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# Behind the Steel Curtain: Examining News Coverage of a Rape Allegation Case

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Running head: MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF A RAPE ALLEGATION CASE

Behind the Steel Curtain:  
Examining News Coverage of a Rape Allegation Case

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

**Abstract**

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2011), one in five women will be the victim of rape in her lifetime. Previous research has also found that the media has the power to influence public opinion on social issues, such as sexual violence. The purpose of this project was to examine the television news coverage of a rape allegation case involving a perpetrator who is a professional football player. Six news clips from Fox News and six news clips from ABC News were analyzed using a critical discourse analysis framework. Textual data from the interview transcripts were analyzed using a coding scheme based on themes found in the existing literature and concepts related to critical discourse and feminist theories. The study also included a visual analysis of the imagery used in the news clips. The findings indicated, overall, the media portrayed the alleged perpetrator as innocent by shifting blame to the victim. In addition, there was a pattern of discrepancy between visual imagery and spoken language in the news clips. These findings underscore the fact that the media's portrayal of rape often blames victims for their attack, which alleviates perpetrator responsibility. In order to address the problem of sexual violence on a macro level, social workers must be aware of the way the television news media depicts this social issue.

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Thank you to my parents. Thank you both for encouraging me to be curious and for instilling in me a love of learning starting at a very early age. I would not be where I am today if not for your love and support. And last, but not least, thank you, Brian Baumgartner. Throughout this process, you have encouraged me, helped me keep things in perspective, and celebrated with me. I am so grateful to have you by my side.

MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF A RAPE ALLEGATION CASE	4
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**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgments .....	3
Table of Contents .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Literature Review .....	8
Conceptual Framework .....	32
Methods .....	35
Findings & Discussion .....	39
Implications .....	65
Conclusion .....	71
References .....	71
Appendix .....	79

### **Introduction**

The National Football League (NFL) has recently come under fire in the media for its disciplinary decisions and personnel policies regarding players who have been accused of or indicted for violence off the football field. While some of these cases have dealt with child abuse or even murder, the Ray Rice case involving domestic violence certainly received the most recent attention.

Prior to the Ray Rice case, there was no formal policy for players who committed domestic violence, and punishment was left up to the discretion of the NFL Commissioner and the player's team. In the immediate wake of the case, the NFL established strict penalties for perpetrators of domestic violence, a six-game suspension for the first incidence of domestic violence and a lifetime ban for a second incidence. However, domestic violence and sexual assault policies were recently reviewed. The new NFL rules state that a first offense will result in a six-game suspension, and a second offense will result in a minimum one-year suspension (Farmer, 2014). Additionally, the NFL has partnered with the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) and other organizations to raise awareness about issues of sexual assault and domestic violence (Cox, 2014).

Shortly after concerns about NFL players committing violence against women and children emerged in the media, two prominent PSA campaigns were launched to address these issues. The White House launched the It's On Us campaign and has teamed up with a variety of organizations and celebrities in order to help end sexual assault ([www.itsonus.org](http://www.itsonus.org)). Another organization, NO MORE, is committed to ending domestic

violence and sexual assault and has recently launched a PSA campaign featuring celebrities as well as NFL players and coaches ([www.nomore.org](http://www.nomore.org)).

These recent changes in the NFL's attention to issues of violence against women and the PSA campaigns are certainly a step in the right direction. However, sexual violence against women by professional athletes still warrants further study, particularly because these cases receive so much media attention.

### **Prevalence of Sexual Violence**

While professional athletes commit only a very small percentage of sexual assaults, these cases do reflect the larger societal issue of sexual violence. According to the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, about one in five women have been raped in their lifetime (CDC, 2011). Moreover, nearly half of women will experience "sexual violence victimization other than rape at some point in their lives" (CDC, 2014).

Of these millions of women who have been sexually assaulted, experienced intimate partner violence (IPV), or been the victim of stalking, 81% reported significant impacts resulting from the violence, including symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), injury, missing school or work, and needing medical care or legal services (CDC, 2011). Based on the number of people affected and its devastating effects, sexual violence is clearly a public health issue. Moreover, considering nearly two-thirds of women who experience IPV report PTSD symptomology (CDC, 2011), it is an issue that affects clinical social work practice.

### **Sexual Violence in the Media**

Not only is the prevalence of sexual violence a problem, but the way it is portrayed in the media is also problematic. Due to the litigious nature of American society, much of the media coverage of sexual violence revolves around indictments and legal trials for sex crimes. In order to better understand the current state of media portrayal of sexual violence, it is important to look briefly at the history of rape laws.

### **Relevant History**

Up until relatively recently in the United States, laws and the legal process surrounding cases of rape and sexual violence were heavily biased in favor of the accused. Even until the 1970s, much of the legislation around rape still bore the vestiges of history, in that the laws were set up to protect men from vengeful accusations of rape (Cuklanz, 1996). For hundreds of years, a woman's marriageability—and in turn, her financial security—was founded on the basis of her being a virgin (Cuklanz, 1996). Thus, it was assumed that women were likely to make false claims of rape since so much was riding on premarital chastity (Cuklanz, 1996). As a result of this assumption, men enacted legislation to protect other men from these false allegations, which is arguably where rape mythology grew out of (Cuklanz, 1996). While there has been legal reform in the area of sexual violence, the effects of these historical attitudes still permeate today. In fact, many of the rape myths that will be discussed later in this paper are based on past beliefs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The recent highly publicized cases involving NFL players demonstrate the power of the media to draw attention to social issues like violence against women. Thus, understanding how sexual violence by professional athletes is portrayed in the media may



give clues as to how the public perceives the issue of sexual violence in general. The purpose of this study is to use critical discourse analysis to examine how an NFL quarterback and the woman who accused him of rape are portrayed in the television news media.

The specific case that will be analyzed in this study was covered in the media from March 2010 through June 2010. Ben Roethlisberger, the quarterback of the Pittsburgh Steelers, was accused of raping a 20-year-old female college student in the bathroom of a bar in Milledgeville, Georgia. The alleged victim reported the incident to the police, and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation was responsible for investigating the case. After an investigation lasting several weeks, District Attorney Fred Bright announced that no charges would be filed against Roethlisberger due to lack of evidence. Although Roethlisberger did not face criminal charges, he was issued a six-game suspension, which was later reduced to four games for “good behavior,” by NFL Commissioner, Roger Goodell. Notably, at the time Roethlisberger was accused in this case, he was also involved in a pending civil lawsuit in which a female hotel employee at a Lake Tahoe casino had accused him of rape.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Professional Athletes and Sexual Violence**

Current statistics suggest that arrest rates for NFL players are lower for all categories of crime than arrest rates for men ages 25-29 in the general public (Morris, 2014). Nevertheless, it is troubling that 48% of NFL player arrests are for domestic violence (Morris, 2014). Moreover, the highest arrest rates for men ages 25-29 in the

general public are in the categories of drug-related crimes, driving under the influence, and nondomestic assault. However, for NFL players the highest arrest rates are for domestic violence, non-violent gun-related crimes, and sex offense crimes. Because NFL players do not reflect the general public when it comes to violence against women, this topic is worthy of further investigation.

In the peer-reviewed research literature, there is some debate about whether or not elite male athletes are over-represented as perpetrators of sexual violence (over-represented: Waterhouse-Watson, 2012; Dabbs, 1997; not over-represented: Locke & Mahalik, 2005). However, because elite male athletes are often afforded celebrity status, any sex crime committed by this group of men is highly publicized. Because these cases receive significant media attention, they are worth examining out of the broader context of sexual violence in the media. Benedict (1998) summarizes the issue in this way:

Although criminal complaints against recognizable athletes represent a statistically insignificant number of the overall sexual assault complaints filed with police and prosecutors, these few cases draw the most public attention. Violence against women perpetrated by athletes tends to be a touchstone of society's larger problem with the mistreatment of women (p. 95).

**Possible Explanations.** There is disagreement in the current literature about whether or not participation in high level athletics is correlated with increased propensity for committing sexual assault. One found that athletic involvement did not predict sexually aggressive behavior toward women in college students (Locke & Mahalik, 2005). However, another study, which involved Northeastern University and University

of Massachusetts college students, found that male student-athletes were over-represented in the reported sexual assaults on campus (as cited in Dabbs, 1997). Thus, although athletic involvement may not predict sexually aggressive behavior, there may still be a relationship between athletic involvement and sexual violence. Several authors have investigated possible explanations for why this relationship exists, and the three main factors that were identified in the research are highlighted below.

*Lack of accountability.* Benedict (1998) maintains that a lack of accountability for elite athletes, which often begins in high school and continues throughout college and into professional sports, contributes to the perpetuation of sexual violence against women. Benedict (1998, p. 13) writes, “student-athletes see their behavior condoned or overlooked when it violates either campus codes of conduct or local laws.” Dabbs (1997) noted a similar concern in her research, citing that college campus judicial boards have at times been ineffective in punishing student-athletes for misconduct. Moreover, since the proceedings of these judicial boards are not available for public scrutiny, they may be used to sweep issues of violence against women by athletes under the rug (Dabbs, 1997).

This lack of accountability is also an issue at the level of professional athletics. The NFL has a personal conduct policy, which covers perpetration of domestic violence and sexual assault; however, there are few examples of league commissioners, who have independent disciplinary power, disciplining athletes for these transgressions over the years (Dabbs, 1997). As mentioned previously, up until September 2014, there was no standardized punishment for players who committed or were accused of domestic violence or sexual assault. Prior to the recent policy update, the punishment for these acts

was solely based on the NFL commissioner's discretion. Benedict (1998, p. 8) argues that players are not held accountable for "socially deplorable conduct" because of "management's vested financial interest" in the players being available to play in games.

Not only are elite athletes often not held accountable by the professional sports leagues, they are rarely formally punished in the legal system. Benedict & Klein (1997; as cited in Benedict, 1998) found:

Out of 217 felony complaints of sexual assault against athletes filed between 1986 and 1995, 100 were dismissed by law enforcement, primarily due to insufficient proof to surmount the hurdle of reasonable doubt. Of the remaining 117 that resulted in indictment, 51 resulted in dropped charges or were pleaded down to misdemeanors. (p. x)

If players are not held accountable, they may be more likely to commit violence against women because they believe that there are no negative consequences associated with their actions. Moreover, this lack of accountability in the legal system is dangerous because it may further enhance athletes' perception of license to treat women in a degrading way (Benedict, 1998).

Professional athletes also tend not to be held accountable for their off-the-field behavior by the general public. Both Dabbs (1997) and Benedict (1998) assert that the American public has the power to influence the leagues and to exert pressure to change how issues of sexual violence are addressed. These authors also both note that professional athletes serve as role models for young people, which makes it more

imperative that they are held accountable if they commit sexual assault (Dabbs, 1997; Benedict, 1998).

**“Groupie behavior.”** Another factor at play in the relationship between sexual violence and professional athletes is the effect of “groupie behavior.” Benedict (1998) defines groupie behavior as the actions taken by a tiny percentage of women who seek to engage in random sexual encounters with professional athletes. It is important to note that sexual violence against women by professional athletes is likely better explained by their social status as a celebrity than a result of their athletic training (Benedict, 1998).

