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THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN REALITY CRIME TV

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This article focuses on the social construction of femininity in a reality television program, America's Most Wanted. The program blurs fact and fiction in reenactments of actual crimes. The analysis focuses on its depiction of women crime victims. A prior study argues that the program empowers women to speak about their victimization. Other research suggests that such programs make women fearful. The authors compare episodes from the 1988-1989 and the 1995-1996 seasons. Although women spoke about their victimization, men spoke more often and presented master narratives about the crimes. In both seasons, the program imagery emphasized feminine vulnerability to violence from strange, devious, and brutal men and masculine technical expertise and authority as women's protection from such violence.

In modern, complex societies, the media disseminate gendered images. Because of its popularity, television is an important medium for circulating these images of gender. A relatively new form of television programming—reality crime programs—is a case in point. These programs comprise a significant share of the prime-time schedule, and they enjoy a substantial audience of women (Fishman 1998). They are significant because they effectively blur the boundaries between factual and fictional genres. Some scholars conclude that these programs reproduce gender stereotypes (Dobash et al. 1998). Others suggest that women watch these programs because they facilitate women's discussion of their victimization (Barber 1991).

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This article analyzes the construction of women crime victims in the reality television series *America's Most Wanted*. We are especially interested in the argument that these programs open a narrative space for women, allowing them to speak about their victimization experiences in their own voices. We examine how the narratives reflect or challenge dominant cultural images of gender. We are also interested in the degree to which these images might change over the course of the series. We analyze 24 episodes of *America's Most Wanted*: 9 from its first season in 1988-1989 and 15 from its 1995-1996 season.

GENDER, CRIME, AND THE MEDIA

The emergent and interactional accomplishment of gender is informed by social structural and institutional contexts (Connell 1987; Martin and Jurik 1996; Messerschmidt 1993; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Robert Connell (1993, 615) argues that some images of gender—hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity—predominate over others. Hegemonic masculinity today is a matter of the subordination of women, authority, aggression, and technical competence. Emphasized femininity is subordinate to and defined by hegemonic masculinity. Organized around themes of dependence, sexual receptivity, and motherhood, this femininity is characterized by “the display of sociability rather than technical competence . . . and [by] fragility in mating scenes” (Connell 1987, 187). Gender differences are viewed as natural but are actually social constructions (Lorber and Farrell 1991; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Gendered images circulate in society through many institutions. The media—and television in particular—are central vehicles for constructing and conveying such images (Connell 1987). Andrea Press (1991, 16) notes that in terms of gender identification, television’s constant stream of images impinges on our very definitions of who we are.

Above all else, television constructs narratives (Kozloff 1987). It tells stories about characters in a language that is accessible to the audience. Stories and characters often take on a life of their own and give rise to fads and fans in the “real” world; they may even frame public discourse (Fiske 1994; Harrington and Bielby 1995). Yet, television is fundamentally a conservative medium. Its narratives are linked to larger discursive frames that achieve authority because they resonate with prevailing cultural constructions (see Madriz 1997; Naples 1997). For example, in the 1970s and early 1980s, television responded to the feminist movement: Women characters left the domestic sphere to work in nontraditional occupations (Press 1991, 35). However, by the late 1980s, the domestic sphere reasserted itself. Women television characters had jobs but were presented at home more than at work. Family matters dominated program plots (Rapping 1994; Taylor 1989).

Feminists have criticized prevailing cultural constructions of women as victims. Some argue that women’s fears of crime are framed and enhanced by media images of women victims and assailants (Madriz 1997). According to popular discourse,

women are vulnerable to victimization, especially if they venture into the public domain (Ehrenreich and English 1978). Their assailants are strangers and frequently are poor, minority men who may be psychotic (Christie 1986; Stanko 1985). These beliefs persist despite research revealing that women's greatest victimization risk comes from intimates and family members (Stanko 1993).

