

Impacts of media violence on violence against women

Media Violence as a Causal Agent for Violence Against Women Through Desensitization, Reinforcement of Gender Roles for Women, and Social Learning Theory. Media Violence as a Causal Agent for Violence Against Women Through Desensitization, Gender Roles of Women, and Social Learning Theory

In the span of about one century the western world has made significant strides to amend the discrepancy in equality between women and men (Crow & Gotell, 2004). Beginning with the first wave of feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the official rights of women were sought and established, resulting in important and favourable amendments to the existing legislation, such as women's right to vote (Johnson-Odim, 1991). Nonetheless, inequalities between women and men were not confined to court documents and legislation, rather they extended further into the community (Johnson-Odim, 1991). As a response to this the second wave of feminism took precedence to address unofficial, social issues including those related to sexuality, the workplace, and reproductive rights (Johnson-Odim, 1991). Yet, and despite the contributions made by both movements, several issues remain on the changing and diverse identity of women (Crow & Gotell, 2004). In response to this, the third wave of feminism was dedicated to refuting the notion of a universal female identity and instead prioritizing diversity among women (Crow & Gotell, 2004). Ultimately, however, the forms of violence and aggression toward women have evolved, become more subtle and implicit, but equally unjust (Rice, 2005). That is, although women's rights and freedom are made present on the surface, there continues to be questionable events that threaten the dignity of women (Rice, 2005).

Specifically, popular media has played a significant role in facilitating, as well as perpetuating, violence against women (Bocock, 2006). With liberalism becoming more adamant in western culture, the visual depictions of women to capitalize on products and services has become normalized (Bocock, 2006). As a result, women are often directly associated with sex and sexuality, completely negating the rest of their being (Bocock, 2006). Currently, there is a large body of research dedicated to exploring the relationship between violent media and aggression, but few studies have been done to specifically address the transition between exposure to violent media and committing acts of violence towards women (Ferguson, San Miguel, & Hartley, 2009). Because this issue is still a relative novelty, it is important to be cognoscente of extra variables that influence violence towards women in real life, all of which should be considered and weighed. However, the intent of this review is to deconstruct the ways in which violence in the media, specifically in television, can facilitate and perpetuate violence towards

women in real life. The type of real life violence under consideration focuses on physical and sexual violence, as well as negative stereotypes and attitudes about women. Although several perspectives and paradigms can be used to explain the contributions to violence towards women, this review will detail the mechanisms of psychological desensitization, reinforcement of women's gender roles, and social learning theory to analyze the role of violent media as a contributing factor in violence towards women.

To begin, and as aforementioned, the exploration of the relationship between media violence and real life violence is not a new subject, rather an ongoing quest to further break down the phenomenon. A common reoccurrence is the issue of media violence and the desensitization of traits that allow us to associate inappropriate acts with human suffering (Fanti, Vanman, Henrich, & Avraamides 2009). Fanti et al (2009) define desensitization as diminished emotional responses to a negative or adverse stimulus after repeated exposure to it. Essentially, repeated exposure to media violence can habituate adverse reactions, voiding a person's innate and natural negative response when viewing violence (Fanti et al, 2009). One plausible explanation for the way desensitization works is that exposure to violent media eliminates inhibitions to violence, which in turn may foster pro-violence attitudes and lower empathic responses (Fanti et al, 2009). This proposal further confirmed by Fanti et al (2009) in their empirical study, in which they exposed young adults to violent or comedic television clips. They hypothesized that repeated exposure to violent media would not only lower the empathic responses of participants, but also increase their levels of enjoyment when watching violent media (Fanti et al, 2009). Ultimately, their study showed that desensitization to media violence can occur after repeated exposure to media violence, and that these results can be seen in a short-term period (i.e. desensitization does not need extensive time to develop) (Fanti et al, 2009). In addition the researchers found that with repeated exposure to violent media not only was the psychological impact and sympathy of the participants reduced, but they reported an increased enjoyment of viewing violent media (Fanti et al, 2009). To further strengthen their results, the researchers were also able to discount existing personality traits (i.e. aggressive individuals) as being correlated with desensitization (Fanti et al, 2009). However, there is an extensive body of research that counters the argument that media is accountable for violence, and instead analyzes other factors that have a heavier contribution to anti-social acts like violence. To illustrate this, a study by Ferguson et al (2009) looked at 603 youths in Texas, half of which were male and half female. Their aim was to evaluate the multiple variables that are associated with violent behaviour in youth (Ferguson et al, 2009). They found that in comparison to exposure to violent television, the most influential factors on the existence of aggressive behaviour were: delinquent peer influences, anti-social personality traits, depression or depressed mood, and parents or guardians who use psychological abuse in their personal relationships (Ferguson et al, 2009). These results undermine the argument, as proposed by Fanti et al (2009), that violence in the media is the most influential agent in desensitization, leading to violent real-life behaviour by the viewer. Although it is certainly important to consider the multivariate relationship linked with acts of violence or aggression it is important to acknowledge how detrimental violent media can be. The argument that

