Representations of Violent Young Women

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ABSTRACT: This Q study investigated representations—portrayals of what a person is like—of young violent women. Its impetus was reporting in the press which was expressing concern about a rise in "acceptability of violence" among young women. The data obtained in the study refute this concern. While the one representation which portrayed a fictional character was of a woman who was frighteningly violent, the other four depicted women known to the participants whose Q sorts described them. All of these were quite "ordinary," their violence was minor, and it was not seen as a central feature of their character. These results suggest that there is something of a "moral panic" being created. Some of the reasons for this are discussed.

Introduction

Wilkinson and Mulgan (1995), in a report from the "think tank" Demos, have recently suggested that women are becoming less interested in traditional "female" values, are moving away from what is seen as "normal" (feminine) behavior and are becoming more assertive. These shifts are generally seen as emancipatory and viewed positively. However, Wilkinson and Mulgan express concern about one particular aspect of these changes in values, which is that younger women are not only seem to be becoming more assertive than earlier generations of women, but also more aggressive. According to one survey conducted for their report, the youngest women who took part in the survey (aged 15-17 years) not only reported a higher "pleasure in violence" than other age-groups, but actually a higher "pleasure in

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violence" than young men of a similar age. This finding was based on an index of "pleasure in violence" made up of responses to statements such as "it is acceptable to use physical violence to get something you want."

In highly contested arenas such as this it is impossible to establish, one way or the other, whether women are "really" becoming more accepting of violence and aggression or not—whether what we are seeing is a genuine cultural shift in values or whether we are being exposed to "media hype." What we can do, however, is to explore the extent to which *perceptions* of women are undergoing change. Q methodology is an ideal means for examining perceptions of this kind, and was used in this study to look at how people formulate their ideas about what violent women are like. The study seeks to gain insight about where such ideas are coming from, including the influences of mass media portrayals of young women (in cinema, for example). In particular it seeks to examine the issue of how far violence is equated with madness, and what other explanations are offered to explain why certain women "turn to violence."

Details of the Study

The concourse under study was concerned with the perceived characteristics of violent young women. An 81-item Q set was designed using a number of media sources of representations of violent women, including novels, magazine and newspaper articles, television programs, and cinema. Descriptors were also generated from interviews and conversations.

A total of 78 Q sorts were completed by a group of psychology undergraduates at the University of Reading, approximately two thirds of whom were women. Participants were asked to think of a "violent young woman," either a fictitious character (from a movie, for example), or a "real person," either someone known to them or, say, a woman criminal reported in a newspaper. They were asked to sort the items on a 13-point scale, from -6 (strongly undescriptive) to +6 (strongly descriptive). As well as recording their sorting on a grid in the usual way, participants were asked to write down a brief but clear description of the individual they had described. The data were analyzed in the usual way, using the SAS analysis package.

Results

The analysis yielded five factors exemplified by more than one Q sort, and these are described below.

Representation 1: The "Bitter and Twisted" Psychopath

This factor was exemplified by the Q sorts of six participants. Of all the representations it is the most clearly defined, in that five of the descriptions were of the same character—the female lead in the movie *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle*; and the sixth was of Myra Hindley, a child murderer convicted in 1966, who is highly notorious in the UK.

This representation is of a woman who is menacing, brooding, cruel, and sadistic. She is seen to having tenuous grip on reality, to think in unusual ways and to be driven and obsessive. She is extremely devious and manipulative (+6), lacking in remorse and having no concern about hurting others. She is arrogant, and untrustworthy. This, then, is a clear account of the conventionally "mad-bad" violent woman, having strong resonance with the "floridly insane" representation identified by Gleeson (1991) in her study of representations of madness. Gleeson also found that this representation was almost exclusively based upon fictional characters from cinema (in her case these included Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* and the Marlon Brando character in *Apocalypse Now*).

What distinguishes this woman from the male characters can be inferred from the use of the character portrayed in the movie *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* as a descriptor and the +5 allocation to the statement "seems to bear a grudge." The stereotypical image here is of a woman whose violence takes the form of obsessive acts of vengeance. This is reinforced by the depiction provided by one of the participants whose Q sort exemplified the factor:

> ... a woman who seeks revenge ... a bitter woman.

The overall impression is of an outwardly stable character who is cunning and therefore able to "cover up" the violence seething below the surface. Of all the representations this one comes across as the most overtly dangerous and threatening. The participants describing this individual seem to have interpreted the term "young" differently to those describing the individuals in representations 2, 3, 4 and 5 (real life characters)—the individual described in representation 1 is older than the "real life" representations.