Cultural constructions contain imagery of "ideal victims," who are more likely to be seen as legitimate victims (Madriz 1997). Those most likely to be accorded the status of "real" victims are white, young, stereotypically pretty, and virginal or married mothers of small children. Young girls are the most ideal victims of all; they are icons of innocence (David Altheide, personal communication, 23 April 1998). The assailants of "real" victims are strangers who fit the stereotypes described above. "Real rape" is committed by a stranger who is not a socially acceptable sexual partner for his woman/girl victim (e.g., much older, different race, or of a lower class than she). Acquaintance or date rapes are not considered real (Estrich 1987). Non-ideal women victims are often blamed for their victimization (Humphries and Caringella-MacDonald 1990).

The cultural constructions of women's victimization are a significant source of informal and formal social control over women. They imply the proper roles for women and the best ways to discipline girls' and women's behaviors (Meyers 1997). For example, responsible mothers must closely supervise and protect young daughters from strangers and suspicious acquaintances. Popular discourse about women's victimization closely conforms to emphasized feminine ideals of women as vulnerable, sexual, and requiring men's protection (Faith 1993; Meyers 1997).

Television's dramatic depictions of crime and victimization mirror and further reinforce these popular beliefs. On television, women and children are depicted as being vulnerable to criminals, who are usually men. Women victims are young, white, and physically beautiful (Signorielli 1989). They are either idealized or blamed for their victimization, but all need the protection of men (Surette 1998).

In television news, crime is the number one category of coverage, and crime news mirrors the television drama's portraits of women (Surette 1998). Reporters rely on criminal justice sources who are often men, so the news reflects an official theory of the case that is masculine (Hammer, Radford, and Stanko 1989). Women, especially young white women, are overrepresented as victims in crime news (Chermak 1995; Surette 1998).

Thus, crime drama and crime news use a similar imagery that depicts women as vulnerable victims. This has long been the case. Walkowitz (1982) demonstrates that newspapers relied on the language of crime fiction to describe the "Jack the Ripper" crimes and that since then, the media have perpetuated an iconography of male violence against women. Such imagery reinforces gender stereotypes, including women's subordination to men. It also may explain women's heightened fear of crime, which, in turn, restricts women's activities (Faith 1993; Meyers 1997; Stanko 1993).¹

A relatively new genre, reality television, blurs the line between crime drama and crime news. Reality crime programs employ one of two formats. Programs

such as *Cops* employ a ride-along format. Through the camera's eye, the audience is seemingly in the backseat of a police car or present during police/criminal encounters. A second format, employed on programs such as *America's Most Wanted* (*AMW*), reenacts crimes and solicits viewers' help to solve them. Vignettes feature interviews with victims, their family and friends, and the police, as well as film or photographs of actual criminals and victims.

These formats are important because they invoke a televisual sense of being present at events to support their claimed representation of reality. The ride-along format appears to offer an unmediated version of "real-life" police/criminal interactions. The reenactment format's reality claims rest on the depiction of crimes drawn from active police cases. Thus, both formats claim to present a true picture—which the audience sees—of crime, criminals, victims, and police work (Cavender and Fishman 1998). Moreover, the reality crime format now serves as a model for other television programming (Greenfield 1998). This modeling effect and its claims to authenticity make reality crime television a significant media innovation.

Reality crime presentations parallel the stereotypic depictions of crime, criminals, and victims in crime news: Crimes are violent, criminals are men, and victims often are women (Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993). Such coverage, whether in reality crime programs, on the news, or in crime drama, may contribute to women's fear of crime (Benedict 1992; Warr 1984). The heightened sense that reality crime programs portray real life may magnify viewers' fears and stereotypes.

For example, Schlesinger et al. (1992) and Dobash et al. (1998) showed *Crime-watch UK* (*CUK*), a British, *AMW*-like program, focus groups of women. Many said that *CUK* focused on glamorous and entertaining aspects of violence against women, not its harmful consequences. They said that *CUK* depicted women as weak and stupid (Schlesinger et al. 1992, 75). One-third of the women said that *CUK* made them feel afraid; half said that it increased their fear of crime (Schlesinger et al. 1992, 55). The authors concluded that *CUK* increased women's anxieties about crime, sustaining what they call a "culture of peril" for women (Schlesinger et al. 1992, 38-39, 63-64). A U.S. study (Curry 1997) of the reality program *Cops* found that women who exhibited higher fears of crime were more likely to regard the program as violent and threatening.