violent media can desensitize individuals and disinhibit their violent impulses or behaviour can be supported within a biological framework (Strenziok, 2010). In a study by Strenziok et al (2010) 37 healthy male participants were tested to analyze the relationship between their exposure to media violence and left orbitofrontal cortex density (LOFC) as mediated by synaptic pruning. Because the orbitofrontal cortex is responsible for important regulatory functions, such as decision-making, social adjustment, and inhibition, any changes that occur in the cortex as a result of pruning can have significant effects (Strenziok et al, 2010). When synaptic pruning occurs the process happens within context (Strenziok et al, 2010). That is, the environment plays a major role in selecting which neuronal connections will be pruned and which will be maintained (Strenziok et al, 2010). Strenziok et al (2010) found that there was a negative correlation between exposure to violent media and left orbitofrontal cortex density. Their findings suggest that media violence can facilitate synaptic pruning in the LOFC, which then short-circuits/decreases neuronal connections--ultimately disrupting normal orbitofrontal cortex functions and allowing for anti-social violent behaviour (Strenziok et al, 2010). Furthermore, the desensitization process and the serving biological functions can be applicable to violence towards women. In a society that upholds equality, freedom, and rights as priorities, there continues to be sensationalized displays violence in the media. One study aimed to examine the effects of repeated exposure to sexually violent films on emotional desensitization toward victims of domestic violence and abuse within sample of 138 males. (Mullin & Linz, 1995). The results showed a decrease in emotional response, physiological arousal, and ratings of how sexually violent the films were with repeated film exposure (Mullin & Linz, 1995). These statistically significant results were relative to the results of the control group, and lasted for three days. That is, when re-evaluated three days after the initial experiment, the results remained static (Mullin & Linz, 1995). However, it is important to also acknowledge that these results did not extend further than three days (Mullin & Linz, 1995). When tested again five days after the initial experiment, participants' baseline responses were restored, essentially suggesting that the effects of sexually violent films were only maintained for a limited and short-term period (Mullin & Linz, 1995). The authors suggest that the results may reflect a lack of ecological validity in the study, since exposure to violent media is longer and more continuous over time compared to exposure in a clinical setting (Mullin & Linz, 1995). What this implies then, is that in a real life setting these results may be inapplicable and possibly irrelevant to violence towards women. Above differential perspective, what this study ultimately supports is the existence of a strong relationship between exposure to gender-based, sexually violent films and overall desensitization (Mullin & Linz, 1995). Lastly, a study by Linz and Adams (1989) measured physiological desensitization (i.e. heart rate) and its relation to cognitive, affective, and attitudinal components of desensitization. Participants were exposed to either a videotape depicting violence against women or a videotape of non-violent, but exciting content (Linz & Adams, 1989). Then all participants watched video clips of violence towards a woman, with a male as the aggressor (Linz & Adams, 1989). Linz and Adams (1989) found that heart rates of participants in the violent videotape condition were lower during the final 90 seconds of each violent video clip compared to the control group. In addition, participants in the