There are many consequences of the frequent contact between professional athletes and “groupies.” The primary result is that it narrows and distorts athletes’ view of women (Benedict, 1998). Specifically, the “jock-groupie tango” leads athletes to believe that all women are sexually compliant, and it can cause athletes to develop a purely sexual view of women (Benedict, 1998). The problem with these views is that some athletes may become convinced that all women are interested in sexual relations with them (Benedict, 1998). Ultimately, this mindset reduces the ability of the athletes to distinguish between force and consent (Benedict, 1998). As a result, these men “may develop attitudes and belief systems that allow them to justify sexual assault or not to define it as such” (Benedict, 1998, p. 91).

**Entitlement.** The concept of entitlement for professional athletes may also provide some insight into why athletes perpetuate sexual violence at higher rates than men in the general public. Benedict (1998) notes that athletes are often granted special privileges due to their high performance. For college-level athletes, these privileges

include scholarships, money for books, and access to tutors. However, professional athletes perceive access to women as just one of many rights that come with their status (Benedict, 1998). This sense of entitlement is chillingly captured by this quote from Benedict (1998, p. 10): “Whereas it is common for accused sex offenders to insist on innocence, professional athletes do not plead innocence, they plead license.”

**An Area for Further Study.** Much of the existing research regarding professional athletes and sexual violence examines the issue within the context of the legal system. In other words, much of the current literature focuses on legal cases and trials in which athletes are accused of rape. While this is valuable information, there is a lack of research regarding sexual assault cases that receive media attention but never go to trial. Considering many incidents of sexual assault never make it to trial, it is critical to examine these cases as well.

### **Rape Myths**

The existing body of research on the portrayal of sexual violence in the media most heavily focuses on the prevalence and impact of rape myths in the media. According to Burt (1980, p. 217), rape myths are defined as “prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs, prejudices or stereotypes about rape, rapists, and rape victims.” Many authors have outlined the common rape myths in their work and have examined the prevalence of various myths in the media (Burt, 1980; Sampert, 2010; O’Hara, 2012). It has been found “much of the news media’s coverage of sexual violence perpetuates myths and stereotypes about rape, rapists and rape victims” (O’Hara, 2012, p. 247). In the

next section of the paper, an overview of the most common rape myths will be provided, which will be followed by a discussion of the broader societal impact of these myths.

**Myths about the Act of Rape.** One of the most prevalent myths about rape is that it is about sex and not violence. Benedict (1992) argues that this myth is the most powerful and that it is the root of all the other rape myths. In a recent study of newspaper articles about rape, it was found that this was the most frequently used rape myth (Sampert, 2010, p. 307). Loś and Chamard (1997) also found evidence of the myth that rape is about sex not about violence in the news media discourse. They note that rape is portrayed as an “ambiguous interaction that has more to do with sex than violence” (Loś & Chamard, 1997, p. 294). It is important to understand that this rape myth is damaging because focusing on male lust “completely ignores the power dynamic that is inherent in sexual violence” (Sampert, 2010, p. 307). Benedict (1992, p. 14) further contends, “The idea that rape is sexual rather than an aggressive act encourages people not to take it seriously as a crime.”

**Myths about Rapists.** In general, Burt (1980, p. 217) found that, rapists are typically portrayed as “sex-starved, insane, or both.” Sampert (2010) found a similar myth in her study, noting that rapists are characterized as the “other.” Another study found that the news media frequently portrays perpetrators using monster imagery, which further supported this concept (O’Hara, 2012). The problem with the rapist as “other” myth is two-fold. For one, it perpetuates the stereotype that rapes are committed by strangers when, in reality, most are committed by a friend or acquaintance of the victim

(O'Hara, 2012; Sampert, 2010). The other issue is that, in cases where the perpetrator is not a "monster," the perception is that it is not a "real" rape (O'Hara, 2012).

Another common myth about rape is that men with good reputations do not sexually assault women (Sampert, 2010). This myth can often be seen in the media surrounding rape trials. Sampert (2010, p. 321) suggests, "While the man's good reputation can be used to exonerate him in media coverage of sexual violence, a woman's bad reputation can be used against her." This rape myth is also closely associated with the myth that innocent men are regularly accused of sexual assault, which plays on the fear that men will be unfairly blamed (Sampert, 2010).

**Myths about Rape Victims.** There are three popular myths regarding rape victims: (1) only "bad" girls get raped, (2) victims provoke the assault, and (3) women regularly lie about being raped (Burt, 1980; Franiuk et al., 2008; Sampert, 2010; O'Hara, 2012). O'Hara (2012) found support for the rape myth that only "bad" girls get raped in her analysis of media texts. It is argued that when the perpetrator cannot be portrayed as a "monster," then the victim is labeled as a "promiscuous woman" who invited the rape (O'Hara, 2012).

Perhaps the most common myth about rape victims is that they are somehow responsible for the attack, which is problematic because it shifts the blame away from the perpetrator and to the victim. This myth comes in many forms, including victims "ask for it" by getting drunk or wearing provocative clothing (Burt, 1980) or victims disregard their safety and place themselves in a position where they are vulnerable to sexual assault (Finch & Munro, 2007). Sampert (2010) contends this myth is even subtly communicated



when law enforcement releases information about what an individual can do to protect herself from sexual assault (i.e., avoid walking alone at night or avoid certain parts of town). While there are likely good intentions behind communicating these messages, it can also feed into the belief that women are responsible for failing to prevent sexual assault (Sampert, 2010).

The third myth about rape victims, which is that women regularly lie about being raped, also comes in many forms. One version of this myth is that the victim wanted sex at the time but changed her mind afterward (Franiuk et al., 2008). Additionally, it is often suggested that victims lie about being raped by high-profile perpetrators in order to gain fame or money or to seek revenge (Benedict, 1998). There also appears to be some confusion in the media regarding the concept of “unfounded” rape cases (Taylor, 1987; as cited in Gavey & Gow, 2011). Frequently, these unfounded cases end up being interpreted as false rape allegations or lies from the victim when, in fact, there may be many other reasons why the case is not investigated or prosecuted. Finally, it is important to note that the myth that women lie about rape also ties into the myth that innocent men are regularly accused of rape.

A consequence of the rape victims-as-liars myth is that the victims are often “put on trial” by defense attorneys and the media when they accuse men of sexual assault (Sampert, 2010). The prevalence of myths about rape victims in the media is supported by many research studies. The findings from one study suggest that female victims are generally “depicted in extremely negative terms: as sexually available, not respectable and not believable” (Loś & Chamard, 1997, p. 309).

**Broader Effects of Rape Myths in the Media**

There is a significant societal impact due to the presence of rape myths in the media. First, it has been argued that the propagation of rape myths in the media causes a narrow public perception of rape (Flowe et al., 2009). This is partially because the media gives disproportionate coverage to more stereotypical (i.e., stranger rape) or titillating rape cases (i.e., serial or gang rape) (Soothill, 1991; Franiuk et al., 2008). Gavey and Gow (2011, p. 343) argue that rape myths “have the effect of restricting understandings of what constitutes rape and justifying male sexual aggression against women.”

A narrow public understanding of rape is problematic on many levels. For one, stereotypes of rape, rapists, and rape victims “hinders discussion about the real causes of sexual violence” (O’Hara, 2012, p. 256). Specifically, stereotypes can serve to mask the fact that sexual violence against women is a societal issue. O’Hara (2012, p. 256) argues that, in perpetuating rape myths, “rape becomes a random act of violence rather than a societal problem.” Furthermore, Sampert (2010, p. 301) contends “legislative changes cannot work if the underlying societal beliefs continue to support myths and stereotypes about sexual violence.”

Another concern about the propagation of rape myths on a societal level is the impact that it has on the criminal justice system. Police officers, judges, attorneys, and jurors are all vulnerable to the influence of rape myths from the media discourse. Benedict (1998) notes this susceptibility to accepting rape myths is partially due to widespread stereotypes about female sexuality. Additionally, Estrich (1987) found

evidence that police are more likely to be sympathetic to victims of stereotypical rapes, such as stranger rapes (as cited in Gavey & Gow, 2011).

One of the most disturbing impacts of rape myths in the criminal justice system is their potential influence on jurors. In a ten-year study of juries, LaFree (1989) found “pre-established myths correlated with a verdict more reliably than any objective evidence presented at trial” (as cited in Sinclair & Bourne, 1998, p. 576). In some ways this finding is shocking; however, juries are simply a group of community members, which likely reflect the overall public’s beliefs and attitudes (Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). Koss and Gaines (1993, p. 102) suggest “rape-supportive attitudes are socially acquired beliefs.” Thus, due to the existence of rape myths in the media, it makes sense why juries would hold these views regarding rape myths. Clearly rape myths have a dramatic impact on the ways in which incidents of sexual violence are dealt with in the criminal justice system.

While rape myths affect society as a whole and the way victims are treated in the legal system, they also undoubtedly contribute to adverse psychological impacts on individual rape victims. When rape myths are propagated in the media, it sends the message to victims that their experience is not a “real rape” if it does not conform to rape myths (Benedict, 1992; Sampert, 2010). This message would understandably be quite harmful and devaluing. Du Mont and Parnis (1999, p. 102) suggest that rape myths contribute to “negative societal reactions to those who have been sexually assaulted,” and the myths “serve to trivialize, justify, and deny sexual assault.”

### **Avoiding Rape Myths in the Media**

There appears to be a general consensus among feminist scholars that there are steps the media can take to prevent rape myth propagation. Worthington (2008) suggests that more progressive news coverage of sexual violence is critical, and she outlines four major criteria for progressive news coverage.

The first criterion is that stories should be selected that reflect accurately the types of crimes that occur (Worthington, 2008). Loś and Chamard (1997) echo this sentiment; by reporting on acquaintance rapes in addition to more stereotypical cases of stranger rape, the public will be presented with a more accurate picture of sexual violence. The second criterion for progressive news coverage of sexual violence is that the media must avoid “sexist stereotypes that either blame the victim or mitigate suspect responsibility” (Worthington, 2008, p. 3). Frese, Moya, & Megías (2004, p. 156) add, it needs to be made clear that there “are no circumstances under which a woman gives up her right to say no to sexual intercourse.” The third criterion is that attention must be paid to the role of social structures in causing and normalizing sexual violence against women (Worthington, 2008). The fourth principle is that the perspectives of either victims or their advocates must be included in the media coverage (Worthington, 2008). O’Hara (2012, p. 253) supports this notion: “reporters may not have access to the victim or her family, but they can interview counsellors or medical professional about the effects of sexual violence.” If the media were to adhere to these four principles, sexual violence would be portrayed more realistically and appropriately, and the propagation of rape myths would decrease.

### **Influence of Rape Myths**

It is evident that rape myths are powerful and prevalent in society. When it comes to examining sexual violence in the media, it is important to understand the psychological and behavioral impacts of rape myth acceptance on individuals as well. It is also critical to understand the broader societal impact that results from rape myth acceptance by individuals. Finally, because this study focuses on professional athletes and sexual violence, the existing literature on the relationship between rape myth acceptance and masculinity will also be reviewed.