Others reach different conclusions. Barber (1991) argues that women, who comprise a substantial share of *AMW*'s audience (Fishman 1998), watch the program because its vignettes provide contextual histories and details about women's lives. Women victims and their families and friends have voices; they tell their own stories. These portraits of victimization on *AMW* validate women's fears of crime (Barber 1991).

Barber's (1991) argument parallels that of scholars who stress the importance of providing an opportunity to previously silenced groups of women to speak about their experiences (Fonow and Cook 1991; Kohler Riesman 1993). Through inclusion of women's narratives—stories they tell about themselves and their lives—oppressive social structures and images can be challenged. The inclusion of

women's voices and experiences, however, does not guarantee that resulting narratives will be empowering to women (Ewick and Silbey 1995). To the extent that television narratives are linked to larger discursive formations about hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, they limit the potential for women's empowerment.

We examine how one reality television crime program, *AMW*, depicts women crime victims. We also examine how these constructions may have changed over time with the maturity of the program, changing patterns of criminality, and changing societal ideals of masculinity and femininity. We consider whose voices are privileged on *AMW* and what these voices say. We ask whether the presentation of women's victimization experiences empowers or simply reinforces a culture of peril among women.

After discussing our research methodology, we describe the demographics of *AMW* crimes, victims, and offenders. We then discuss who controls the narratives about women's victimization experiences and the images of women victims. We conclude with a discussion of the significance of our findings for understanding reality television's construction of gender and violence against women.

METHODS

Our research site for this article is *AMW*. Although its audience ratings have slipped in recent years, *AMW* still enjoys a substantial audience of women (more than 50 percent of viewers) (Fishman 1998). Moreover, it has remained on the air for 10 years, a rare feat in prime-time programming (Fishman 1998). *AMW*'s blurring of news and entertainment genres has made it a prototype for reality programs in general, especially for those that deal with crime. Arguably, *AMW* has even affected traditional news programs, which now employ re-creations, dramatic camera work, and other production techniques popularized by *AMW* (see Greenfield 1998). Even recent dramatic television series (e.g., *Law and Order*) evoke a sense of realism by using techniques developed on reality crime programs such as *AMW*.

We focus on how *AMW* constructs women and girl crime victims (hereafter women unless a specific reference is to a girl) and how that construction has changed over time and with changes in *AMW*'s format. We compared women victim imagery in episodes from the first year of the series with those from a more recent season. We originally videotaped all of the *AMW* episodes aired between January 25 and May 31, 1989, and then randomly selected a sample of 9 episodes to analyze (see Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993). We videotaped all episodes of the 1995-1996 season aired during the same months of 1996 (January through May) ($n = 15$). The total sample consisted of 24 episodes. The 1989 episodes were each a half-hour long. By 1996, the episodes had been expanded to one hour each. The 9 *AMW* episodes from 1989 contain 24 original crime story vignettes; the 15 episodes from 1996 contain 72 original crime story vignettes. A total of 96 vignettes were analyzed. (Updates of previous episodes were not included in the analysis.) In

1989, 10 (42 percent) of the vignettes featured women crime victims, and 32 (43 percent) of the 1996 vignettes featured women victims. Within these vignettes, a total of 59 women were depicted (21 in 1989, 38 in 1996). The victim was the unit of analysis.

Our coding protocol included quantifiable indicators of victim demographics (age, race/ethnicity, occupation, etc.), victimization (offense, relationship to offender, etc.), and a space for recording the verbal and visual depictions of women victims in the vignettes. Two coders recorded protocol information for every vignette.