violent videotape condition attributed less injury to the female victims portrayed in the media in comparison to the control group (Linz & Adams, 1989). To further delineate the contrast between the experimental and control conditions, the control condition experience significant increases in hostility, anxiety, and depression during the violent video clips- a testament of their adverse responses to and disapproval of violent media (Linz & Adams, 1989). Ultimately, based on the growing body of literature on violence and media, there is significant evidence to support the role of exposure to violent media and its facilitation of real life violence, as it pertains to women. Such evidence not only addresses sociological perspectives of desensitization, but also provides psychophysiological support to explain the biological processes that enable such a relationship.

Because humans tend to be swayed from and influenced by several variables, it is important to further analyze sociopsychological and cultural variables in the relationship between media violence and women. Specifically, gender norms and roles as they relate to women will be discussed in the context of media and real life violence. Although these roles and norms are an integral part of our identity beginning from birth, one must consider the unanticipated consequences. Often times with such social and cultural standards there runs a risk of placing individuals into very concise and finite societal niches, which may be difficult to break free from. For example, in western societies, the moment a baby is born he or she is often assigned a colour, according to gender appropriateness, be it pink or blue. The process of socialization begins from the moment an infant is introduced into society. From that moment onward, the child is brought up to meet societal and cultural standard of correct ways of being, according to their sex. Unfortunately, this strenuous and confining process is difficult to stray away from, and individuals who attempt to establish themselves as persons first, rather than male or female, often experience disapproval, backlash, and even social isolation. In addition, the role of the media has been another influential means by which to enforce norms and roles in western worlds. Specifically, recent literature has proposed arguments that violent media reinforces the self-image of women in accordance with gender roles, and can even foster intra-female real life violence. What this implies then is that not only is violence towards women a reality, but that women themselves are now engaging in their own demise and contributing to the same hegemony that oppresses them. Although it was traditionally understood within the scientific realm that aggression is primarily related to males, and that aggression is singular in nature (i.e. direct, physical), recent literature is debunking this claim. Specifically, indirect aggression, which is not physical or explicit, in female-female relationships has takecentre stage (Bjorkqvist, 1994). In theory, there is no reason to suggest that women are as violent as men, considering their physical ability. In reality, however, women have adapted to this difference by using indirect hostility and aggression by way of verbal and social manipulative (e.g. spreading rumours, excluding peers, etc) acts as a means of being violent (Bjorkqvist, 1994, Cote, 2007). Bjorkqvist (1994) suggests that this indirect aggression can even be considered more sophisticated and powerful than conventional aggression (i.e. physical) because the aggressor is able to harm another person without being identified. However, the nature of aggression displayed by women

