayed as innocent and blameless for their victimization in these four crime dramas.

Table 2: Portrayal of Victim for all Shows

	Innocent	Innocent with flaws	Unlikeable not culpable	Manipulative	Total
Victim	13 (37%)	7 (20%)	8 (23%)	7 (20%)	35(100%)

Although offenders are not the focus of this paper, we assessed the verbal portrayal of offenders as it may impact how viewers characterize the victim. As Table 3 suggests, 35 offenders⁸ were placed in four categories with 8 offenders (23%) in the sympathetic category, 8 offenders (23%) in the unlikeable category, 4 offenders (11%) in the manipulative category, and

⁷ The primary reason there was not enough information about these victims was that they were secondary victims (6 out of the 7).

⁸ As 7 victims did not have enough information to categorize them in the victim typology, we did not include their associated offenders.

14 offenders (40%) in the predator category. These numbers suggest that offenders were most likely to be portrayed as predators by the selected crime shows.

Table 3: Portrayal of Offender for all Shows

	Sympathetic	Unlikeable	Manipulative	Predator	Total
Offender	8 (23%)	8 (23%)	4 (11%)	14 (40%)	35(100%)

Themes regarding Portrayal of Victim

Our overarching research question was, ‘How are female victims portrayed through crime dramas?’ Using the victim typology categories of ‘innocent,’ ‘innocent with character flaws,’ ‘unlikeable but not culpable,’ and ‘manipulative,’ we assessed how portrayal of victims differed across the *four shows* watched for this project. As shown in Table 4, *Law and Order* was most likely to portray victims innocently (60% of the cases) and least likely to portray victims as innocent with flaws (0 victims). *Law & Order-Special Victims Unit (SVU)* was most likely to characterize victims as unlikeable but not culpable and least likely to characterize victims as manipulative (0 victims). *CSI* was most likely to portray victims as innocent (44%) and least likely to portray victims as unlikeable but not culpable (0 victims). Finally, *Without a Trace* was evenly split between characterizing the victim as manipulative (30%) and innocent with flaws (30%) and also split in characterizing the victim as unlikeable but not culpable (20%) and innocent (20%). In sum, these findings suggest that *Law & Order* and *CSI* were most likely to portray the victim as innocent, while *SVU* was most likely to portray the victim as unlikeable but not culpable, and *Without a Trace* was most likely to portray the victim as either innocent with flaws or manipulative.

Table 4: Portrayal of Victim by Show Type

<i>Show</i>	Innocent	Innocent with flaws	Unlikeable Not Culpable	Manipulative	Total
Law & Order	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	5
SVU	4 (37%)	2 (18%)	5 (45%)	0 (0%)	11
CSI	4 (44%)	2 (23%)	0 (0%)	3 (33%)	9
Without a Trace	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	10
Total	13	7	8	7	35

We were also interested in knowing if the *crime type* would impact the portrayal of the victim. As shown in Table 5, based on our victim typology, the majority of sexual assault victims (45%) were portrayed as innocent, followed by innocent with flaws (25%). Only 15% of sexual assault victims were portrayed as either unlikeable but not culpable or manipulative. Interestingly, two of the three ‘manipulative’ sexual assault victims were victims that falsified their rape report, and one was counted as a rape victim under the law governing correctional employee/inmate relations⁹

In terms of intimate partner abuse¹⁰ (IPA), 50% of IPA victims were portrayed most harshly, falling into the manipulative category while no IPA victims were characterized as innocent. For the non-intimate family violence victims, 50% were portrayed as innocent, while 50% were portrayed as unlikeable but not culpable. Finally, stalking victims were most likely to be characterized as innocent (67%), or innocent with flaws (33%). In sum, sexual assault and

⁹ The offender of this crime was charged with ‘rape under the law’ because he was a correctional officer who had consensual sex with the victim, an inmate, on the grounds of the facility.

¹⁰ The qualitative data suggested there were stark differences between intimate partner victims (those victimized by a romantic intimate such as spouse, partner, boyfriend/girlfriend, or date) and those victimized by a family member (such as a parent or sibling). Therefore, these two categories were separated to highlight these differences.

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stalking victims were most likely to be characterized as innocent or innocent with flaws. The non-intimate family violence victims were equally likely to be portrayed as innocent or unlikeable but not culpable, while intimate partner abuse victims were most likely to be portrayed as manipulative.

