

Critical discourse analysis of the representation of victims and
perpetrators of sexual violence in select US news articles

Bachelor's thesis
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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Rikoksista uutisoidaan sanomalehdissä päivittäin. Uutisointi on merkittävä tekijä liittyen siihen, minkälainen kuva ihmisillä on rikosten uhreista, tekijöistä, ja rikollisuudesta ylipäänsä. Aiemmat tutkimukset ovat näyttäneet, että seksuaalirikoksista uutisoidessa käytetään usein niin kutsuttuja raiskausmyyttejä, jotka ovat stereotyyppisiä ja osin virheellisiäkin toistuvia tapoja kuvata niin seksuaalirikosten uhreja kuin tekijöitäkin.</p> <p>Tässä kandidaatintutkielmassa perehdyn kuuden yhdysvaltalaisen uutisartikkelin pohjalta siihen, miten seksuaalirikosten uhreja ja tekijöitä kuvataan, sekä siihen, mitä muita toistuvia diskursseja artikkeleista mahdollisesti nousee esille. Artikkelit ovat peräisin <i>Los Angeles Timesin</i>, <i>The New York Timesin</i> ja <i>Washington Postin</i> internet-sivuilta. Toteutettu analyysi on laadullista ja metodina toimii kriittinen diskurssianalyysi (CDA), joka sopii hyvin tekstissä piilevien merkitysten ja ideologioiden tarkasteluun.</p> <p>Lähiluvun perusteella havainnot uhreista, tekijöistä ja muista toistuvista teemoista on jaettu viiteen eri alakategoriaan, joiden puitteissa dataa on analysoitu. Uhrien kuvauksissa esille nousivat epäluotettavuuden ja sosiaalisen aseman diskurssit, ja tekijöiden kuvauksissa saavutusten ja pahuuden diskurssit. Lisäksi aineistossa toistui naapuruston pelkoon viittaava diskurssi. Edellä mainitut raiskausmyytit olivat aineistossa osittain läsnä, mutta kenties vähemmässä määrin kuin aiempi tutkimus olisi antanut olettaa. Havainnoissa näkyi kuitenkin kiinnostus tekijää kohtaan uhrin jäädessä usein vähemmälle huomiolle tai epäluotettavan todistajan asemaan. Myös amerikkalaisen median kiinnostus hegemonis-maskuliinisia instituutioita kuten armeijaa ja urheilujoukkueita kohtaan näkyi aineistosta.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Public perception about crime is heavily influenced by media (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004: 498). Sex crimes are heavily gendered in nature, and culturally understood as such, since women are often seen as passive and men active in regards to sexual behavior (Shelby and Hatch, 2014: 404). Sex crimes also tend to evoke strong emotional responses and opinions from the general public. News reporting on sexual violence is not only a matter of crime reporting but a gender issue as well (Benedict 1992: 3).

Researchers have examined rape myths which can be defined as “prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs, prejudices or stereotypes about rape, rapists, and rape victims” (Burt 1980: 217, cited in O’Hara 2012: 248). Furthermore, the myths reinforce a phenomenon called “rape culture” in which aggressive masculine sexuality is seen as legitimate, and sex and violence are tightly interwoven (Cobos 2014: 38). In this thesis I want to examine whether elements of rape myths are evident in current news articles.

Both the news-reading public as well as politicians and legislators are affected by the news media and its portrayal of crime (Best 1990, cited in Shelby and Hatch 2014: 404); therefore the role of media is significant not only regarding people’s perceptions but law-making as well. Previous studies have shown that news reports on sexual violence often focus on the particularly grievous yet rare incidents thus potentially distorting people’s conceptions about crime (Shelby and Hatch 2014: 405). Such issues highlight the importance of further research on the influence of crime-related media discourses.