**Rape Myth Acceptance by Individuals.** Many studies have investigated rape myth acceptance or RMA. RMA is conceptualized as, “the amount of stereotypic ideas people have about rape, such as that women falsely accuse men of rape, rape is not harmful, women want or enjoy rape, or women cause or deserve rape by inappropriate or risky behavior (Burt, 1980; as cited in Frese et al., 2004, p. 145). Much research has been devoted to examining what contributes to rape myth acceptance, differences between high RMA and low RMA individuals, and the impact of RMA. Significant findings from these studies will be highlighted below.

In one research study, participants were presented with a scenario of either spousal rape, acquaintance rape or stranger rape. Findings indicated the participant’s level of RMA was a factor in determining his or her attribution of victim blame, estimation of trauma, and likelihood of reporting the crime to the police (Frese et al., 2004). Specifically, participants with high RMA attributed more victim blame, lower estimation of trauma, and lower probability of reporting the crime (Frese et al., 2004). These findings suggest that individuals with high RMA may perceive acts of sexual

assault to be less serious than they are. The results of this study have implications for perpetrators' understanding of the repercussions of committing sexual violence and whether or not victims report their crimes.

Frese and colleagues (2004) also suggest stereotypic ideas about rape are most influential in cases that are perceived as more ambiguous. This assertion is supported by the finding that blame was attributed most to the victim and least to the assailant in the acquaintance rape scenario (Frese et al., 2004). Considering acquaintance rape is the most common type of rape, the findings of this study have far-reaching implications for how jurors and the public may perceive this type of sexual violence.

A 2005 study by Bohner and colleagues sought to examine the relationship between RMA and rape proclivity. The authors found that men who were administered an RMA questionnaire prior to taking a survey to assess rape proclivity had higher scores on the rape proclivity measure than participants who received the RMA questionnaire after the rape proclivity survey (Bohner et al., 2005). These findings indicate that exposure to rape myths may increase an individual's tendency to commit an act of sexual violence. Therefore, if individuals are exposed to rape myths in the media, the likelihood of individuals committing sexual assault may also increase.

A longitudinal study that examined rape-accepting attitudes and forced sex in adolescent males found that changing rape myth attitudes produced behavioral change in participants over time (Lanier, 2001). The findings of the study indicate that "targeting rape myth attitudes in males as a way to prevent forced sex is warranted" because "diminishing rape-supportive attitudes in males can be effective in lowering perpetration

of forced sex” (Lanier, 2001, p. 883). Although this was only one study, the findings suggest that the way people think about rape has the potential for tremendous influence on their behavior. If the media continues to spout rape myths as truth, people will likely continue to hold higher levels of rape-accepting attitudes. As a result, as this study indicates, there may be higher rates of sexual violence.

Another study found male participants who were exposed to rape myth endorsing newspaper headlines regarding the Kobe Bryant rape case were more likely hold rape-supportive attitudes and less likely to think Bryant was guilty (Franiuk, et al., 2008). Moreover, findings from this study suggest that cases that adhere to rape myths are more likely to be prosecuted. These studies clearly demonstrate the impact that rape myth acceptance can have on how acts of rape, alleged victims, and alleged perpetrators are perceived in the criminal justice system and by the general public.

**Rape Myths and Masculinity.** Professional athletes, especially those who engage in contact sports like football, are often assumed to have traits associated with hypermasculinity. Thus, it is important to investigate the interplay of rape myth acceptance, rape proclivity, and masculinity. There is a substantial amount of research in this area. Locke and Mahalik (2005) sum up some of the most significant findings in this way: traditional masculinity attitudes predict men’s adherence to rape supportive beliefs (Bunting & Reeves, 1983) and men’s aggressive sexual behaviors (Mosher & Anderson, 1986); men’s traditional views of the male role correlated to attitudes supportive of date rape (Truman, Tokar, & Fischer, 1996) and rape myth acceptance (Davis & Liddell, 2002); and men’s beliefs and expectations about masculinity were the most powerful and

consistent predictor of their sexual violence supporting beliefs and behaviors (Good, Heppner, Hillenbrand-Gunn, & Wang, 1995).

While it is useful to know that there is a relationship between masculinity and rape myth acceptance and rape proclivity, it is also critical to understand what is meant by “masculinity.” In their 2005 study, Locke and Mahalik operationalized masculinity into nine different dimensions. The study results indicated that masculinity norms reflecting power with women (“Power over Women” and “Playboy”), interpersonal power (“Dominance”), and disdaining gay men (“Disdain for Homosexuals”) were particularly strong predictors of sexual aggression and rape myth acceptance (Locke & Mahalik, 2005). The authors recommend “cognitive therapy techniques could be used to help men identify and challenge particular masculinity norms (e.g., patriarchal attitudes or devaluing women) that may constrain their own well-being as well as contribute to sexual aggression (see Mahalik, 1999)” (Locke & Mahalik, 2005, p. 282).

Although these authors are likely referring to working to alter the cognitions in sexually aggressive men on an individual basis, it is arguable that challenging masculinity norms should also occur at a societal level in order to have a broader effect. The way masculinity norms are presented in the public discourse may be a way to target this change. Additionally, the suggestion from Locke & Mahalik’s study also points to the importance of cognitions and ways of thinking about sexual violence. If the schemas that individuals use for understanding sexual assault and masculinity can be shifted, then it is possible that behaviors may be changed as well.



Benedict (1998) notes, demonstrated masculinity is an “occupational necessity” for professional athletes. He goes on to identify the unique relationship between masculinity and high-level athletics:

It is generally accepted by scholars that American culture supports male behavior that encourages men to distance themselves from feminine perceptions; encourages quests for power, status, and control; refuses to show emotion (e.g., acting tough) and approves of aggression. Whereas these credos may be advertised and promoted to the society at large, they are intricately woven into the prerequisites of successful participation in aggressive sports. (p. 89)

Based on attitudes toward sex roles and masculinity, it would seem that professional athletes would be at greater risk for perpetrating sexually violent crimes.

A 1999 study by Hinck & Thomas also addresses issues around gender roles and rape myth acceptance. The results of this study indicate men expressed weaker disagreement with rape myths than women, which is consistent with previous research (Franiuk et al., 2008; Bohner, 2001; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). The authors also found that specific factors including victim blame and sex role expectations were related to an individual’s level of RMA (Hinck & Thomas, 1999). These findings are also consistent with previous research that has suggested RMA is correlated with increased gender role stereotyping (Burt, 1980).

Adhering to gender role stereotypes for men would include displaying more masculine traits. Since professional football players are thought to be ultra-masculine by virtue of their participation in a contact sport at an elite level, there may be greater

acceptance of rape myths by these athletes. If there are, in fact, higher levels of RMA by professional athletes, it would follow that there may be higher rates of sexual assault perpetration by this group as well. Although the influence gender roles may be involved in many cases of sexual violence, there may be a unique relationship for perpetrators who are professional athletes.

### **Importance of Language**

**Why language matters.** Social constructionism posits that meaning and understanding are developed among human beings and that language is an essential tool for constructing reality. Thus, from this theoretical perspective, the media plays a critical role in creating reality around various social issues. It is arguable that this lens is especially effective in examining the interplay between the media and public perception of sexual violence.

Several authors have identified the important role that the media plays in shaping public opinion about rape (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012; Soothill, 1991). Sampert (2010) takes a slightly different, but nonetheless helpful, perspective, arguing that the news media reflects social reality. Sampert (2010, p. 301) writes, "To understand how society views sexual assault, it is important to understand the media discourse about sexual violence." The relationship between the media and public perception is perhaps best articulated by Bird and Dardenne (1988, p. 82), who write, "While news is not fiction, it is a story about reality, not reality itself." Each of these perspectives is critical to bear in mind when analyzing media around a particular instance of sexual violence.

**Terminology.** There are many words used in the media to describe incidents of sexual violence. Rape, sexual assault, and attack are just a few of the commonly used terms. Interestingly, even though many women have experienced an event that would meet the legal definition rape, a significant proportion of these women do not label their experience as rape (Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003). Kahn and colleagues (2003) argue that using the label of rape is important. This is because if victims do not label their experience as rape, then they are less likely to report the crime, which in turn prevents the perpetrator from being punished (Kahn et al., 2003). Another issue with terminology was identified by Sampert (2010). She notes that the media occasionally refers to sexual assaults as “sexual relations,” which “subverts the coercive and violent aspects of sexual assault” (Sampert, 2010, p. 307).

**Passive versus active voice.** Another linguistic technique used in the public discourse on sexual violence is the choice of selecting active or passive verbs. The decision by a journalist to use the passive or active voice in reporting has implications for how the story is understood by the audience. Bohner (2001, p. 515) writes, “The passive voice is used to put the actor in the background and the acted-upon person in the focus of discourse.” In the context of media discourse surrounding issues of sexual violence, this has critical implications.

Several studies have examined the impact of using passive versus active voice in describing incidents of rape. In one study, the authors found that female victims were almost always discussed in media reports on rape using the passive voice (Loś & Chamard, 1997). However, women were described as “agents” by the usage of active

voice when they were acting in a way that would increase their chances of victimization (i.e., drinking alcohol, going places alone) (Loś & Chamard, 1997). The authors suggest this implies that “when women act it is in their peril” (Loś & Chamard, 1997, p. 318).

Another study examined media portrayals of professional soccer players in Australia. Findings from this study suggest that passive voice can be used as a literary technique to abdicate responsibility from the alleged perpetrators (Waterhouse-Watson, 2011). The author writes that grammatical patterns in the media “represent the players as passive and not responsible for anything that takes place” (Waterhouse-Watson, 2011, p. 6).

In an additional study, Bohner (2001) found that increased use of the passive voice in describing an incident of rape is correlated with increased levels of RMA. Furthermore, participants who used more passive voice in this study perceived the crime as less severe and ascribed more responsibility to the victim in the acquaintance rape scenario. Bohner (2001) suggests that the use of passive voice in describing rape serves as a way to place more responsibility for the attack on the victim. Based on these research studies, it is clear that the use of passive versus active voice in the media plays an important role in how the public may come to attribute responsibility for acts of sexual violence.

### **Beyond Language**

While word choice plays a crucial role in public discourse, there are also other rhetorical and syntactical choices in media speech and text that contribute to how society makes meaning of a particular issue. Specifically, it is critical to examine how sexual

violence as a social issue is framed in the media. Additionally, feminist scholars note that it is important to pay attention to the omissions in media discourse. Finally, it is essential to examine who is given a voice when it comes to speaking on the social issue at hand. In other words, it may be pertinent to consider whether males or females are reporting on a case involving sexual violence. It may also be important to note whether law enforcement, attorneys or sexual assault victim advocates are selected as the experts in cases dealing with sexual violence.