Table 5: Portrayal of Victim by Crime Type

<i>Victim Portrayal</i>					
<i>Crime Type</i>	Innocent	Innocent with flaws	Unlikeable Not Culpable	Manipulative	Total
Sexual Assault	9 (45%)	5 (25%)	3 (15%)	3 (15%)	20
Intimate Partner Abuse	0 (0%)	1 (12%)	3 (38%)	4 (50%)	8
Non Intimate Family Violence	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	4
Stalking	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3
Total	13	7	8	7	35

Another important avenue of research on victim blame focuses on the *relationship* between the victim and offender (Britto, 2007; Soulliere, 2003a). As Table 6 shows, when the victim and offender were strangers (which was the case for 43% of the victims), the victim was far more likely to be portrayed as innocent, with 64% of the victims portrayed as completely innocent and 29% portrayed as innocent with flaws. Sexual assault victims were least likely to be portrayed as manipulative (0 victims). When the victim and offender were romantic intimates (29% of victims overall), 58% of the victims were portrayed as manipulative (see Table 6). Interestingly, for the romantic intimate relationship, victims were least likely to be portrayed as innocent (0 victims). When the victim and offender were non-romantic family members (17% of victims), victims were equally likely to be portrayed as innocent or unlikeable but not culpable, while 20% were portrayed as innocent with flaws (see Table 6). Finally, when the relationship

between the victim and offender was classified generically as ‘other’ (12% of victims), 50% of the victims were characterized as innocent, 25% were characterized as innocent with flaws, and 25% were characterized as unlikeable but not culpable. In sum, based on these results, victims who did not know their attacker were most likely to be characterized as innocent, while victims who were romantically involved with their attacker were most likely to be characterized as manipulative. Those victims that were family members were spread out over the innocent, innocent with flaws, and unlikeable but not culpable categories, while victims that had an ‘other’ relationship with their offender were primarily portrayed as innocent.

Table 6: Portrayal of Victim by Victim-Offender Relationship

<i>Victim Portrayal</i>					
<i>Relationship</i>	Innocent	Innocent with flaws	Unlikeable not culpable	Manipulative	Total
Stranger	9 (64%)	4 (29%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	14 (43%)
Romantic Intimates	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	4 (34%)	7 (58%)	12 (31%)
Non-Intimate Family Member	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	5 (17%)
Other	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	4 (9%)
Total	13	5	8	7	35 (100%)

Finally, little emphasis in prior literature is placed on the *role of the offender* in shaping viewpoints about victims of crime in crime show dramas. In other words, is a victim’s characterization influenced by how the offender is portrayed? Does this portrayal impact how we, as a viewer, see the victim? As stated above, the most common portrayal of offenders was as a predator (40%). As Table 7 indicates, the portrayal of the offender impacts how the victim is portrayed by crime shows. When the offender is portrayed as sympathetic, the victim is overwhelmingly portrayed as manipulative (62%) with no victims of a sympathetic offender

portrayed as innocent. When the offender is portrayed as unlikeable, 50% of the victims are portrayed innocently and victims are least likely to be portrayed as either innocent with flaws or unlikeable but not culpable. When the offender is characterized as manipulative, there is little variation in the portrayal of victims, with half of the victims portrayed as innocent and half of the victims portrayed as unlikeable but not culpable. Finally, when the offender is portrayed as a predator, the majority of victims are portrayed as innocent (46%) or innocent with flaws (33%), while 21% are portrayed as unlikeable but not culpable (0 victims were portrayed as manipulative). In other words, when the offender is characterized as sympathetic, the victim was most likely to be portrayed as manipulative. When the offender is portrayed as unlikeable, the victim is most likely to be portrayed as innocent. When the offender is portrayed as manipulative, the victim is either portrayed as innocent or unlikeable but not culpable. Finally, when the offender is characterized as a predator, the victim is most likely to be portrayed as innocent. Therefore, this suggests episodes that characterize the victim in a negative light may make the offender more likeable or sympathetic to increase the viewer's dislike or blame of the victim.