The data of the present study, consisting of six US online news articles on sex crime incidents, will be analyzed within the framework of critical discourse analysis which can shed light to possible underlying conventions within reporting on sexual violence. Discourses do not exist in a vacuum; they are affected by and have an effect on past and future discursive events in both social and cultural terms (Blommaert 2005:4). Furthermore, language use cannot be seen as neutral, rather it should be examined for implicit and explicit values, presuppositions and ideologies.

Sexual violence is a type of crime that takes place in all different social, ethnic, and age groups. These situational variables, that is, differences linked directly to the unique situations of the crimes, are likely to affect the way in which the crimes are reported on in

contemporary online media sources but closer examination of them is left out of the scope of this thesis.

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

2.1 Media Discourse Analysis

News articles often follow certain genre conventions although the conventions are not as strict as in for example legal texts. News articles consist of a heading and a description of the main events but might have information regarding the background of the event or address the possible consequences of it as well (van Dijk 1988: 178). Moreover, the whole production of news sets criteria for what is considered news; van Dijk (1988: 121) lists for example novelty, recency, proximity and conformity with existing values as elements that increase the so-called news-worthiness of an event. Instances of violent crime usually fill the criteria and thus are generally written about.

News articles are a commodity, therefore the task of a journalist is not only to transmit information but to describe and illustrate it as well, for the consumption of the public (Fairclough 1995: 91). Journalists are rarely present in the scene of the event such as a crime when it is taking place, instead, they have to rely on interviews, police statements and other forms of mediated information and process it into the form of a news article (van Dijk 1988: 179). As a piece of news travels through several intermediators, it is bound to transform along the way, due to for example different viewpoints of the intermediators, ideological reasons, or misunderstandings or miscommunication along the way. Previous works on media discourse analysis offer tools to tackling these potential challenges and through methods of Critical Discourse Analysis it is feasible to examine both explicit as well as implicit values, attitudes, and such in news articles.

The news media has an undeniable effect on the society. According to van Dijk (1988: 182) the news accustom the readers into forming certain "interpretation frameworks" that implicitly shape the way the public view and perceive different events. This highlights the importance of further studies on the news media taking into account its potential force in shaping the society.

2.2 Studies on sexual violence and the media

Several studies on sexual violence and the media have been done in the past decades from journalistic, linguistic, criminal justice and gender studies point-of-views. Benedict (1992) writes extensively on the subject from a mainly journalistic point-of-view and describes sex crime reporting as a continuum where stories of female victims follow certain narrative patterns that are very rigid and further enforced through language, for example in that women are more likely to be described through their relations to men than vice versa (Gallagher 1981 cited in Benedict 1992: 21). Benedict (1992: 14-18) also introduces stereotypical images of sexual violence perpetrators and victims in news reporting, the so-called rape myths which include e.g. “rape is sex”, “the assailant is perverted or crazy”, “only ‘loose’ women are victimized” and “women cry rape for revenge”. Some of these myths will be referred to in the analysis section of this thesis.

O’Hara (2012) examines rape myths by conducting a quantitative lexical analysis on the vocabulary used in 124 news articles. According to her findings most of the articles, which were about three separate cases of rape, supported existing rape myths (O’Hara 2012: 256). O’Hara also refers to a study by Franiuk et al. (2008, cited in O’Hara 2012: 248) in which the researchers found that “exposure to articles endorsing rape myths leads participants to be more likely to side with the defendant in a sexual assault case than prior to exposure” which demonstrates the potentially influential role of the press.

Shelby and Hatch (2014) study media discourses of sexual offenders and victims present in legislative debates about Megan’s Law: a law based on which a community notification is required when a previously convicted sexual offender moves into a neighborhood. Two main themes can be found in the data: the prominence of the victim’s age and gender, and the “sexual psychopath discourse” (Shelby and Hatch 2014: 407). Age and gender are likely to be present in the debates since the impetus to Megan’s Law was the murder of a young girl. Media reports were found to have been used in law-making procedure as key evidence on the existence of a societal sexual violence problem (ibid.).