Representation 2: The Attention-Seeking Outcast

This factor was exemplified by the Q sorts of three participants. It is clear in each case that the person portrayed was someone known to the participant—a girl from school, a friend, and an ex-foster-sister. The character portrayed is a young woman who is selfish and impulsive and who has a nasty temper—who tends to "act first and think afterwards" (+5). She lacks trust in others yet craves attention and approval. She has low self esteem, finds it hard to show her real feelings, and has trouble dealing with stressful situations. She lacks a conscience and does not feel shame.

There seem to be two key elements which shed light on the perceived reasons why this character is violent. First, she is seen to feel herself a social outcast; she is portrayed as feeling marginalized and excluded. Second, in the accounts given by participants of the person they were describing, two allude to disruptions in the past:

> She does not have much of a home life (inattentive parents) and has had a fair few unhappy experiences (deaths of family members and friends) in her early teenage years.

> She saw her sister run over by a car when she was twelve.

The sense is given of a psychodynamic explanation for her aggressiveness; that her aggressive behavior is "acting out," a result of earlier traumas. She is seen as manifesting childlike qualities—of lacking impulse control and craving attention—which suggest a failure in achieving maturity, almost like a toddler having "temper tantrums." The impression given is of a rather "pathetic" woman—someone you feel sorry for but irritated by at the same time.

Representation 3: The School Bully

This factor was exemplified by the Q sorts of three participants. One gave the label "bully" to their description, while the other two labelled theirs "a girl at my school." As in the previous representation all three were describing someone known to them. The young women portrayed does indeed conform to the archetypal/stereotypical "school bully": She is seen as intolerant, intimidating, and someone who "gets a kick out of having power over others." She has a lack of respect for those in authority and finds it hard to accept being in the wrong. She is stubborn, single-minded, and seems very brash. Interestingly the item

"gets on well with people of the other sex" is viewed as most strongly
descriptive. This could be interpreted in a number of ways: as implying
a girl who is sexually promiscuous, or, alternatively, as a young
woman who identifies strongly with adolescent boys by behaving like
them. In contrast to the "bitter and twisted" violent woman, this image
is much more "normal." This description lacks all the former char-
acter's "mad" qualities and simply comes across as a "nasty piece of
work"—an unpleasant but perfectly sane and ordinary person.

Representation 4: The "Stroppy" Friend

This factor was exemplified by the Q sorts of two participants. Once
more they were describing people known to them, both friends from
school-days. The impression given is of a young woman who is not so
much violent but rather "stroppy." One description was of "a school
friend who slapped her sister in a pub." She is strong willed and
stubborn, someone who has difficulty accepting being in the wrong or
handling criticism. She can get very obsessed about things yet tends to
give up easily; has a nasty temper and is impulsive. She likes to feel
important but does not feel she has to dominate.

Clearly though, for all her failings, she is seen warmly—as loveable,
loyal to her friends, kind, and considerate. She is basically not a bad
person—just rather impulsive and lacking in judgement, someone who
gets carried away and does not think of the consequences of her actions
until it is too late. Compared with the rather pathetic character
portrayed in representation 2, the "stroppy friend" is much more
psychologically "together." The sense given is that her aggressiveness
is not an important feature of her character, but merely a consequence
of a degree of immaturity she will eventually "grow out of."

Representation 5: The Assertive "Go-Getter"

This factor was exemplified by the Q sorts of two participants, again
both describing women known to them. The image here is of an
independent, self-assured character who is well able to stand up for
herself, does not need the approval of others but likes being noticed.
She is very much her own person. She is achievement oriented and has
a domineering streak—more of a leader than a follower. This image is
a positive one. She is not nasty or cruel but tough, strong, confident,
and very capable. Yet while these are traditional "male" qualities, she
is still seen as strongly feminine (+5). The idea she might be motivated
by self-gain is strongly rejected (-6). Her violence, when expressed, is

not "calculating." It seems more to be an unfortunate down-side of her strong character. Nonetheless, she has a measure of control over it. Participants described the person they were portraying thus:

> ... she is prone to outbreaks of violence, but has never caused actual bodily harm.

> She is confident, loud, very expressive, highly social, strongly opinionated. Appears very happy—but can often snap in anger very quickly.

Discussion

Women's violence is coming under a great deal of scrutiny, and there is growing concern in the popular media about what is seen as an "explosion" of crimes of violence perpetrated by young women, including traditionally "male" crimes such as street robberies and assaults on old people in their homes. In this context it is hardly surprising that the shift in young women's views on violence identified by the Demos research (Wilkinson and Mulgan, op cit.) has aroused such disquiet. For example, writing in *The Sunday Times*, Reid (1996) responded to the Demos findings by presenting them as "chilling facts about the behavior of modern women." In the UK edition of *Cosmopolitan,* Lisa Brinkworth (1995) suggested that they showed that "the new breed of violent female is threatening to unstitch the very fabric of society."