Table 7: A Typology of Victim-Offender Portrayal

<i>Victim Portrayal</i>					
<i>Offender Portrayal</i>	Innocent	Innocent with flaws	Unlikeable not culpable	Manipulative	Total
Sympathetic	0 (0%)	1 (13%)	2 (25%)	5 (62%)	8
Unlikeable	4 (50%)	1 (12%)	1 (13%)	2 (25%)	8
Manipulative	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	4
Predator	7 (46%)	5 (33%)	3 (21%)	0 (0%)	15
Total	13	7	8	7	35

DISCUSSION

Results of this project suggest that victims are characterized in very particular ways that may influence viewers' perceptions of victimization and victim blame. First, when analyzing the victim demographic information across four crime shows from the 2003-2004 season, it is apparent that female victims are portrayed as white, young, single, childless, and as someone who often does not know her offender. This portrayal provides misinformation to the public, as non-white females have higher rates of victimization, particularly by someone they know (Belknap 2007).

This may increase opinions of victim blame by the general public when they hear of a victimization experience that falls outside what they are accustomed to seeing through media images of crime and victimization. For example, Berns & Schweingruber's (2007) in-depth interviews with individuals on a college campus found that one possible reason individuals may be critical of domestic violence victims was because they had no direct experience with intimate partner violence. They consequently saw victims as very different from themselves and could therefore not understand this crime as a social problem. This may similarly be the case with crime shows, which present an unrealistic picture of a victim to an audience which may have little knowledge of this crime on a personal level.

Further, our findings suggest the portrayal of victims differs across the four crime shows selected for this project. Given *SVU*'s focus on victims, particularly sexual assault victims, it is surprising that victims are not portrayed more innocently. *SVU* ranks third of these four shows in terms of the percentage of victims classified as innocent. However, it is also clear that this show, with its emphasis on special victims, holds victims in higher regard than the other three shows. No victims were portrayed as manipulative in *SVU*, whereas 20 to 30 percent of victims were

portrayed this way in the other shows. *CSI* also focuses on the victim, and in some ways does so more than *SVU*. The most common portrayal of victims in *CSI* is the “innocent” victim. It seems that while the *CSI* team is concerned with offenders, the perspective is that of the victim and what happened to her, not the offender and why s/he committed the crime.

The differences that exist in the characterization of victims across these four shows is important for understanding how the general public views and reacts to (e.g., voting behavior, jury verdicts, etc) crime victims. If most of what we know about crime and victimization comes from television, then these four shows together tell us that 60% or less of victims are truly innocent and undeserving of their victimization. This may result in viewers perceiving that many crime victims are at least in part, if not in whole, responsible for their own victimization. For example, *SVU* touts itself as concerned with victims, yet 45 percent of the victims are portrayed as unlikeable. It is possible that viewers translate “unlikeable” as partially responsible. As a result, viewer of this popular crime drama may come away from this show with misperceptions of victims and how culpable they are for their own victimization, wherein the common myths, for example, of rape victims are reinforced rather than debunked.

Results of this project also indicate that all four crime shows used in this project are more likely to portray victims as innocent and offenders as predators. At first glance, this suggests that victim blame may not be much of a problem in crime dramas. We did not find overt (obvious, deliberate, or direct) types of victim blame through crime dramas that paint victims as responsible for their victimization. However, when consulting the typologies created for this project and considering the variation among victims, we find covert (concealed and unintentional) forms of victim blame in crime dramas. First, when considering the victim by *type of crime*, the majority of victims (60%) were victims of sexual assault and were by far, most

likely to be characterized as innocent. This may suggest that media outlets are becoming more conscious of the victimization movement that has focused attention on bettering the treatment of sexual assault victims. More surprising was our finding related to victims of intimate partner abuse. These victims were portrayed extremely negatively, often as manipulators or at the very least as unlikeable women. It is apparent that crime shows are especially harsh on victims of romantic intimate relationships. Although much more work has been done in the literature on victim blame of sexual assault victims through crime dramas, this finding suggests that more work needs to be done on victim blame of romantic intimate partner violence. The negative characterization of these victims and the blame associated with their victimization experience may give the general public ideas about intimate partner violence that lead to victim blame and misinformation about victims of crimes against women more generally.

Our results further indicate that covert victim blame occurs in selected crime dramas through the *relationship* between victim and offender. Specifically, victims who knew their offender were characterized more negatively than victims who did not. In fact, victims who did not know their offender were most likely to be portrayed as completely innocent, whereas victims who were romantically involved with their offender were more likely to be portrayed as manipulative. This portrayal may provide inaccurate messages to the public, teaching viewers that victims who know their attacker are more responsible for their victimization than those who do not. Further, 43% of all victims did not know their attacker, suggesting that stranger induced victimization is common. This misperception may formulate images of the ‘perfect’ victim and contribute to victim culpability and influence criminal justice policy (Belknap, 2007; Cavender et al., 1999; Franiuk et al., 2008; Surette, 1998; 1999).