3 PRESENT STUDY

As introduced in 2.1, similar studies on sex crime reporting have been done before. Since news reporting both continuously shapes and is shaped by the society, studies with more up-to-date data give insight to the current situation. Critical analysis can also aim to influence existing conventions of news reporting that may be prejudiced or even harmful.

3.1 Research Questions

My main interests regarding the data have been formulated into the following research questions:

- How are (the alleged) victims and perpetrators of sexual violence portrayed in the news articles?
- Are recurring discourses – other than those related to the victims and perpetrators – present in the data?

3.2 Data

The data was gathered from three online newspapers: *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post*, whose print versions are the second, fourth and seventh largest newspapers in the United States, respectively (Alliance for Audited Media 2013). The newspapers selected are prominent regional papers from the United States that have a wide nationwide circulation as well. They often report on specific local crime incidents. I did not simply choose the largest newspapers because several of them were either explicitly nationwide or New York-based; I wanted a more geographically varied sample of the phenomenon while still focusing on key players in the field of newspaper publishing.

None of the newspapers state an ideological or political leaning on the “About Us” (or equivalent) sections of their official webpages. Groseclose and Milyo (2005) conducted a study on bias in the news content of different US media outlets. They determined that *Washington Post* places slightly left of the center in the United States political axis, while *the New York Times* leans heavily to the left and *Los Angeles Times* is situated roughly in

the middle between those two. These leanings can have an effect on how ultimately very political issues such as crime and criminal politics are written about but this thesis will not extend its scope into the politics of news media.

The articles will be referred to in the analysis section by the following codes:

- LAT1: Blume, H., Mather, K. and Jennings, A. (2015). 14 boys accused of sex crimes at Venice High; police finds photos of sex acts. *Los Angeles Times* [see the bibliography for full URL addresses of the articles].
- LAT2: Meija, B. (2015). Former Orange County executive pleads guilty to sexual misconduct. *Los Angeles Times*.
- NYT1: Bidgood, J. (2015). In Girl's Account, Rite at St. Paul's Boarding School Turned Into Rape. *The New York Times*.
- NYT2: Schweber, N. (2014). On One Brooklyn Block, Two Violent Crimes Bring Broader Scourge to Surface. *The New York Times*.
- WP1: Kaplan, S. (2015). A serial rapist cop's 'mistake': Assaulting the grandmother who finally reported him. *Washington Post*.
- WP2: Miller, M. E. (2015). Three convicted in S&M murder case that shocked San Diego. *Washington Post*.

The articles were all published either in 2014 or 2015. Quite recent articles were chosen to ensure a current focus on the topic. They were found via the online newspapers' internal search engine with the key word "sex crime". The sample was drawn by arranging the articles from the newest to the oldest and selecting three from the current articles that were related to a specific crime incident rather than sex crime as a larger societal issue, and that were extensive enough to include analyzable information on both the victim(s) and the alleged perpetrator(s). The articles selected present a wide variety in the content of the crimes: e.g. a serial rapist, a case with several alleged perpetrators and a case where the victim was murdered.

As Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2013: 85) point out, statistical generalizations cannot be drawn from the sample due to the limited scope of this study but as in qualitative thesis work in general, the goal of this thesis is to provide a glance into the larger phenomenon in the form of a more specific case study. A qualitative point-of-view and a smaller scope also allow for a more detailed analysis of the discourse data.

3.3 Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (later: CDA) will be used as the main methodological tool of analysis. In CDA language is both socially constructing and constructed as well as deeply entwined in societal power relations (Blommaert 2005: 25). Language is therefore seen as social practice; something that not simply exists but is done as well. Fairclough (1995) divides the CDA process into three dimensions: textual, discursive and sociolinguistic. The main area of interest in this thesis is the textual level, thus vocabulary choices are at the core of examination. Structural choices such as transitivity will also be taken into account, as well as both what is present in and absent from the text (Fairclough 1995: 106). The findings will be reflected upon using a critical point-of-view.