**Framing.** In the context of media studies and journalism, framing can be broadly defined as the way in which a social issue or a story is constructed. According to Carragee and Roefs (2004, p. 216), framing consists of “patterns of selection, emphasis, interpretation, and exclusion.” Entman (1993) adds:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 5)

Framing is an important element to examine in the media portrayal of sexual violence. Research shows the way in which a story is framed shapes how the broader issue and the particular event are interpreted (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). For example, in many instances, the media frames rape as isolated events. In doing so, the media serves to disregard the broader social practices and phenomena that contribute to sexual violence (Smart & Smart, 1978; as cited in Loś & Chamard, 1997).

Framing also influences viewers' attributions of responsibility (Iyengar, 1991, 1996; as cited in Carragee & Roefs, 2004). In a study on the supposedly rising number of false rape accusations, Gavey and Gow (2011) found that framing is critical. The results of this study suggest media reports often align more with the "police side" than the "victim side" in a rape case, which can serve to discount the victim's experience (Gavey & Gow, 2011). Thus, viewers may attribute less responsibility than is warranted to the alleged perpetrator or the police in their handling of a case.

**What Is Not Said.** Several authors argue it is also important to examine what is omitted from the discourse (O'Hara, 2012; Gavey & Gow, 2011; Loś & Chamard, 1997; Sampert, 2010). Upon reviewing the existing literature on the media portrayal of sexual assault, there appear to be two critical omissions. The first omission is that the media tends to disregard the impact of the attack on the victim (O'Hara, 2012). O'Hara (2012) contends that ignoring the experience of the victim can be devaluing and harmful to the victim and also detrimental to society as a whole. Furthermore, Sampert (2010, p. 327) maintains that the media largely overlooks that sexual assault is not an "isolated problem that happens to a tiny majority." Insufficient attention is given to the reality that sexual assault is "a larger issue that can have a significant impact on a woman's ability to live a full, happy, and healthy life" (Sampert, 2010, p. 327).

The second omission is that the media fails to address the historical and sociocultural supports for rape (Gavey & Gow, 2011; Loś and Chamard, 1997). This omission has several dimensions. First, the media largely ignores the patriarchal power structure in society. Loś and Chamard (1997) argue that rape is "not a crime like any

other, but a part of the systemic oppression and objectification of women” (p. 317).

Second, Gavey and Gow (2011, p. 351) found evidence to suggest some aspects of rape (i.e., false rape allegations) are presented “within a truncated historical narrative” which “allows the legacy of patriarchal constructions of rape to be downplayed, if not entirely erased.” These omissions provide evidence for the importance of analyzing not only what is included in the media discourse on rape but also examining what is not said, particularly when it comes to issues of power.

**Having a Voice.** In addition to paying attention to what is not said in the media discourse surrounding sexual violence, it is also important to note to whom the media gives a voice. Both Cuklanz (1996) and Loś and Chamard (1997) address the fact that women’s voices are often not afforded the same status as men’s voices in the media discourse. Specifically, Cuklanz (1996, p. 2) contends “female, feminine, and feminist perspectives are often distorted or eliminated from public discussion of even those issues and policies that affect women most.” The distortion and elimination of female perspectives in public discourse serves to silence “groups and individuals who wish to speak against established practices, beliefs, policies, and definitions,” which “is central to the maintenance of existing power relations” (Cuklanz, 1996, p. 2).

Loś and Chamard (1997) comment that criminal justice professionals, such as policemen, government officials, and judges, are often relied on as the primary sources of information when it comes to crime reporting. As a result, these mostly male-dominated groups act as “definers” of social issues, such as rape (Loś & Chamard, 1997). Hence, the female voice is overlooked in this way as well. Furthermore, Loś and Chamard (1997, p.

322) found when women's voices were included in the media discussion, their "knowledge was not treated on equal terms with that provided by male representatives." In the context of newspaper reporting on rape reform laws in Canada, the authors found "the authority of feminist voices was undermined by the tendency to portray them as biased, emotional, and incoherent" (Loś & Chamard, 1997, p. 322). Thus, it stands to reason that it is not sufficient to only examine the words that are spoken or written in the media discourse on sexual violence, but it is also critical to analyze who is given a voice.

### **Television versus Newspapers**

Many previous studies have examined the portrayal of sexual violence against women in newspapers. However, there has been much less attention paid to how alleged perpetrators and victims are portrayed in television news. According to the Pew Research Journalism Project, there has been a significant decline in Americans relying on newspapers as their primary source of news (Olmstead, Jurkowitz, Mitchell, & Enda, 2013). Moreover, this same study has found that television is the main way that American adults get their news at home (Olmstead et al., 2013). Thus, it stands to reason that the portrayal of sexual violence in television news warrants further study since it is the primary source of news for most people.

Another reason to analyze television news versus newspapers is the way in which language is communicated in each. When it comes to television, news anchors and guest commentators often speak more casually and more "off the cuff" than reporters do in newspaper articles. This type of communication could be an example of what van Dijk refers to as "micro-level text and talk." According to van Dijk (2001, p. 261), this type of



communication is “often less consciously controlled” which allows for “more ‘unofficial’ exercise of power.” Thus, public discourse in the television news media may be fundamentally different from newspapers. Since very little research has been done on media portrayals of sexual violence on television, it stands to reason that further research is warranted.

### **Research Question**

Therefore, the research questions being proposed are: (1) How are Ben Roethlisberger, the alleged perpetrator, and the alleged female victim portrayed in the television news media? (2) Is there a difference in how they are portrayed on Fox News versus ABC News? (3) What are the broader societal impacts of the portrayal of the alleged perpetrator and the alleged victim in these cases?

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of analytic framework that focuses on exploring the societal power imbalances that emerge in written and spoken discourse (Fairclough, 1995). CDA operates on the assumption that meaning is socially constructed and that language plays an important role in the construction of meaning. In other words, CDA maintains, “the language we use not only represents, but also creates the world” (Altheide, 2003; as cited in White & Stoneman, 2012, p. 110).

Examining power structures is an important aspect of CDA because “discourses have the potential to reflect, reproduce and transform power relations between and among individuals and social systems” (Fairclough, 1995; as cited in Mancini, 2011, p. 649).

Moreover, CDA analysts contend that public discourse serves to maintain systems of power (Park, 2005). In order to give a voice to the oppressed, it is critical to bring to light the often invisible power structures embedded in public discourse.

Critical discourse analysts contend that the power relations in discourse can be revealed through the examination of style, rhetoric, and meaning of text and speech (van Dijk, 2001). Analysts may look for metaphors and contrasts between “us” and “them” in rhetoric (van Dijk, 2001), omissions and framing (Mancini, 2011) or patterns, contradictions, and inconsistencies (Wilson, 2004). However, it is important to note that there is no one correct way to perform CDA (van Dijk, 2001; Mancini, 2011).

One unique aspect of CDA is that the analyst does not maintain neutrality on the issue being examined, but rather the analyst must take a position on the issue and make his or her stance explicit (van Dijk, 2001). The reason the analyst does not maintain neutrality is two-fold. First, critical discourse analysts believe that no usage of language in public discourse can ever truly be neutral (Park, 2005). Therefore, the person analyzing the discourse can also not be neutral. Second, critical discourse analysts do not maintain neutrality because they seek social change through critical understanding (van Dijk, 2001).

CDA is consistent with the values of social work practice as it seeks to align with and liberate oppressed groups (Van Dijk, 2001). This perspective is fitting for examining sexual violence against women due to the inherent power differentials between men and women in society. Furthermore, Sampert (2010: 303) argues, “using CDA allows for a

clearer understanding of the deeply embedded nature of the cultural scripts regarding sexual assault.”

### **Feminist Theory**

While there are many different facets of feminist theory, feminists broadly seek to understand power differentials in society as a result of gender. Feminist researchers often explore issues related to gender roles and norms, gender inequality, and oppression. Feminist theory is also concerned with giving a voice to women and understanding the female experience.

Feminist theory is being used as one of the conceptual frameworks for this research study for several reasons. First, much of the existing body of research on sexual violence against women has examined the issue from a feminist perspective. This study seeks to maintain consistency with previous research methods. Moreover, as sexual violence is an issue that disproportionately affects women, it is logical to examine this subject from a feminist perspective. Finally, a feminist lens is being used in this study because sexual violence is understood by many researchers to be impacted by the patriarchal nature of Western society.

While many of the tenets of feminism overlap with CDA when it comes to analyzing discourse, feminists examine texts from a slightly different angle. From a feminist perspective, it is critical to identify “exclusions, erasures, and missing information” from documents (Reinharz, 1992). Once these omissions are identified, the researcher must consider the implications of these gaps (Reinharz, 1992). Previous research has shown the implications are frequently related to gender and power

imbalances in society. Thus, feminist theory and CDA are complementary perspectives for analyzing public discourse.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The overall purpose of this research study was to examine how an alleged rape victim and the alleged offender are portrayed by the television news media by investigating a rape accusation that involves a high profile perpetrator. This design of this research study includes collecting qualitative data from transcribed television news clips that address a sexual assault allegation case against Ben Roethlisberger, quarterback of the Pittsburgh Steelers. The qualitative data was then analyzed using a critical discourse analysis perspective.

### **Sample**

For this study, 12 television news clips were included in the sample based on several criteria. The first criterion was each news clip must have originated from either Fox News or ABC News. The researcher selected six clips from each network that covered the lifespan of the news coverage of the case in order to facilitate a comparison between the networks. Additionally, using data from both networks allowed for a more comprehensive examination of the case as a whole. The second criterion was that each news clip must reference Ben Roethlisberger and the rape accusation from the Georgia college student. Finally, each news clip had to contain commentary from a news anchor, reporter, or host.

The decision to examine the rape allegations against Ben Roethlisberger was chosen due to the researcher's interest in professional football, media portrayals of women, and the issue of sexual violence. This particular case was chosen because all three of these topic areas were involved. Additionally, this case was selected due to the time frame in which it occurred. The media covered this rape allegation against Roethlisberger in the spring of 2010 through the summer of 2010. Therefore, this case is recent enough to be relevant to the current state of the media, but it is old enough that the researcher has access to news clips that cover the entire lifespan of the case.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

This study did not involve human subjects. Therefore, no protections had to be made.

### **Data Collection**

Television news clips were found through several means. First, the video archive section of the Fox News website was searched using the search term "Ben Roethlisberger." This search term returned 10 results that covered the rape allegation case involving the Georgia student. Two of these clips would not play, seemingly due to a technical error from the website. Thus, these clips could not be included in the sample. Three of the clips were excluded from the sample because they originated from the Fox Business network instead of Fox News. Another clip was excluded because its primary focus was on the NFL draft and only briefly mentioned the rape allegation. Therefore, the remaining four news clips from the original search were included in the sample because they met the inclusion criteria.

Next, additional news coverage of the rape allegation against Roethlisberger was found by searching for transcripts in the LexisNexis Academic database. The term “Ben Roethlisberger” was used in the initial search. The search results were then refined by setting the date range from January 2010 to December 2010. Six news transcripts met the inclusion criteria. In order to collect visual data for each of these news clips, the website TV News Archive (<https://archive.org/details/tv>) was searched to find the corresponding video clips for the transcripts obtained from LexisNexis.