Similarly, our results suggest that the way these crime dramas *characterize the offender* has an impact on the way they portray the victim. Interestingly, when the offender was portrayed most sympathetically, the victim was most likely to be portrayed as manipulative. On the opposite extreme, when the offender was portrayed as a predator, the victim was most likely to be portrayed as innocent. This dichotomy of good and bad further contributes to victim blame by showing that good or relatable offenders may victimize less worthy individuals or that these victims are more to blame for their victimization. Since victim blame rhetoric has become less obvious in crime dramas, perhaps a more covert or unintentional way to blame victims is through offender responsibility. By forfeit, those offenders who seem less responsible for their crimes make the victim more responsible for her victimization. These covert messages may convince the public that certain offenders (just like certain victims) have less or more culpability based on their personal characteristics. Although no works, to our knowledge, consider offender personal characteristics in determining blame for the victim, one study conducted by Franiuk and colleagues (2008) found that many articles concerning the Kobe Bryant case often highlighted his positive attributes which made readers more likely to believe that he was innocent. It is our belief that future scholarship in the area of victim blame should continue in this direction, by considering offender characteristics as a viable outlet for the social construction of the victim.

Lastly, one purpose of a typology is to facilitate future research. The above discussion illustrates that our typology of victim-offender characterization contributes to the media and crime literature in several ways. First, the typology presented in this research helps us understand female victim blame in these four crime dramas. The degree to which female victims are blamed for their victimization appears to depend on how their offenders are characterized. This reinforces for the viewer the myth of that there must be one “good” actor and one “bad”

actor in any given criminal event. According to these shows, either the victim is a good person or the offender is a good person, but they both cannot be good people. This allows the viewer to deflect their own potential for criminal behavior, as they are unlikely to see themselves as being a “bad” person who could engage in such acts, unless of course the victim “gets what’s coming to them” because they are a bad person.

Second, the general nature of the victim-offender characterization typology means we should be able to apply this typology to other crimes and to male victims. Additionally, this typology may help us understand both female and male victim blame in other media outlets such as news casts, television newsmagazines, crime-based reality shows, films, literature, and magazines and newspaper articles. Applying this typology to other crimes and other sources will help us better understand the overall nature of victim blame in the media. This may in turn help us understand the nature of victim-blame in court rulings, jury findings, police interaction with victims, and the opinions of the general public on issues related to crime, victimization, and justice.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to our research that should be mentioned. First, it is clear that we can only provide information about these four specific crime shows and not about how other crime shows or media outlets characterize victims. While we believe this research makes a significant extension of the literature on fictional crime drama, we suggest that future work in this area continue to analyze victims and offenders of all crime types across a variety of crime shows. A second limitation concerns our methods of data collection. A content analysis technique allowed us to analyze text but not visual or audio cues that may also shape victim or

offender attributes. We believe this would be an excellent extension of this work, but our focus was on the verbal messages being transmitted to viewers.

A third limitation is that our typology is based on a holistic characterization of victims and offenders. We did not establish if this characterization changes over the course of an episode or by individual actors. It is possible that law enforcement characters say negative things about victims as part of the investigative process that occurs over the course of an episode. As in reality, television detectives speculate and make assumptions about the character and lifestyles of victims and potential offenders in their attempt to solve the crime, which may inevitably lead them to initially attribute negative characteristics to a victim. Additionally, law enforcement officers, both in reality and in television, may disagree about the culpability of the victim, and certainly it would be the case that family members of the victim are more likely to characterize him/her in a more positive manner than they would the offender.

With these limitations in mind, we believe this piece provides important insight into the influence of the media on the construction of the crime victims. As crime dramas increase in popularity and take up more and more of our 'entertainment' airtime, the impact they may have on perceptions of crime and victimization cannot be understated. Given the strength of the media in shaping attitudes, perceptions, and opinions, we believe this work provides a unique spin on the construction of the victim in fictional crime dramas and provides avenues for future research on the role of the offender in constructing victim blame as well as more in depth consideration of the portrayal of domestic violence victims. Although victim blame messages may be less obvious than they once were, these results suggest victim blame may appear through less noticeable outlets such as crime type, relationship between victim and offender, or the offender characterization. Future work should look not only at female victims of sexual assault,

a trend in the current literature, but also victims of intimate partner abuse and stalking, as well as male victims of these same crimes.