Multimodality is increasingly taken into consideration in the analysis of (online) media texts. Regardless, multimodal elements such as pictures and in one article, a video, that are present in the data will be left out of the analysis due to limitations in scope. In a more extensive study a multimodal angle of analysis could be highly beneficial for a more multifaceted understanding of the subject matter. The data used in this thesis, however, shows that that possibly due to the delicate subject matter the pictures used are mainly quite generic and uninformative.

I examined the data by conducting several close readings and marking any reoccurring topics, eventually categorizing the most prominent ones under suitable main headings. Brummett (2009: 3) defines close reading as “the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings”. The aim of close reading, thus, is to go beyond the surface of the text and dissect it so that elements explicit and implicit are examined thoroughly. According to van Dijk (1988: 74) in mass-mediated discourse several elements regarding “shared knowledge, beliefs, norms, and values must be presupposed”, that is, they cannot all be written explicitly in the articles. These presuppositions can reveal hidden values and attitudes of both journalists and the (assumed) readers.

The categorizations used were based on the rape myths in e.g. Benedict (1992) and Shelby and Hatch (2014), yet modified based on the data in question to better reflect my findings.

4 ANALYSIS

After close readings of the articles some reoccurring themes became evident. These have been divided into the following three main categories: portrayals of the victims, portrayals of the perpetrators, and other noteworthy discourses.

The categorization will be complemented through closer analysis and commentary which may include, for instance, whether the information provided in the articles is relevant, leading, neutral or minimal, and whether it passes judgement or is speculative.

4.1 Analysis of victim portrayals

In this section, I will analyze two prominent features of the victim portrayals: the unreliability and the social standing of the victim.

4.1.1 Unreliability

The victims' credibility is often questioned although instances of false accusations of rape are very uncommon, estimated at 1 to 8 per cent of all reported cases (Benedict 1992: 18). Cobos (2014: 38) states that in the U.S. media linguistic choices in articles on rape often put blame on the victim while portraying the perpetrator in a commiserating light. That is also what defense lawyers aim for in trial, with tactics that often involve portraying the credibility and character of the victim in a negative light (Benedict 1992: 112).

In WP1, when the defense attorney's comments are referred to, the victims are called the accusers, which is quite likely a word choice of the attorney. The victims' credibility is heavily questioned in instances such as the following three: *(...) defense attorney Scott Adams's cross examination of the accusers, (which) focused a great deal on their criminal records and drug abuse; one accuser tested positive for PCP and marijuana before appearing on the stand, others had stories that changed during the course of the investigation; these facts undermine the accusers' credibility, Adams argued (WP1).*

The perpetrator's last victim in WP1, however, whose assault was called in the headline *a serial rapist cop's mistake* was framed as a more believable victim through describing her as an upstanding, middle-class citizen: *[but] J.L. was not like Holtzclaw's other victims (...)*

she was not from the mostly low-income neighborhood where he patrolled. She had no criminal record. (WP1). Calling the last victim a *mistake* places the point-of-view of the headline to that of the perpetrator, possibly to attract the reader's attention, and refers to the perpetrator's inability to distinguish *J.L.* from the demography of women he had previously attacked. Otherwise, referring to the perpetrator's failure to assault yet another powerless woman would be cruel; in this context, it is a sensationalizing element. The NYT1 article also referred indirectly to the argument of the defense attorney: *(...) argued that their encounter was consensual and more innocent than the girl had portrayed; seeking to undermine her credibility (...) he has pointed out to their cordiality before and after the encounter; He may also delve further into whether the girl's expectations were as innocent as she suggested* (NYT1). This was the only article out of the six examined in which the journalist pointed out that undermining the victim's credibility is *the linchpin for many cases involving accusations of rape* and there were several quotes regarding the victim's testimony, resulting in a fairly even-sided view of the case.

As evident from the previous paragraphs, in NYT1 and WP1 the verbal expressions of skepticism seemed to come from the defense attorneys. Still, the journalist who writes the story can choose for instance whether to report direct speech or refer to the comments indirectly which can have a significant effect on the portrayals.