A number of theories have been proposed to explain why women may be becoming more violent. Brinkworth sees this as not to do with some moral decline in women's behavior but as an inevitable (if regrettable) consequence of progress: " ... a rise in violent and criminal behavior is the price to be paid for womens' independence and advancement," an argument she notes was first put forward by the criminologist Freda Adler in the 1970s. Brinkworth argues that the shift towards more assertive and aggressive behavior among women is to be expected, given that they are "sick of a social climate in which women don't feel safe to walk the streets alone."

Feminist theorization, however, offers an alternative reading of what is going on. Over twenty years ago Chesler (1973) pointed out that women whose behavior goes against the feminine norm—who are independent, objective, and aggressive—tend to be viewed as aberrant. However, behaviors associated with the feminine stereotype (such as being submissive) are also seen as unnatural when compared to the

male norm. Chesler argued that women have no way of behaving available to them that makes them "normal."

Anne Campbell (1993), who has examined women and violence in considerable depth, suggests that women who behave in an aggressive fashion are "simply incomprehensible to the male mind." Campbell's argument is that because aggression is usually regarded as a male prerogative, aggressive women are seen as inherently unfeminine and hence their sanity is questioned. Women who act in such an "unfeminine" manner cannot, from this perspective, be normal—they have got to be *mad*, otherwise they simply would not behave in this way. Writing more recently in *The Guardian*, Beatrix Campbell (1997) suggests that reactions to the Demos report are part of a "backlash" against women's emancipation. She points out that the Demos data relate to only a very small proportion of women, even among the youngest age-groups. Stirring up a "moral panic" by suggesting that women *in general* are becoming more violent, is, she argues, a response to the threat such "uppityness" is seen to pose to masculinity.

Other Feminist commentators such as Heidensohn (1985) have argued that such high levels of concern arise because women who are violent are seen as "doubly deviant"—deviant first of all because they have broken society's established rules governing how people in general should behave; and deviant again because a woman who is violent is also transgressing norms of femininity.

After the death of English schoolgirl Louise Corby following an attack by her classmates in 1996, Kenny (1996), in the *Daily Express,* wrote that this case seemed "worse somehow," more of a "horrific occurrence" because it was a gang of girls who were the perpetrators. She suggests that this is worrying because "biological studies" have shown women to be less aggressive than men. Kenny also highlights the growing number of girl gangs "where the mass psychology of the group takes over ... and the attacks become frenzied." This is not, she argued, the case when it comes to groups of young men where "the male bonding instinct can be turned to good effect." Young women, it seems, are just not predisposed to bond in the same way as young men. Kenny also cites "butch fashions" and co-education as some of the reasons behind young women picking up the "yobbish" behavior of young men.

Birch (1993), writing specifically about the child-mass-murderer Myra Hindley, argued that her "notoriety is endemic in her femininity." She is remembered, Birch asserted, because she is a *woman* who committed those crimes:

> ... the image of Myra Hindley has been used to convey the horror of femininity perverted from it's "natural" course ... Hindley has become a scapegoat for some of society's greatest anxieties. The mythology of Myra Hindley reveals, above all, that we do not have a language to represent female killing and that a case like this disrupts the very terms which hold gender in place.

Heidensohn (1985) drew attention to the way that images of violent women often account for their deviance by alluding to psychological factors such as pre-menstrual syndrome, menopause, depression, and psychosis. Alternatively, they are seen to have been "pushed over the edge" by horrifying events in their lives, or to be "under the spell" of a man. Using this analysis, women's violence, since it is an "aberration," needs to be explained in a way that men's "natural" violence does not. Holmlund (1993) observed that women who commit violent acts in feature films are largely portrayed as doing so for a reason—to defend a child or family, wreak revenge, or to escape from violence themselves.

Such "explanations," French (1996) has argued, only serve to perpetuate the image of women as weak, irrational, and incapable; as having no mind of will of their own. This, perhaps, provides a key to understanding why there is so much current disquiet about violence in women—because we are beginning to see women portrayed as acting violently without "good cause," and without "losing their minds," in films such as *Thelma and Louise* and even in computer games, such as the character of Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*.