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APPENDIX A

A. Stalking: ‘Stalking is conservatively defined as ‘a course of conduct directed at a specific person that involves repeated (two or more occasions) visual or physical proximity, nonconsensual communication, or verbal, written, or implied threats, or a combination thereof, that would cause a reasonable person fear’ (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998). Stalking behaviors also may include persistent patterns of leaving or sending the victim unwanted items or presents that may range from seemingly romantic to bizarre, following or laying in wait for the victim, damaging or threatening to damage the victim's property, defaming the victim's character, or harassing the victim via the Internet by posting personal information or spreading rumors about the victim’ (National Institute of Justice, 2007b). The episode must either show at least two stalking incidences or discuss an additional incident that has happened in the past.

B. Intimate Partner Abuse/Non-Romantic Family Violence:

1. **Intimate Partner Abuse:** Intimate relationships (either current or former) where one or both partners are violent toward the other, including physical, sexual, or psychological abuse of an intimate (Belknap, 2007).

2. **Non-Romantic Family Violence:** Violence between non-intimate family members (such as child-parent relationships, sibling relationships, or other family relationships) including physical, sexual, or psychological abuse of a non-intimate family member.

C. Rape/Sexual Assault: ‘...nonconsensual oral, anal, or vaginal penetration of the victim by body parts or objects using force, threats of bodily harm, or by taking advantage of a victim who is incapacitated or otherwise incapable of giving consent. Incapacitation may include mental or cognitive disability, self-induced or forced intoxication, status as minor, or any other condition defined by law that voids an individual's ability to give consent’ (National Institute of Justice, 2007a).

D. Sexual harassment: ‘Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. Sexual harassment can occur in a variety of circumstances, including but not limited to the following: The victim as well as the harasser may be a woman or a man. The victim does not have to be of the opposite sex. The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, an agent of the employer, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or a non-employee. The victim does not have to be the person harassed but could be anyone affected by the offensive conduct. Unlawful sexual harassment may occur without economic injury to or discharge of the victim. The harasser's conduct must be unwelcome’ (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2007).

APPENDIX B: EXAMPLES OF VICTIM AND OFFENDER TYPOLOGIES

Innocent Victim: An example of the ‘innocent’ categorization is found in the *CSI* episode ‘Homebodies’ when Suzanna, a 16 year old virgin is raped in her home by a stranger (who broke into her home and locked her parents in the closet of the room where she is raped). A quote illustrative of Suzanna’s innocent character states ‘You want to hear something stupid? My boyfriend and I had been talking about sex for a couple of months. I always said no because I was afraid my parents would find out.’

Innocent with Character Flaws Victim: An example of the ‘innocent with character flaws’ categorization is found in the *Without a Trace* episode ‘Prodigy’ when Natasha, a musical prodigy, is kidnapped by her biological father. Although she is portrayed as someone kidnapped by no fault of her own, she is also portrayed as an unruly teenager, not much different than any other teen. This is apparent in a conversation between the girl’s mother and a detective. Mother: ‘You must think it’s strange that she would lie to me.’ Detective: No-she’s a teenager.’ Mother: If I would’ve known about Shane (Natasha’s boyfriend), I never would have allowed it.’ Detective: That’s why she lied to you.’

Unlikeable but Not Culpable Victim: An example of the categorization ‘unlikeable but not culpable’ is found in the *Law & Order* episode ‘Choice’ when Jennifer, a pregnant bar owner is beaten and almost raped by her spouse. Although it is clear the spouse did in fact beat and attempt to rape his wife, most of the episode focuses on Jennifer, the way she lied about what happened to her, how she is drinking during her pregnancy, and her consideration of abortion. This negative portrayal is apparent through an exchange between the prosecuting and defense attorney when the PA claims ‘I won’t accept a plea on attempted rape when your client has a history of violence.’ DA: ‘Jennifer dropped all charges. With what you have, zero medical evidence of a rape and your complainant first blamed her attack on a disadvantaged kid. Not to mention the fact that she drinks while she’s pregnant.’