Drawing attention to the victim's flaws puts distance between victims and non-victims, and reinforces the myth that bad things only happen to bad people (Madriz 1997: 344, Benedict 1992: 17). This accentuates the existing problem of victims not coming forward with their experiences due to fear or being further tormented by law enforcement officials or the press (Benedict 1992: 18) and can act as a limitation to people in terms of what is considered appropriate behavior or a safe public space and situation (Madriz 1997: 344).

4.1.2 Social standing

Questions of reliability mentioned under the previous section were often linked to the social standing of the victim. In WP1 the victims' social standing was mentioned as a key component for the victimization in *he didn't choose CEOs or soccer moms; he chose women he could count on not telling what he was doing* (WP1), that is, women that had a criminal background and were of a lower social class. Instead enforcing the myth that rape only

happens to “bad people” it quite attentively sheds light to the fact that individuals with a lower social standing are more likely to face prejudice from law enforcement officials than “CEOs or soccer moms”.

In all of the articles, the victims were described so as to portray them in a neat, specific way, as a certain type of citizen – in these cases for example as a wife or as a person with a criminal record. Newspaper language about female victims is often “sexual, condescending or infantilizing” (Benedict 1992: 20) which is evident in WP2 where the victim is called *a pretty wife of a Marine* and later again *the wife of a young Marine* – someone who’s main attributes are her physical attractiveness and her relationship to her Marine husband. In NYT1 the victim’s testimonial demeanor and appearance was described eight times in total in ways that accentuated her fragility, ultimately also infantilizing her, as describing her with *hair pulled back* or having *left the courtroom (...) with her hands folded in front of her* is quite irrelevant to the case itself.

It was explicitly expressed in WP1 and LAT2, however, that the crimes involved an abuse of the imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. This is evident from expressions in WP1 regarding the alleged perpetrator who was a police officer, such as: *(...) Holtzclaw preyed on vulnerable women*. In LAT2 a slightly similar situation was described regarding a case where a former city councilman sexually abused his subordinates. The article stated that the victims feared for their jobs in coming forward with the abuse. The district attorney was also quoted as he thanked *(the) victims and witnesses that bravely came forward in the face of fear and retaliation from a well-connected politician* (LAT2).

All in all the victims, who in my data happened to all be women, were generally portrayed in terms that did not make them appear active agents in control of their own lives. Either the truthfulness of their statements was questioned, or their personal attributes reduced to features of relationship or social status, or appearance. Sexism was in most of the cases quite implicit, suggesting perhaps that while people are increasingly more aware of biased language, traces of the underlying attitudes can still be found in media texts.

4.2 Analysis of perpetrator portrayals

In this section, I will analyze two prominent features of the perpetrator portrayals: the accomplishments and the inherent immorality of the perpetrator.

4.2.1 Accomplishments

The American news media is very interested in members of hegemonic, masculine institutions such as the army and (student) sports teams (Cobos 2014: 39). Perhaps therefore, when applicable, affiliations with these institutions were mentioned when describing the alleged perpetrators, who in my data were all male except for the two female accomplices in WP2.

In WP3 the perpetrator is described as *the former college football star and three-year veteran of the Oklahoma City police force* (WP1) and his position as a (ex-) police officer is mentioned six times in total. The victims were never described in such a manner. Discretion towards the victim may play a role in this, but arguably in cases in which the victim's credibility is contested, the repeated mention of the perpetrator's achievements can further undermine the victim.

The LAT1 article mentions that *some of the boys are members of the high school's football and basketball program*. The fact that the boys were members of the high school sports programs seems irrelevant to the crime. It could however suggest that criminal activity is out of character from them or that it is difficult to believe that individuals with wholesome hobbies or professions could commit acts as horrific as rape. The accused in LAT1 were further described as *a group of male students working together to pressure girls into having sex* which sounds more like an after-school team activity than sexual coercion and assault. "Working together" is a surprisingly positive choice of words, when "pressurizing" and "coercing" would have also been accurate verbs to use. Altogether, the alleged perpetrators were mentioned 19 times: 10 times as *(male) students* and five times as *boys* while the alleged victims were mentioned only four times, twice as *girls*, and as *female victims* and *female classmates* (LAT1).