In order to facilitate a comparison between networks, the researcher wanted to find more news clips from Fox News. Therefore, the TV News Archive website was searched for additional clips. The following search criteria were used: (1) search term “Ben Roethlisberger,” (2) year 2010, and (3) Fox News network. The researcher then looked for a news clip that covered the DA’s decision not to file charges and a news clip that discussed Roethlisberger’s suspension by the NFL commissioner. News clips on these two specific topics were sought out because these were two significant occurrences in the news coverage that had been missed in the original search on the Fox News website.

The transcripts from ABC News were available through LexisNexis. However, the audio from each Fox News clip was transcribed verbatim using a transcription service. The researcher also collected data on the visual aspects of the news clips, noting what text and background images appeared on screen as well as notable facial expressions by reporters, anchors, or commentators.

It is important to note that the researcher had originally intended to compare news coverage of the rape allegation on Fox News and CNN. However, due to the availability of data, the sample had to be adjusted.

### **Data Analysis**

The news clip transcripts were analyzed using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) lens. As mentioned in the Conceptual Framework section, there is no one particular method for CDA. Nevertheless, the hallmark of CDA is to examine the subtle and overt power structures that emerge in the discourse. Thus, this attention to power differentials was reflected in the coding framework. The coding categories also reflected a feminist perspective as feminist theory is the other conceptual being used for this study.

The researcher began analyzing the textual data by reading through the news clip transcripts several times. The researcher then open coded each transcript, which involved going line by line and identifying a word or phrase to describe the main concept of each line. The researcher then reviewed the transcripts and identified incidents of speech relating to rape myths, accountability (or lack thereof), “groupie behavior”, and entitlement. The researcher also examined the rhetorical style of the transcripts, including unusual word choices, metaphors, and euphemisms. The use of passive versus active verb choice regarding actions of the alleged perpetrator or the alleged was also noted. The researcher looked for informational omissions in the transcripts as well as what types of individuals were asked to comment on or serve as “experts” regarding the case.

After the textual data had been analyzed, the researcher examined visual data of the news clips. The researcher first noted what text was used on the bottom of the screen

and what, if any, photographs or video footage were used in the background. The use of other news clips (i.e., press conference from the DA, police video of the interview with alleged victim, etc.) was also noted. Additionally, noteworthy facial expressions or other nonverbal cues from news anchors or commentators were recorded. The visual data was analyzed in light of the words that were being spoken. Special attention was given to patterns, contradictions, and inconsistencies between images and spoken word.

### **Findings & Discussion**

Three dominant themes emerged in the analysis of the news clips. First, Roethlisberger was portrayed as a “target” due to his status as a professional athlete. Second, the victim’s lack of credibility was emphasized in the discourse. Third, there were discrepancies between much of the spoken discourse and the visual imagery in the news clips.

These themes were mainly identified through patterns, inconsistencies, and omissions in the media’s use of language and visual imagery in the coverage of this case. These themes taken together served to depict Roethlisberger as innocent and the victim’s testimony as unbelievable. However, ABC News and Fox News differed substantially on the portrayal of this case. Overall, the ABC News coverage was more neutral toward Roethlisberger and the victim, and more descriptive reporting techniques were used. Whereas, the discourse on Fox News contained many rape myths, which served to shift responsibility away from Roethlisberger and toward the victim.

This portrayal of Roethlisberger and the victim was achieved through several different strategies used by the media. However, perhaps the most important technique



evident in the media discourse of this case is framing. The case was framed through “patterns of selection, emphasis, interpretation, and exclusion” (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 216). Framing incorporates the language used, which details are focused on in the case, and what is omitted from the discourse. In analyzing television news media, visual imagery can also be used for framing. How these media strategies were used as well as the effects they had on the portrayal of this case will be discussed further in this section.

### **Defending Big Ben**

In the media coverage of the rape allegation against Roethlisberger, he is overwhelmingly portrayed as innocent. This portrayal is achieved through several different tactics. First, Roethlisberger is depicted as a “target” due to his status as a professional athlete in the media discourse. Additionally, the victim is blamed, and her credibility is diminished. Finally, the seriousness of the accusation is downplayed by the media, and favorable visual images of Roethlisberger are used in the news clips.

**Who is the real victim?** In his seminal work on CDA, van Dijk (1993, p. 264) writes, “One of the ways to discredit powerless groups... is to pay extensive attention to their alleged threat to the interests and privileges of the dominant group.” This means of discrediting is quite common in public discourse around sexual violence. This notion relates to the rape myths that “good” men are regularly accused of rape and that rape is something that women frequently lie about (Sampert, 2010). An underlying theme in the media discourse of this case is “presuming that women are telling the truth threaten[s] justice for men accused of rape.... Inherent in such constructions is the notion of scarcity – that gains for women must mean losses for men” (Gavey & Gow, 2011, p. 353).

In this case, the media repeatedly draws attention to the ways in which the victim threatens Roethlisberger, despite the fact that he clearly holds more power. This concept is illustrated by the media's focus on Roethlisberger and other professional athletes as "targets." The quotes below illustrate this concept:

These guys are targeted constantly. This is a professional athlete. He's a football player. Has lots of money. The earlier claim was in the press quite a bit. In fact there was a lot of criticism about that first victim for not having gone to the hospital. Is this now an individual who's educated, who's read a lot about this particular football player? (Mercedes Colwin, Fox News, 2010c)

...we all know these high profile athletes, they're targets. I mean they are.

They're targets. (Arthur Aidala, Fox News, 2010d)

One commentator even uses the "groupie behavior defense" as illustrated in the excerpt below. Colwin tries to argue that Roethlisberger would not force himself on a woman who is not interested in him because there are many other women out there who are interested in him. However, this line of thinking ignores the fact that some professional athletes may have difficulty distinguishing between consent and force because they have been socialized to believe that all women are sexually compliant (Benedict, 1998).

...this is not a defense that I've ever expressed in court for professional athletes that I represent, but lots of women want these men. That could be the overarching theme here. Hey, you know what? There are a lot of women that line up, want to

date Ben, want to date other professional athletes. Why would he then force himself upon this young woman? (Mercedes Colwin, Fox News, 2010c)

**“A money grab.”** In some instances, the discourse progresses from professional athletes being targets to the athletes being targeted specifically for their money. Previous research on professional athletes and rape suggests that victims are often accused of alleging rape for financial gain. This pattern of discourse is also illustrated in the Roethlisberger case, as evidenced by the quotes below.

He [Roethlisberger] has a 100 million dollar contract. He has been in the news. He’s a star quarterback. Is there a chance he is being targeted by somebody who sees a payday? (Megyn Kelly, Fox News, 2010c)

I mean, I represent professional athletes that are facing these types of charges. It happens quite a bit and a lot of it has to do with money. (Mercedes Colwin, Fox News, 2010c)

Emphasizing financial gain as the motivation for accusing Roethlisberger of sexual assault served to discredit the victim. According to Waterhouse-Watson (2011, p.3), “The Gold Digger stereotype invalidates a rape complaint, as a woman who alleges rape for financial gain must be lying, and was therefore not raped. Her claims are to be doubted.” What is even more troublesome about this accusation is that the victim never sought a settlement deal from Roethlisberger. Therefore, she undoubtedly was not accusing him of rape in order to profit financially.

**Blaming the victim.** Several common rape myths work to shift blame to the victim (Burt, 1980). One of these myths is that women who claim they were raped are lying, have ulterior motives, or wanted sex at the time but changed their minds afterward (Franiuk et al., 2008). This rape myth, particularly the ulterior motive piece, is illustrated in the “money grab” allegation.

Another rape myth that shifts blame to the victim is that victims “ask for it” by getting drunk or wearing provocative clothing (Burt, 1980). In this case, there is no mention of the victim’s dress on the night of the incident, but the media does focus on the fact that she was intoxicated that night. Additionally, the victim’s credibility is repeatedly questioned, which suggests that she was lying about being raped.

*“She was wasted.”* As mentioned, a widespread rape myth is that women hold at least some responsibility for being raped if were intoxicated at the time of the attack. Five out of the 12 news clips mention the victim drinking alcohol that night or describe her as intoxicated. By focusing on the victim’s level of intoxication it subtly shifts the blame for the sexual assault from the perpetrator to the victim. Although it appears that the victim had been drinking prior to meeting Roethlisberger on the night of the incident, he did purchase alcohol for her at the bar. Nonetheless, in this case, the blame still is placed on the victim since she was “wasted.”

Another issue is that the description of the victim’s drinking is very different from how Roethlisberger is described. This discourse around Roethlisberger’s alcohol consumption that night is illustrated by the following quotes:

...you've got other witnesses in the bar, who describe him as having had several cocktails. (Megyn Kelly, Fox News, 2010c)

Even someone who's a little drunk like Ben was that night. Although they say he wasn't completely out of his mind, but he was definitely drunk. (Mercedes Colwin, Fox News, 2010c)

These descriptions of Roethlisberger are contrasted with the descriptions of the victim below.

The only evidence he found that corroborated her story was how drunk she was. (Arthur Aidala, Fox News, 2010b)

They don't deny that she was wasted. (Shepard Smith, Fox News, 2010b)

It is concerning that the victim being intoxicated seems to decrease her credibility, but Roethlisberger's drinking does not negatively impact his credibility. This point is highlighted further in this comment:

One of the big key things here, Megyn, is they say, both of them, this whole group, and all the witnesses say, both Roethlisberger and his team and the girl and her team, uh, her friends, had been drinking heavily throughout the night. Not just at one club, but at a number of clubs throughout the Milledgeville, Georgia area. (Trace Gallagher, Fox News, 2010f)

Gallagher says a "big key thing" is that both parties were drinking on the night of the incident. However, when it comes to credibility, it appears that being intoxicated only

negatively impacted the victim because Roethlisberger's credibility is never questioned. Furthermore, previous research studies have found evidence to suggest that alcohol use increases men's perception that female behavior is sexual in nature, decreases the perception of risk involved in sexual aggression, and increases the likelihood of sexual aggression (Fromme & Wendel, 1995; Koss & Gaines, 1993; Seto & Barbaree, 1995; Testa, Livingston, & Collins, 2000; as cited in Locke & Mahalik, 2005). Thus, the fact that Roethlisberger was drinking on the night of the incident is even more disconcerting. However, none of the potential risk factors for the perpetrator using alcohol was addressed in the media coverage of the incident.

*"Maybe she has some dirty laundry."* In this case, the victim issued a statement through her lawyer in which she indicated that she did not want to press charges in order to avoid "a very intrusive personal experience." In addition to not wanting to press charges, the victim also indicated that she would not testify if the case went to trial. However, since rape is a criminal offense, it was up to the District Attorney, representing the state of Georgia, to decide whether or not charges would be pressed.