Manipulative Victim: This categorization was assigned to two types of victims. The first are victims who were blamed either covertly or overtly for their victimization by the episode. The second are victims who lied about their victimization, namely falsely reporting rape. An example of the manipulative victim is apparent in the *CSI* episode, ‘Coming of Rage’ when Ashley, a teenager, convinces her three male friends to kill another male teenager. To get away with the crime, she lies and states that the male attempted to rape her and during this process, her rapist was hit over the head by a stranger passing by. Although the criminal justice professionals work hard to find her attacker at first, backing her up completely, once they discover she has lied, the detectives are furious as exemplified in this conversation. Detective: You weren’t attacked Ashley, Brian was. At the mall, you weren’t in shock, you were celebrating...I’m done with the Ashley pity party. You’re not a victim. You were a lure. Do you know how many people don’t report a rape because they’re afraid no one will believe them? Ashley: Of course, that is what I was counting on. Detective: I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure you’re tried as an adult. Ashley: Good luck: I dress up real nice. Little lace collar. Two dead parents. I’ll be the saddest girl in the world.’

Sympathetic Offender: An example of the categorization ‘sympathetic’ offender occurs in the *Law & Order-SVU* episode ‘Shaken’ when a mother shakes her 20 month old daughter

which eventually leads to her death. The episode portrays this offender in a sympathetic and somewhat relatable manner as is apparent in this conversation between the offender and a detective. Offender: ‘The day my daughter was born was the happiest day of my life.’ Detective: ‘and then your husband died. It must be very difficult raising a child without him.’ Offender: ‘I wanted to be a stay at home mom but now I have to be the breadwinner.’ Later, the offender takes responsibility and explains her actions claiming: ‘I did it. I’m so sorry. I love her. Detective, you have to know I love my baby. That night, I just wanted a chance at a normal life again with a man I loved... She woke up and she wouldn’t stop screaming and I was so angry. I shook her over and over until she stopped crying and then I put her down and she smiled up at me. She seemed OK...I never meant to hurt her. I love her.’

Unlikeable Offender: An example of the categorization ‘likeable’ offender is evident in the *Law & Order* episode ‘Patient Zero’ when a prominent medical researcher infects his ex lover with SARS (which ends up killing their child). The offender is portrayed as an extremely unlikeable although not necessarily malicious offender. This was suggested by the ADA who stated ‘and if that boss was Dr. Charles Blanchard (offender), I don’t know as if I’d believe you. ...Saw him on Larry King. Pompous son of a gun. Said he’s prepared to rid the world of all that ails it. Detective: He also managed to trigger the first SARS epidemic in New York. The ‘unlikeableness’ of this character was further verified by a woman who worked for the offender. She claimed ‘The only one around here in love with Charles Blanchard is Charles Blanchard. ...He made [Anna] nauseous... He’s OK until you spend some time with him. The man may not always be right, but he is never wrong, if you know what I mean. He’s the feudal lord and we’re all his serfs, plowing his fields.’

Manipulative Offender: An example of the categorization ‘manipulative’ occurs in the *Law & Order-SVU* episode ‘Careless’ when Lori-Ann, a foster mother of a variety of children, smothers Jaime, a foster child and mutilates Megan, another foster child that saw her kill the first child. She attempts to manipulate the situation by covering her tracks as this conversation exemplifies. Detective: ‘That’s pretty slick, hiding a murder witness in a Looney bin, telling them she was a psycho.’ Offender: ‘yea, well obviously, the girl is disturbed.’ Detective: ‘She’s not that disturbed, she told me what happened. She says she saw you kill Jaime.’ Offender: ‘Well, she’s lying. Who do you think a jury is going to believe. Me or some teenage delinquent. She cut herself OK, she’s psychotic.’ Detective: ‘and Jaime smother himself too?’ Offender: No, my loser husband did that [trying to pin murder on husband]

Predator Offender: An example of the categorization ‘predator’ occurs in the *Without a Trace* episode ‘Copy Cat’ when an offender copycats an old murder case as a way to get back at a detective who had put him in jail for pedophilia. The offender copycats a case the detective did not solve where a woman was kidnapped and was killed moments before the detective reached the victim. The ‘cat and mouse’ game is apparent through this conversation: Offender: ‘I wish you could see the look on her face right now, Jack. She is absolutely terrified.’(In this same sequence we see her begging detective over the phone) ‘ Please. Please help me.’ And ‘Oh, God, please Jack, he’s gonna kill me.’ Later, in a conversation about the offender, two detectives claim: ‘What’s the deal with you and this guy? He’s a child molester, but he’s not the only one out there.’ Jack: ‘There’s a lot more to Graham Spaulding than that. He’s a sociopath and a killer.’