In NYT1, the accused was described as *a former star student who earned a scholarship to St. Paul's* and was said to have [...] *been headed to Harvard until the young girl came forward with her accusations* which suggests that it was the girl's accusations, not the

crime itself, which had put a halt on the plans regarding Harvard. This is technically a true statement but places the girl awkwardly in the causal position regarding the future of the accused. The article goes on to mention the “senior salute”, a tradition of older students courting for younger ones in the high school which both the victim and the perpetrator attended, assessing the cultural factors related to the case including *sex, gender and entitlement at St. Paul’s*. The prosecution had problematized the social context of the salute while the defense referred to it as *an old tradition that many young students joined with pride* (NYT1), acknowledging the social context of the alleged crime but denying its harmful potential.

The attributes given to the female victims, in contrast, included for example *the pretty San Diego-based wife of a Marine serving in Afghanistan* (WP2) and *the 57-year old grandmother* (WP1) which only tell about the victim’s marital or family status. Referring to a victim as “pretty” is patronizing and evaluative, and a poorly justifiable word choice; the crime would not be any less reprehensible if the victim looked different. Reducing women to mere supporting figures in the lives of men seems very outdated and thus it was quite surprising to find such glaring examples in the articles.

4.2.2 Inherent immorality

Another slightly less prominent theme present in the data was that of the perpetrator’s inherent immorality. According to Shelby and Hatch (2014: 404) what constitutes as “sexually normal or deviant” is based on cultural notions; those who deviate from the norm are seen as intrinsically evil and a sharp line is drawn between them and the so-called average person. Abuse is also seen as stemming from an individual’s inner problems while larger issues of gender and power are often overlooked (Shelby and Hatch 2014: 412).

Discourses of inherent immorality were present in e.g. WP2 where the case was especially gruesome, resulting in the death of the victim. The perpetrator was identified as a Marine or a Marine staff sergeant four times in the article, but was also described as someone who committed the assault and murder *to satisfy [their] fetishes*, was in a dominant-submissive relationship, a part of an *S&M trio*, and had a house with a *sex dungeon* (WP2). These descriptions are quite scandalizing and clearly frame the perpetrator as a sexually

deviant person, making no distinction between consensual and non-consensual practicing of S&M.

Shelby and Hatch (2014) have argued that media overemphasizes the role of “stranger-danger” type of sexual violence and the perpetrators’ individual personality disorders while in fact most perpetrators are acquaintances or family members of the victim and act under the legal definition of sanity. At least some extent this is most likely a result of the newspapers’ interest to gain a larger readership by writing about things that are unusual but something worth considering when addressing the issue of media portrayal.

All in all, the alleged perpetrators in my data were mainly either framed through their accomplishments in fields such as military or sports, or as monsters preying on their victims, or sometimes even both. As a result of news articles oftentimes reporting on unusual and rare cases, the main focus in the data seemed to be drawing attention to how inconceivable the crimes were. This does not reflect on the more accurate nature of rape as a crime that typically takes place between family members, friends, or acquaintances.

4.3 Reoccurrences of other themes

The theme that was most evident in my data, in addition to those related directly to the victim or the perpetrator, was that of the plight of the neighborhood.

4.3.1 The plight of the neighborhood

In the cases where the victim was not a so-called ideal victim, that is, of a privileged race or social class, neighborhood reactions to the crime were often emphasized. Newspapers tend to favor the kind of crimes that allow for reflecting on the state of morality in today’s society (Katz 1987 in Benedict 1992: 92) which can be done, for example, by interviewing local residents. In addition, interview quotes allow for reporting of opinions and personal point-of-views which would otherwise be out of place in news articles (van Dijk 1988: 76). According to O’Hara (2012: 252) it is not atypical for the interviewees to completely disregard the victim and focus on the neighborhood’s woes instead.