There are two major concerns that emerge in the media discourse around the victim's decision not to press charges. First, the blame is subtly shifted to the victim. Second, possible consequences for a victim who does decide to press charges, especially against a high profile perpetrator, are largely ignored. The quotes highlighted in this section illustrate these points. In the first quote below, former prosecutor, Jason Friedman comments:

... you hate to say that they're victimized twice, but when you're alleging rape, sometimes that happens to these women. Sometimes they have some dirty laundry. They have some things that are in their past, or other things that happened that night that they don't want to become public, because it's just going to further tarnish them. (Jason Friedman, Fox News, 2010b)

Friedman may have had the intention of expressing empathy for alleged rape victims. However, his use of language and the omission of the larger context of sexual violence results in maintenance of the status quo when it comes to the issue of sexual violence. While Friedman does acknowledge that rape victims are sometimes victimized again when they go through the legal system, he seems to concede that that is just the way things are. However, he misses an opportunity to remark on the fact that women who allege rape should not have to be victimized again if they decide to press charges. Additionally, Friedman's use of the phrase about "dirty laundry" plays into the rape myth that only "bad" girls get raped.

Another problem with Friedman's comment centers on his remark that participating in a public trial is "just going to further tarnish" alleged victims. This type of language implies that the rape is the first "tarnishing." Inherent in this implication is that women are to blame for being "tarnished" by getting raped. His comment also suggests that being a rape victim is somehow shame worthy. By placing the blame on the rape victim and not holding the perpetrator accountable, this type of discourse serves to legitimize manifestations of male dominance that contributes to gender inequality in American society.

The quote below illustrates the damaging discourse regarding the victim's decision not to testify if the case went to trial.

But criminal charges against Roethlisberger were dismissed after the woman refused to cooperate, to avoid what her lawyer called “a very intrusive personal experience.” (Ron Claiborne, ABC News, 2010f)

There are several issues with this quote from ABC News Reporter Ron Claiborne. First, he implies that criminal charges were dropped because the victim did not want to press charges. However, according to the statement from the DA, the woman choosing not to testify was not the reason the charges were dropped. Additionally, the word choice of “refused to cooperate” has a negative connotation, and it ignores the stigma that sexual assault victims often face when their stories are in the media. Previous research indicates stigma is one of the reasons a victim may not press charges (Frese, Moya, & Megías, 2004). Furthermore, it has been suggested the fear of being stigmatized is justified (Frese, Moya, & Megías, 2004). The discourse, in this case, seems to support this finding from the existing literature.

**Believability.** The credibility of the victim is called into question in the media discourse in a variety of ways, which serves to decrease the believability of her testimony. As previously mentioned, the validity of the rape accusation is discredited when the media suggests that the victim made the allegation for financial gain. The victim's believability is also called into question through the media's focus on the fact that she was intoxicated on the night of the incident.



The victim's credibility is also questioned in other ways, namely through a pattern of discourse that implicitly labels her as a liar. Previous research suggests that the victims-as-liars rape myth often results in the media and defense attorneys putting the victim "on trial" (Sampert, 2010). There is certainly a pattern in this case of the media putting the victim on trial, as evidenced by the quotes highlighted in this section:

He [Roethlisberger] could go after her for slander. (Arthur Aidala, Fox News, 2010d)

My mind goes back to the Duke case... I go back to the Kobe Bryant case as well... (Martha MacCallum, Fox News, 2010d)

The references to the Duke case and the Kobe Bryant case are noteworthy because there were no rape convictions in either of these cases. By attempting to make a connection between the victim in the Roethlisberger case to the complainants in the other cases, MacCallum implies that this is another instance where a woman is lying about being raped.

Further doubts about the believability of the victim are also highlighted in the discourse below.

When the 20-year-old coed first talked to police, she wasn't even sure what had happened. (Steve Osunsami, ABC News, 2010c)

The victim had given contradictory statements. Her first statement to the police, "Did he rape you?" She said, "No." "Did he have sex with you?" "Well, I'm not sure." (Fred Bright, ABC News, 2010c)

Studies have shown that a victim's credibility gets challenged if they do not remember exact details from the incident (Weir & Brady, 2003). The media coverage of this case supports these previous findings. The problem with questioning the victim's first statement given to the police is that she may have still been intoxicated when she spoke to police. If that were the case, then it would make sense that she would not initially be able to put together a cohesive narrative of what happened that night. Furthermore, trauma impacts memory, and victims may have temporary amnesia about parts of the incident.

A fundamental question that must be asked is: "Does the media portray rape as something that happens to women, or as something that they lie about?" (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012, p. 67). Unfortunately, a theme that emerged in the media discourse is that rape is something women lie about, as evidenced by the fact that the victim's testimony and credibility are frequently called into question. This type of media discourse serves to perpetuate the rape myth that innocent men are regularly accused of rape and that women often lie about it. In order to avoid perpetuating this myth, the victim's testimony must be portrayed as believable (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012).

Nevertheless, a fundamental assertion is made by previous researchers regarding the media portrayal of rape victims as liars. Gavey & Gow (2011) assert:

We are not suggesting that women never lie about rape, but, like other feminist critics, we do argue that incommensurate and uncritical attention to such a possibility, a stereotype that has a long and oppressive social history, is not only unjustified but is "rape-supportive." (p. 356)

Another way to think about this issue is that the accused are given the presumption of innocence until they are proven guilty. Why then is the victim often presumed guilty of fabricating an allegation of rape until proven “innocent?” (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012).

**Boys will be boys.** In the instances where the Roethlisberger behavior is criticized, it is often done so through a “boys will be boys” lens. This defense of Roethlisberger’s actions emerged as a theme in the media discourse of this case. There are relatively frequent descriptions of Roethlisberger as being immature, dumb, and rude. Calling Roethlisberger names like “moron” and “jerk” takes away from the seriousness of the rape charges.

I mean Ben is a moron. He is not supposed to be out without security.... He’s guilty of being ignorant and stupid. (Tamera Holder, Fox News, 2010a)

...obviously he’s been a jerk. I mean he’s definitely a jerk, but a jerk doesn’t equal a rapist.... He’s a bit of a jerk, but let’s see what happens. (Mercedes Colwin, Fox News, 2010c)

Not only do Fox News commentators use this type of language, but so does Fred Bright, Ocmulgee Judicial Circuit District Attorney, in his interview with ABC News.

In response to a question, I was asked, “If he were your son, what would you say to him?” And the comment was, “Grow up.” (Fred Bright ABC News, 2010c)

Additionally, Roethlisberger uses similar language in a press conference where he apologizes for his behavior.

I've wanted to apologize for so many things, for being immature, for being dumb, for being young, for not knowing any better, for getting caught up with everything that was thrown my way. (Ben Roethlisberger, ABC News, 2010c)

One of the major issues with the boys-will-be-boys approach is that it fails to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions. When Roethlisberger makes his statement to the press, he apologizes “for not knowing any better.” Although he is not explicitly referring to the rape allegation in this news conference, we cannot afford “not knowing any better” to be an excuse for sexual violence.

**Defining a ‘real’ rape.** Stereotypes regarding rape, rapists, and victims can come into play in societal definitions of what constitutes a “real” rape. For example, in cases where the perpetrator is not portrayed as a “monster,” the perception is that it is not a “real” rape (O’Hara, 2012). In essence, the less a case conforms to stereotypes about rape the more likely people are to blame the victim and the less likely they are to blame the assailant (Frese et al., 2004).

In this case, the media attempts to define the “realness” of the rape based on how the victim acts after the assault. This point is illustrated by the comments made by Eglarsh and Holder below when they compare the Georgia victim and the Lake Tahoe victim.

Between the two, no question this is one more credible. First, she immediately ran to the police. That’s number one. Number two, you got potential witnesses. She was also taken to the hospital and you’ve got possible physical evidence that was gathered. Roethlisberger was actually interviewed in this case and his potential

admissions perhaps could corroborate the physical evidence. (Mark Eiglarsh, Fox News, 2010c).

She [the Lake Tahoe victim] just filed a civil complaint. There was no police reports, no investigation in that first case. There's a big difference between the two. (Tamera Holder, Fox News, 2010a)

From a legal standpoint, it is possible that the Georgia case may have resulted in a greater likelihood of prosecution given the amount of evidence that was collected in the case. However, I believe that is important to distinguish between "credibility" of the victim and the likelihood that the perpetrator will be found guilty in the court of law. Just because the accused cannot be found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt does not mean that the assault did not happen or that the victim is lying about it.

These types of comments send the message that if a victim does not go to the hospital or call the police right away then it is not a "real rape." However, this view ignores the fact that a majority of sexual assaults are perpetrated by individuals known to the victim. Furthermore, this belief also ignores that victims are less likely to go to the hospital or the police if they know the assailant (Koss & Gaines, 1993). Just because the victim does not do so, does not mean that a rape has not occurred.

### **Use of Visual Imagery**

**Contradictions.** An unexpected finding from the data analysis was the contrast between the verbal and visual messages that were transmitted in the news coverage. There are many instances, particularly from Fox News, where there are glaring

inconsistencies between the words that are spoken and the images that are shown on the screen.

Mason and Monckton-Smith (2008, p. 694) found evidence that “perpetrators of violence are regularly described as ‘beasts’ or ‘perverts’ and distanced from ‘ordinary’ men.” This type of discourse perpetuates the stereotype that “ordinary” men cannot be rapists and that if the perpetrator is not a “beast” or “pervert” then it is not a “real” rape (O’Hara, 2012). This issue is played out in the media coverage of this case, specifically through the imagery that is shown in the news clips.

For example, in one news clip, the speaker says, “Her friends tell police, they saw her go into that bathroom and were worried because she had been drinking, and heavily. They say they tried to follow her, but Roethlisberger’s bodyguards wouldn’t let them pass” (Shepard Smith, Fox News, 2010). As Smith says this, a photo of Roethlisberger smiling in a suit with his Super Bowl ring is shown in the background.

This same image of Roethlisberger smiling with his Super Bowl ring is shown again in another news clip when the commentator says, “that first victim for having not gone to the hospital. Is this now an individual who’s educated, who’s read a lot about this particular football player? He’s a bit of a jerk...” (Fox News, 2010c). The underlying message is this: Does this man look like a rapist? Based on society’s stereotype of rapists as “the other”, the overwhelming answer is no.

There is another instance of a troublesome disconnect between verbal and visual messages when Lis Wiehl, Fox News legal analyst, begins to talk about the details of the case. Lis Wiehl comments, “the allegation is that, from this woman that was raped in a

bathroom, that she left the bar right after that with a friend” (Fox News, 2010d), and there is an image of Roethlisberger throwing a football during a game. Again, the use of this type of image trivializes the seriousness of the allegation against Roethlisberger.

Additionally, a video of Roethlisberger laughing with teammates at practice is shown in the background while Smith reports:

Two women accused the Steeler of sexual misconduct on separate occasions. Roethlisberger will not face charges in either case as far as we know, but the league spokesperson says they looked into this latest accusation very carefully and are ordering him to meet with a doctor to see if he needs counseling. (Shepard Smith, Fox News, 2010e)

The viewer faces a dilemma here. A stigma exists around counseling, and there is an implication in the verbal message here that Roethlisberger may be “crazy.” Yet, the viewer sees Roethlisberger laughing with teammates, looking like an “ordinary” man. What is the audience to believe? What they hear or what they see?

Clearly, there is a pattern of discrepancy between what the audience hears and what they see in the coverage of the case on Fox News. This is noteworthy because much of the imagery works in Roethlisberger’s favor. Even when serious details of the case are being discussed, images of him playing football are shown, which helps make him look innocent.