However, the data obtained in this study suggests that the types of women portrayed by the media don't seem to be very salient to "ordinary people." Of the five representations, four were drawn from "real life"; they were women known personally to the participants. Only representation 1 was drawn predominantly from a character from a film. Of all the representations, only this character seems to live up to all of the media fears—she is unpredictable, unstable, and brooding; an extreme example of a violent woman. Representation 1 is a clear media image and, as such, an explanation is offered for this violence. In the movies, when a woman is violent, she also tends to be portrayed as out of the ordinary in other ways too. According to much of the media, violent women are more often than not like this (or at some stage they *will* be). There seems to be little fictional "middle ground" in such films.

However, the results from the study reported here indicate that this does not seem to be the case. The "real-life" violent women depicted

by the participants bear little resemblance to the media representation of violent women. Because a woman behaves in a violent way, this does not appear to make her "abnormal" in the eyes of those who know her. Representations 4 and 5 are described as "friends." They are, in fact, quite positive descriptions of someone who is well liked and certainly not unpleasant to be around. Their aggression and assertiveness gets things done and could be seen, in certain situations, as a positive attribute.

In these portrayals, respondents are clearly not equating the women's violence with madness and abnormality in the way that newspapers and television seem to be. The only one of these characters displaying "mad" characteristics is the one drawn from fiction—the rest appear to have a grasp on reality and, to a varying extent, control over their actions. With representation 2, the explanation is more grounded in psychodynamics—her traumatic past manifesting itself through violent behavior. With representation 3, the main motivation to violence seems to be the feeling of power over others that this violence gives her. The violent behavior of representation 4 seems to be just a product of her immaturity and in the case of representation 5, her violence is simply part of her strong character, of her desire to "get things done."

What seems to be appearing are elements of stereotypes previously described by researchers working in this area, (e.g. Heidenson's (1985) observation of a tendency to explain womens' violence in terms of psychosis or being "pushed over the edge"—representations 1 and 2) but largely these representations are of apparently "normal" young women who happen to be violent. Their violence is not necessarily a defining characteristic, but (particularly in the case of representations 4 and 5), a sometimes unfortunate part of what is otherwise a "good" person.

There seems to be, then, a split between the media panic being generated about the emergence of a new breed of uncontrollable violent women, and the way that "ordinary people" see women who are violent; women that they have met and interacted with in real life. Media commentators are preoccupied by the threat that violence among young women poses to the status quo, to what is "natural" and "normal." Even those who adopt a "pro-women" stance (such as Brinkworth, 1996) tend to place a negative reading on what is going on—that women's violence may be "the price to be paid" for their advancement. But this seems much less of an issue for most of the participants who took part in the study.

At first sight this very acceptance of violence as normal raises the possibility that the media concern may have some foundation; that these data support the contention that we are seeing a shift in values in which

violence in women has become more acceptable. These results may seem to confirm this, given that most of the portrayals obtained depicted young women as able to be violent without also being seen as "bad" people. They are not cold, hard, and unfeeling and certainly not mad—just fallible, vulnerable people who can act violently sometimes.

This is not, though, the only way the data can be interpreted. None of the four "real life" characters portrayed in this study warrant the kind of hysteria that is currently playing itself out in newspapers and television documentaries. They may behave violently, but at the same time they pose little serious threat—their violence is not murderous or savagely cruel, but petty and circumscribed. They are just "normal" people who show "normal" human failings and vulnerabilities. These findings suggest that media images of fictive violent women are less than helpful when it comes to understanding why women may be violent and what such "ordinary" violent women are like. These results (in relation to representation 5 particularly) show that it is not informative to stereotype violent women as *inevitably* mad, hysterical, and "unfeminine."

What the study thus calls into question is the way that society continues to insist upon explaining acts of violence by women largely in terms of their gender rather than on the basis of circumstances (as male violence is). Critically, it challenges the way that commentators have constructed a moral panic about a "new breed of violent female" who is so dangerous that she "is threatening to unstitch the very fabric of society" (Brinkworth, op cit). As the participants in this study made clear in their responses, ordinary women who behave violently seldom pose any serious threat at all. They can be nasty and vicious, stroppy, mean, and manipulative—but hardly ever will they cause any serious injuries or act uncontrollably. Even taking into account variations due to differential treatment of men and women, the vast majority of serious assaults are still perpetrated by men. To infer from a tiny number of extreme attacks of violence by women that "the very fabric of society" is being threatened is, to put it mildly, overstating the case.

Above all, then, what the results of this study tell us is that, for women in ordinary, everyday life, violence is mostly a matter of the mundane—it is something some women sometimes do; not, by and large, what they *are*. It may well be that women are, today, somewhat more likely to act violently than used to be the case; that, in becoming more assertive and less willing to play the "victim" role, they stand up for themselves more. However, women's violence still does not pose anywhere near the threat that men's violence does.

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