The first three paragraphs of NYT2 report on the assaults and after that, the focus shifts to the experiences of the local tenants (NYT2). The topic of prostitution is addressed in the article in a way that makes it implicitly evident that the victims were sex workers.

After this becomes evident, the main viewpoint of the article shifts to the difficult situation of the neighborhood, especially to its residents, who are described for example as *a youth sports coach* and *young diners in expensive sunglasses*, and their lodgings as *multifamily buildings valued at \$1 million to \$3 million* and *an expensive (...) condominium built in 2012* (NYT2, 2014). Arguably, while those living in the neighborhood express their worry of the community, their main interest is ultimately personal since in the case of NYT2, the local tenants' risk of being victimized has not objectively increased. According to van Dijk (1988: 76) journalists write "according to their intuitive beliefs about middle-class readers". Although van Dijk refers mainly to the understandability of the text by this, I would further the notion of "intuitive beliefs" to the actual content: when the victim is of a lower social status, the newspaper readers will more likely identify with the local tenants and house owners, sympathizing with their fears for the perceived restlessness of the neighborhood.

In LAT1, apart from the attorneys four people were interviewed and their comments were reported either directly or indirectly: a 12th grade student was reported to have seen three students handcuffed, a 10th grader commented *It's embarrassing (...) The whole world knows about this school and for this. It's really awful* and two parents commented, one of them saying *Kids do stupid things. I certainly want to know what happened. Were the assaults off or on campus? Where were the adults?*. The comments do not express sympathy for the victims, nor clear condemnation of the perpetrators – or the other way around – although the age of those involved is mentioned by the parent as a reason for "doing stupid things". With this kind of framing those reading the article might begin to feel sorry for the interviewees rather than e.g. for the victims of the assaults.

5 CONCLUSION

Through close readings of the data five categories of representations or themes became evident: the unreliability and the social standing of the victim, the accomplishments and the inherent immorality of the alleged perpetrator, and the plight of the neighborhood. The findings were presented within these categories through data excerpts and further

analyzed using methods of Critical Discourse Analysis and tools drawn from earlier studies on sexual violence and the media.

The existence of rape myths or stereotypical conceptions about sex crime evident in earlier research was present also in my data, although more implicitly than expected based on previous research. The existing rape myths were problematized to some extent, for example the myth of the unreliable or “bad” victim was addressed by emphasizing the fact that victims with a criminal record felt that they would not be believed if they came forward with their accusations. Shedding light to rape myths will hopefully eventually make it easier for victims to come forward.

Some prejudicial views were still present, for instance in the cases where women were framed only by their relation to their husbands or when sex crime was seen in one of the articles as a result of unconventional sexual preferences. Questioning such journalistic choices can help make newsmakers less sexist in their writing and more aware of these kinds of undermining discursive practices. Such points may, or at least definitely should be taken into account in the education of future journalists who through their own work are able to have influence in people’s sentiments.

News reporting on sex crime does not reflect the reality of most cases of sexual abuse in that it is usually the most scandalous, yet statistically rare incidents that get written about. This is often the case in other type of crime as well, and can largely be traced back to people’s interest in the unusual and shocking, and is therefore unlikely to change in the near future. Research into the subject can, however, bring into attention inaccuracies and potentially harmful ways of reporting on crime and perhaps make both journalists as well as the public more conscious and critical of the news.

A further study could be conducted with a larger data sample, possibly including more quantitative elements to allow for more generalizable results. Another option could be looking into a more specific phenomenon such as news articles on sexual violence in colleges or work places, or in cases committed by acquaintances, for an in-depth analysis on the issues. Studies on media discourse can also greatly benefit from a multimodal point-of-view or from cross-comparisons of newspapers or articles from different decades or different countries. In any case, the subject matter provides plenty of material for further research.

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