The findings regarding the imagery in the media coverage of this case are consistent in some ways with previous research. One study examined photographs that accompanied news stories of rape cases and found “their most consistent message

appears to be that rape is a male affair” (Loś & Chamard, 1997, p. 310). In the study, 82% of the photographed individuals were male, and the authors argue, “The pictures only accentuate the invisibility, almost unreality, of rape victims (Loś & Chamard, 1997, p. 310). In the news coverage of the Roethlisberger case, almost all the images are of him.

**Fox News versus ABC.** The images from Fox News are in somewhat stark contrast to the images used in the media coverage on ABC News. Fox News overwhelmingly showed pictures and videos of Roethlisberger. The majority of these images were football-related, and Roethlisberger was seen smiling in many of them. Fox News did not choose to show any photographs from the night of the incident, except for the picture of Roethlisberger with the police officer who was later fired. Overall, the images on Fox News represented a positive portrayal of Roethlisberger.

However, on ABC News, there are more often images of the Capital City bar at night or police cars with flashing lights. In one news clip, a photograph of the bathroom, where the assault is said to have taken place, is shown on the screen. This image serves to give more credibility to the victim’s version of the events. While ABC News uses some images of Roethlisberger, the pictures tended to show him with more neutral facial expressions. Additionally, fewer photographs of Roethlisberger shown on ABC News are football-related, and quite a few pictures are shown from the night of the incident.

### **Critical Omissions**

**Power dynamics.** In this case, there are many facets at play when it comes to power dynamics. First, there is the issue of physical power. There are only two instances



out of the 12 news clips where Roethlisberger's physical size is mentioned. However, it is never explicitly stated that the size differential between these two individuals could have impacted "whatever happened in that bathroom" (Megyn Kelly, Fox News, 2010c).

Roethlisberger is 6'5", 240 pounds. Based on the video footage of the police interview with the victim, she looks to be about average size. Therefore, it stands to reason that Roethlisberger is likely almost twice her size. Clearly, there is a power differential, which goes largely ignored in the media coverage of the case.

Another overlooked aspect of power in this case is that men have more social power than women due to the patriarchal nature of U.S. society. By ignoring gender inequality as it pertains to the issue of sexual violence, the media serves to maintain hegemony. Previous research has shown that adherence to certain dimensions of masculinity, such as having power over women, is a reliable predictor of sexual aggression and rape myth acceptance (Locke & Mahalik, 2005). As long as men subscribe to the notion that masculinity means having power over women, sexual violence will continue to occur.

Furthermore, not only does Roethlisberger possess power due to his physical stature and his gender, but he also is a professional athlete who has a tremendous amount of social capital. Benedict (1998) synthesizes the notion of inequality in physical and social power as it relates to consent in this quote:

The concept of consent is premised on physical power to act and free use of that power. But celebrated athletes have an unsurpassed combination of power and

popularity, often placing the women who are with them on unequal ground from the outset. (p. 3)

The power differential between Roethlisberger and the victim is clear in this case. However, the media continues to use the ‘he said, she said’ discourse, which implies that both parties are on an equal playing field from the start. Because Roethlisberger has greater social capital, the “he said” side is taken more seriously. Another issue with the “he said, she said” discourse is that it reflects the myth that rape is an “ambiguous interaction that has more to do with sex than violence” (Loś and Chamard, 1997, p. 294). In turn, this myth is further reinforced.

*Consent.* As illustrated in the Benedict quote, embedded within the issue of power dynamics is the concept of consent. Remarkably, the issue of consent on the part of the victim is almost entirely ignored. In fact, consent is rarely mentioned outside of Roethlisberger’s assertion that the “sexual contact” was consensual. However, consent is perhaps the most important factor when it comes to whether or not a sexual assault has occurred.

In order to achieve progressive news coverage of sexual violence, it needs to be made clear that there “are no circumstances under which a woman gives up her right to say no to sexual intercourse” (Frese, Moya, & Megías, 2004, p. 156). According to Briere and Scott (2013), rape is defined as:

*Nonconsensual* oral, anal, or vaginal sexual penetration of an adolescent or adult with a body part or object, through the use of physical force, *or when the victim is*

*incapable of giving consent* (for example, *when under the influence of drugs or alcohol*, or when otherwise cognitively impaired. (p. 11, emphasis added).

However, the media hardly touches on the issue of consent in this case.

The audience is repeatedly reminded how intoxicated the victim was on the night of the incident, but it is never questioned whether she had the capability to give consent while under the influence of alcohol. The fact that Roethlisberger had been buying alcohol for the victim that night makes this issue even more problematic. However, it is never addressed by the media. This finding is consistent with the existing literature. Kramar (1994) found that “defendants in alcohol-related rapes are rarely convicted by juries, even though the pertinent statutes identify intoxication as one reason why a victim might not be able to give consent” (as cited in Sinclair & Bourne, 1998, p. 577).

**The victim.** There are several key omissions in regards to the victim, her voice, and her side of the story. Although the victim made the decision to stay out of media spotlight, there are other ways that her story could have been shared. It has been acknowledged that reporters may not always have access to a victim in order to understand how sexual violence affected her. Nonetheless, reporters do have the option to interview experts in the field of sexual assault prevention in order to understand the broader implications of rape (O’Hara, 2012). However, in this case, neither network chose to do so.

**Impact on the victim.** There is evidence that the media largely ignores the impact of the assault on the victim in this case, which is consistent with findings from previous research (e.g., O’Hara, 2012). In fact, very few of the news clips ever mentions the

victim's physical injuries from the night of the alleged sexual assault, which included bruises, bleeding, and lacerations. Instead of addressing the suffering experienced by the woman, most of the news coverage of this case focuses on the impact that the events have had and will have on Roethlisberger, as evidenced below.

How does this play out for him? (Megyn Kelly, Fox News, 2010c)

This cannot be a happy day for Ben Roethlisberger that he is dealing with this again. (Martha MacCallum, Fox News, 2010d)

*Giving a voice to the victim.* ABC News did choose to release portions of the videos of the police interviews with the victim, which gave her a voice in the coverage of the case. Waterhouse-Watson (2012) argues that featuring the testimony of the victim is important because it brings her version of the events to the public's attention. Although ABC did release excerpts of the victim's testimony, some of her statements were omitted in the coverage that served to weaken her side of the story. Perhaps the most critical omission in her police interview is discussed below.

ABC News shows a video clip from the interview, and the victim states, "One of his bodyguards came, and like, didn't grab my arm, but like, like, was like, 'Hey, come here.' Took me to this back, like, it's a hallway" (ABC News, 2010f). ABC News anchor Ron Claiborne then says, "The woman who admitted later she was drunk, says the 6'5", 240-pound Roethlisberger came into the hallway, exposing himself, and then forced himself on her in this bathroom" (ABC News, 2010f). The victim's testimony resumes, and another portion of the police interview is shown. The victim is heard saying:

He, like, followed me in and shut the door. And that's when he proceeded to have sex with me. And the whole time I said, "You know, we really don't need to do this. This isn't okay." And like, "We shouldn't be doing this." Then he just, like, got up and left. (ABC News, 2010f)

It is admirable ABC News chose to use the victim's voice in their news coverage of this case. However, the decision to omit a portion of the victim's testimony and to interject with Claiborne's words is unfortunate. Not only does the audience not hear the victim's version of this part of the story, but the victim is subtly discredited by the news anchor. This is illustrated when Claiborne states, the victim "later admitted she was drunk" (ABC News, 2010f). Furthermore, hearing the news anchor say Roethlisberger "exposed himself" does not have the same effect on the audience as hearing the victim's testimony. The omitted portion of the victim's testimony is as follows:

Ben comes back there [the hallway]. His penis is already out of his pants. And I was like, no, this is not right. Like, I don't agree with this. I got up and I, like, went to the first door that I saw, which happened to be, like, a bathroom.  
(Associated Press, 2010)

This version paints a different picture than the statement made by the news anchor.

While ABC News at least included some video clip excerpts from the victim's interviews with the police, Fox News did not show the videos at all. In fact, Fox News devotes very little air time to the victim's side of the story. In one of the few instances where the victim's side of the story is shared, Shepard Smith, the Fox News anchor covering the story, is flippant and disrespectful. Smith reads a section of the victim's

report and chuckles after he reads the words, “I still said no, this is not okay, and then he had sex with me. He said it was okay” (Fox News, 2010b).

**The larger social context of sexual violence.** Previous research indicates a problem with media coverage of sexual violence is that it is often presented as an isolated event as opposed to a societal problem (Sampert, 2010). This concept is also an issue in the media coverage of the Roethlisberger case. Despite the fact that Roethlisberger was currently involved in a civil suit related to a rape charge while the Georgia incident was in the news, the media mostly tried to separate the two cases.

*Comparisons to the Lake Tahoe victim.* In the media discourse, there were a few instances where news anchors or commentators point out that this is not the first time Roethlisberger has been accused of sexual assault. Occasionally, bringing up the pending civil suit from the victim in Lake Tahoe was used to highlight that there may be a pattern of sexually aggressive behavior by Roethlisberger. Former prosecutor Steve Clark most strongly makes the case for this issue.

...the key to this case is not only going to be what happened in Georgia, but the prosecutors are going to look at what happened in Lake Tahoe where another accuser accused him of rape. They're going to see if there's some similar pattern to his behavior, because those two cases put together are going to bolster one another. Because ultimately, this is going to come down to a credibility contest, but when you have a second person saying this, that's going to strengthen the prosecution's case. It makes it a lot more likely that they're going to prosecute him. (Steve Clark, Fox News, 2010a)

If you look at a sexual assault case, you look at the credibility of these individuals and now if two people are saying they were sexually assaulted in two different parts of the country that don't know one another, that's going to lend credibility to this case in Georgia. (Steve Clark, Fox News, 2010a)

There are several other instances when the media addresses the Lake Tahoe case in relation to the Georgia case. In the examples below, the previous case is discussed, but the two cases are not used to bolster each other or to support explicitly the Georgia victim's side of the story.

This is the second time, Megyn, in a year that Roethlisberger has been accused of sexual assault. Previously, in Lake Tahoe, he was accused by a woman of rape. Those charges also were not pursued for lack of evidence. (Trace Gallagher, Fox News, 2010f)

Seeing this accusation the second time was a little bit different. I thought, let me take this one a lot more seriously because, again, immediately law enforcement were called to the scene. There's no indication this is about a civil suit. I just think that, again, we have this type of behavior out there. It's something at least to consider. (Mark Eiglarsh, Fox News, 2010c)

When Gallagher states that the previous case was also not pursued due to insufficient evidence, it serves to diminish the credibility of the women. This comment highlights the pattern of a lack of evidence on the part of the victims instead of focusing on the pattern of Roethlisberger's behavior. Conversely, Eiglarsh does address the

possibility of a pattern of sexually aggressive behavior by Roethlisberger. However, in doing so, he discounts the Lake Tahoe victim because she did not act in accordance with our views of what a rape victim “should” do after an attack (i.e., going to the police right away).