and men cannot be solely attributed to biological or physiological differences. Social and cultural variables, and their influence on learning help perpetuate these modes of aggression (Bjorkqvist, 1994). With violent media being so pervasive and omnipresent, particularly as it relates to women, it is important to explore its effects on real life actions. Ringrose (2006) examines the way in which media sensationalizes indirect violence, now being referred to as the 'mean girl phenomenon' and the implications it brings forth. This novelty depiction of women poses a bilateral problem, in that aggression is often synonymous with power but remains as a type of behaviour frowned upon in women. For example, Gonick(2004) proposes that the stereotypical vulnerable girl has now been replaced by the 'mean' girl in the public eye. What would be ideal is to avoid polarizing women's behaviour, or homogenizing them into black or white categories, figuratively speaking. Nonetheless, what is ideal is rarely reality. Although the recent creation of the mean girl in the media appears to provide equality between women and men, as it provides an over reactive response and antidote to the idea that women are nurturing and not aggressive, there are serious side effects to this new sensation (Gonick, 2004). The pervasive presence of this construction of the mean girl in the media is now redefining normal behaviour for women and girls, allowing femininity and aggressive behaviour to be re-pathologized (Ringrose, 2006). Now that popular media, specifically televised and print media, is disguising indirect female-female aggression behind the facade of female empowerment, a new template of appropriate girl and women behaviour is being inherited by newer generations. The media often portrays indirect violent behaviour as exciting, dramatic, sexy, and especially as a marker of status and power. For example, feature films such as Mean Girls and Thirteen glorify indirect and relational aggression, depicting relating such behaviour to physical attractiveness, popularity, and success. Not only are such media positing that such behaviour is appealing and even glamorous, but is also negates all other equally important aspects of existence, such as stable family relationships, and a breadth of education. In addition to assigning indirect aggression as a vehicle of power, violent media also sets up such aggression to take place in female to female social relationships. It is often said that a civilization destroys itself from within rather than being conquered by outsiders and the western female population exemplifies this heuristic. That is, because violent media sensationalizes indirect aggression in female-female relationships, the integrity with which women relate and identify with one another is compromised. As such, this population is left vulnerable and more susceptible to patriarchal standards of life, and is once again turned into a commodity that can be regulated according to trends and demands. A study by Lavin and Cash (2000) demonstrates the complex relationship between violent media portrayals of women and real life indirect aggression in female-female interactions. They conducted an experimental study to break down and examine the effects of mass media and women's body-image experiences (Lavin & Cash, 2000). In this study 66 college women were made to listen to one of two audio tapes: one containing information on the subject of appearance stereotyping and discrimination and the other containing information on television violence aggression (control condition) (Lavin & Cash, 2000). At the conclusion of their study they found that although neither condition differed in the altered mood of the participants, exposure to the appearance-related condition versus

the control condition yielded significantly less favourable body-image evaluations (Lavin & Cash, 2000). The results, produced by Ten Visual Analogues Scales and the 14-Item Appearance Schemas Inventory, demonstrate the ways in which western media showcases beauty and physical attractiveness in conjunction with covert and overt social benefits (Lavin & cash, 2000). In addition, the violent media often depict strong associations between beauty and desirable traits. That is, women are learning that beauty is good, and that is it the most important factor in leading a fulfilling life is the virtue of beauty. Because of this trend in the media of using women's physicality as commodities and means to capitalize and turn a profit, women become more invested in their aesthetic selves. In turn, women who have deep psychological investments with their self aesthetics become more susceptible to adverse social events, such as negative feedback about their weight or comparison cues (Lavin & Cash, 2000). Such events become critical experiences, and pose the possibility of increased body dissatisfaction. For example, the images of dismembered women in print ads are rampant. What is meant by dismemberment is that only parts of women's bodies are used to sell a product of service. A good illustration of this is the prototypical beer print ad, in which the only thing visible is a woman's torso with specific attention paid to the bust, followed by a posing hand holding a beer bottle. Such media pays no attention to the woman in question, rather reduces her to specific anatomical parts, in total disconnection to her individual self. In fact, a face is not only unnecessarily in such violent media, but is also obstructive because violence is more acceptable when identity is unknown (CITATION). Ultimately, violent media not only encourages and portrays indirect aggression as a means of power and representation of status, but also regulates its usage in women's relationships with one another, such that women become active participants in their own oppression and violence. To add to this, women also internalize their roles in western society as portrayed by the media. That is, women begin to see themselves and their bodies in terms of their sexual and aesthetic worth, disregarding other important aspects of their lives. Clearly, the role of violent media cannot be ignored in light of the consequences it brings. This is not to imply that violent media the sole cause of such effects, as there are other variables to consider. There is a significant amount of research that supports the argument that exposure to violence and aggression enacted in parental relationships in the home have the most significant impact on violence inRather, the aforementioned information should be used to support the significant contributions and influences between violent media and violence towards women.

Another mechanism by which violence in the media influences violence in real life violence is through the social learning theory. Bandura (1978) defines the social learning theory as a process in which people learn new behaviours by observing the behaviours of others, and assessing the benefits of exhibiting that behaviour to determine whether the behaviour will be sustained over time. That is, if the behaviour in question results in positive outcomes, then the observer is more likely to display this behaviour (Bandura, 1978)