Unfortunately, most of the time that the Lake Tahoe victim is mentioned, it is to discount her credibility. This type of discourse serves to shift accountability away from Roethlisberger. Because the credibility of the first victim is repeatedly undermined as illustrated by the examples below, there is no discussion of the possibility of Roethlisberger being a repeat offender.

It will help his defense in my view that it comes on the heels of an allegation that has serious credibility problems. In other words, it may look like a money grab.  
(Megyn Kelly, Fox News, 2010c)

If they’re trying to tie this... I mean this 20-year-old... if you’re trying to tie it to the earlier one... [indistinguishable]... really there’s obviously a lot of issues in that first case. (Mercedes Colwin, Fox News, 2010c)

Not only does the media discourse ignore that sexual violence is a major social problem in the United States, but it also functions to isolate the accusations from the Lake Tahoe victim and the Georgia victim. In doing so, sexual violence is portrayed as isolated incidents. As a result, this portrayal does not allow for any discussion about sexual violence on a larger scale. Furthermore, an effect of the media denying the “social roots of violence against women” is it “absolves the larger society of any obligation to end it” (Carll, 2003, p.163; as cited in O’Hara, 2012).



**Commentators.** The existing literature suggests testimony from an expert in the field of sexual violence can be used to confirm that a victim's reaction to an alleged sexual assault is in line with the reaction of "real" victims (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012). Thus, including testimony from an advocate can serve to validate the victim's side of the story (Waterhouse-Watson). In the news coverage of this case, neither Fox News nor ABC News invited anyone who could be considered an expert in the area of victim advocacy or sexual assault prevention to speak on the issue. Instead, the guest speakers were almost exclusively limited to individuals from the legal profession.

Relying primarily on professionals from the criminal justice system to comment on rape allegation cases serves to place lawyers in the position of "authorized knowers" (Ericson, et al., 1989; as cited in Loś & Chamard, 1997) and "primary definers" (Hall, et al., 1978; as cited in Loś & Chamard, 1997) of the social issue of sexual violence. The issue, in this case, is these legal professionals, knowingly or unknowingly, propagate rape myths. By not including another perspective, these views go unchecked.

### **Fox News versus ABC News**

Overall, ABC News portrays both Roethlisberger and the victim reasonably neutrally. Their coverage of this case can be described as descriptive reporting because there is more emphasis on reporting the facts of the case as opposed to issuing opinions. While ABC News tends to be more neutral in general than Fox News, the time constraints of network news also do not allow for as much commentary as does cable news. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, the average length of a story on evening network news is only two minutes and 21 seconds (Jurkowitz, Hitlin, Mitchell,

Santhanam, Adams, Anderson, & Vogt, 2013). Whereas, the average length of the news clips from Fox News that were used in this study was four minutes and 50 seconds.

While ABC News offers a more neutral portrayal of the case, Fox News primarily portrays Roethlisberger as innocent and the victim as unbelievable. This depicted is mainly achieved by framing and propagating rape myths.

Although many viewers watch a combination of local, network, and cable news, Fox News has the largest singularly dedicated audience (Olmstead et al., 2013). On Fox News, 55% of airtime is dedicated to commentary or opinion while only 45% is dedicated to factual reporting (Jurkowitz et al., 2013). The coverage of the Roethlisberger case seems to be consistent with the fact that Fox News typically devotes more time to commentary or opinion than to factual reporting.

Another demographic difference between the networks is that 60% of Fox News viewers identify as having conservative political beliefs, whereas only 38% of network evening news viewers do (Pew Research Center, 2012). Previous research suggests that more traditional gender roles are correlated with conservative political beliefs (Lye & Waldron, 1997). Additionally, adherence to traditional gender roles is related to higher rape myth acceptance (e.g. Franiuk et al., 2008; Bohner, 2001; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). Therefore, it stands to reason that a network with a more politically conservative viewership base may perpetuate more rape myths in their news coverage than a more moderate network.

### **Implications**

One of the primary aims of critical discourse analysis is to “analyze, understand and combat inequality and injustice” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 279). Through investigating the ways the Roethlisberger rape allegation case is portrayed in the media discourse, this study intends to raise awareness about inequality and injustice as it pertains to the media’s portrayal of sexual violence.

According to a critical discourse perspective, change must start with critical understanding. When people watch the news, they expect to get the facts, at least for the most part. However, it is important to be aware that the “facts” are communicated through a patriarchal lens because men hold the power in U.S. society. In order to begin to gain a critical understanding of a social issue like sexual violence, it is imperative to understand and give a voice to the female perspective.

The main findings from this case are consistent with previous studies of the media portrayal of sexual violence. Discourse that alleviates perpetrator responsibility and blames victims is clearly oppressive toward women. According to critical discourse analysts, the often invisible power structures embedded in public discourse must be brought to light in order to give a voice to the oppressed.

In addition to the need to bring about social change through critical understanding (van Dijk, 1993), there are several other important implications related to the findings of this study. Other implications of this research involve how it relates to societal views of sexual assault broadly and how the legal system may be impacted by the media discourse. Additionally, implications for public policy and social work practice are also discussed.

### **Societal Views of Sexual Assault**

Due to the high profile nature of the Roethlisberger case, it received a disproportionate amount of attention from the media. Although this is just one rape allegation case, the damaging discourse regarding sexual violence is evident. The way we talk about rape matters. We live in a society where reality is socially constructed, and language is one of the primary means of doing so.

One of the dangers with this type of discourse about sexual violence is that the more the media presents stereotypic ideas about rape as true, then the more society begins to see it as reality. Moreover, the CDC has found a list of factors that are associated with heightened risk for perpetrating sexual violence (CDC, 2014). Some of the items on the list include: “Being exposed to social norms, or shared beliefs, that sexual violence is acceptable” and “Accepting false ideas about rape” (CDC, 2014). If the media continues to reinforce false beliefs about rape and reinforce social norms that accept sexual violence, the more individuals will be at risk for perpetrating sexual violence.

Another major concern with stereotypes about rape in the media discourse is that it prevents a discussion of the real causes of sexual violence (O’Hara, 2012).

Approximately one in five women is the victim of rape in her lifetime (CDC, 2011).

Sexual violence is a public health issue. However, through the propagation of rape myths, the media would have us believe otherwise.

### **Legal System**

There are several implications related to the legal system as a result of how rape is portrayed in the media. The first implication is that the media portrayal of sexual violence may contribute to low reporting rates. According to the General Social Survey on Sexual

Victimization, many victims of sexual assault do not report their experience to the police because they fear publicity if they do report (Sampert, 2010). Thus, it is suggested that the way the media reports sexual assault is seen as a barrier to reporting for victims (Sampert, 2010). Therefore, it stands to reason that if the media were to portray rape in a more accurate way, then more women would be inclined to report their victimization to the police.

The media portrayal of rape may also contribute to low conviction rates. The Roethlisberger case serves to illustrate this issue. At the end of one of the news clips, the host states, “One final word for our viewers. This allegation is just that, an allegation. We will let a jury decide what happened here. Until then, everyone should keep an open mind” (Transcript 6). While this appears to be an appropriate comment, it comes on the heels of her commenting that this accusation looks like a “money grab.”

The problem is that the media, in essence, works to exonerate the perpetrator before the case ever goes to court. If the media depicts Roethlisberger as innocent, then it is likely that the general public will believe he is innocent as well. This is because the way the media portrays high-profile rape cases has a significant impact on public opinion (Waterhouse-Watson, 2011). Public opinion, which may indicate how a jury would think about a case as juries are simply a small sample of the larger population, is already influenced by the media before the case ever goes to trial. If a district attorney does not believe a jury will convict, then he or she will not press charges (Benedict, 1998). Therefore, if a perpetrator is portrayed as innocent in the media before charges are

pressed, public opinion could sway the district attorney's decision on whether or not to indict.

Not only are there implications regarding public opinion and conviction rates, but there are also implications when athletes are not convicted. Benedict (1998, p. 24) notes, "The failure to convict athletes of felony rape only enhances their perception of license and further fuels their proclivity toward treating women in a degrading way."

Additionally, Sinclair & Bourne (1998) found that men showed a greater acceptance of rape myths and less empathy after a not guilty verdict was reached in a rape trial.

Therefore, when perpetrators are acquitted of rape, it further reinforces rape myths. The fact that Roethlisberger was never charged in this case serves to reinforce this same myth.

### **Policy**

The findings from this study point to the power of media discourse and its ability to impact perceptions about sexual violence. As illustrated by this case, the media can be used as a means of propagating rape myths. However, campaigns like "No More" and "It's On Us" use the media as platform to combat rape myths. Although it is unclear exactly what impact these campaigns have had thus far, it stands to reason that raising awareness and opening up the conversation about sexual violence is a good place to start.

Previous research findings have suggested that lower rape myth acceptance is associated with lower rape proclivity (e.g. Bohner et al., 2005; Lanier, 2001). Therefore, providing individuals with correct information about sexual violence through prevention programs may decrease rape perpetration rates. Consequently, advocacy efforts should be

directed towards evaluation of existing rape prevention programs and increased implementation of effective programs.

### **For Social Workers**

The preamble of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics reads, “A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society” (NASW, 2008). There are two important implications that arise based on this notion. First, the meaning of “social context” must be understood. Research has shown that the media has the power to shape public opinion on social issues (e.g., Waterhouse-Watson, 2012; Soothill, 1991). Therefore, it stands to reason that the social context mentioned in the Code of Ethics includes the media, which implies that social workers must be concerned with how social justice issues are portrayed in the media. Second, if social workers are to focus on “the well-being of society”, then sexual violence must be put to an end.

Furthermore, social workers are called to challenge social injustice by pursuing “social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (NASW, 2008). As demonstrated by the findings of this study, women continue to be oppressed not only as victims of sexual violence, but also in the way the news media portrays sexual violence.

If social workers are to strive to promote well-being on both individual and societal levels, action must be taken at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Advocating for policy changes outlined in the previous section is one way to respond to the issue of sexual violence on a macro level. Anti-sexual assault organizations such as Rape, Abuse

& Incest National Network (RAINN) and National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) also outline action steps on their websites for sexual violence prevention and advocacy.

Many survivors of sexual assault will come into contact with social workers or other mental health professionals at some point in their lives. The findings from this study point to the necessity of being aware of language that is used when working individually with survivors of sexual violence. Additionally, it is important for social workers to be aware of the ways in which broader perceptions of sexual violence may impact stigma or the way an individual survivor perceives his or her experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Using a critical discourse analysis framework this paper sought to shed light on the detrimental ways in which the social issue of sexual violence against women is portrayed in the media. The findings from this study illustrate how framing (through focusing on specific aspects of the case and omitting others and the use of language and visual imagery) and the use of rape myths in the media discourse can work to shift blame from the accused perpetrator to the alleged victim. When rape myths are present in the news coverage of a rape allegation case, real causes of sexual violence, such as the oppression of women, are ignored. If sexual violence against women is to be addressed on the macro level, we must be concerned with how the issue is portrayed in the media.

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### Appendix: News Clips Used in Data Analysis

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