We aggregated data on offenses and victim characteristics to make tabular comparisons with other research and with crime statistics. Our analysis of qualitative data focused on the content of each vignette, including visual images of victims, language, and who provided these descriptions.

To determine whose voice is privileged in each vignette, we coded the gender and status of those who talked on camera (excluding dramatizations and hosts) and what they said. We were interested in whose version provided the dominant narrative or "theory of the case." If *AMW* provides women with a forum for recounting their victimization experiences, then whenever possible, the victim's voice should frame the vignette. Together, these measures enable us to assess the extent to which these programs construct traditional or oppositional images of femininity and violence against women. We compare the images of 1989 with 1996 *AMW* episodes. In our Findings section, examples from data are referenced by the month, day, year, and sequence number in parentheses.

DATA AND DISCUSSION

Victim Demographics

We are interested in the types of crimes and images of women victims presented on *AMW* during these two time periods. We are also interested in whether declining official rates of violent crime in the United States are mirrored in the 1996 episodes. Television news and fiction present a distorted picture of crime, criminals, and victims when compared to crime statistics. Violent, personal crime, the least frequent type of crime, occurs the most often in news and dramatic portrayals (Chermak 1995). Reality programming perpetuates this picture (Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993). A breakdown of the types of offenses depicted in our sample of these two seasons is contained in Table 1. Violent, personal crimes comprised 84 percent of the offenses depicted against women victims in 1989 and 98 percent in 1996. This increase was statistically significant ($p > .05$).

Violent crime was a prominent focus of *AMW* in both 1989 and 1996, despite recent declines in official rates of violent crime. Violent crimes accounted for 16 percent of all self-reported victimizations in 1989. This figure increased to 26 percent by 1994 but has been declining since then (U.S. Department of Justice 1998).

TABLE 1: Numbers (and percentages) of AMW Victims by Offenses

| <i>Offense</i> | <i>1989</i> | <i>1996</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Attempted murder/murder | 17 (53) | 14 (33)** | 31 (42) |
| Bigamy | 1 (3) | 0 | 1 (1) |
| Child molestation ^a | 0 | 7 (17)** | 7 (9) |
| Fraud/theft | 4 (13) | 1 (2) | 5 (7) |
| Home invasion | 0 | 1 (2) | 1 (1) |
| Kidnapping/abduction | 3 (9) | 7 (17) | 10 (14) |
| Rape ^b | 2 (6) | 5 (12) | 7 (9) |
| Robbery | 5 (16) | 5 (12) | 10 (14) |
| Stalking | 0 | 2 (5) | 2 (3) |
| Total | 32 (100) | 42 (100) | 74 (100) |

a. A single victim may have experienced more than one offense.

b. With children, molestation and rape distinctions were sometimes unclear. Our coding reflects *AMW*'s characterizations of the offenses.

** $p < .01$.

From 1995-1996 alone, there was a 5 percent decrease in violent crime, including a 9 percent decrease in murder and a 2 percent decrease in rape. The media, however, overreport these offenses (Surette 1998). *AMW* is no exception: Murder/attempted murder was the largest category of crime against women on *AMW* in 1989 (53 percent); bank robbery was the second most frequent crime (16 percent) (victims depicted were women bank tellers). *AMW* also depicted murder/attempted murder as the most frequent crime against women in 1996, but the percentage of murder offenses decreased significantly over the percentage for 1989 (33 percent; $p < .05$). The molestation of girls was the second most frequent crime (17 percent). The percentage of child molestation offenses is a significant increase over that of 1989 *AMW* episodes ($p < .01$). Four of seven abductions/kidnappings were of young or adolescent girls. Rape, which accounted for less than 1 percent of all self-reported victimizations (by household) in 1989 and 1996 (U.S. Department of Justice 1998), constituted 6 percent of the crimes against women in 1989 *AMW* episodes and increased to 12 percent in 1996 episodes, but this difference was not statistically significant. In addition to the increase in coverage of child molestation and rape cases, the 1996 episodes included two contemporary crimes—stalking and home invasion.

According to official statistics, when women are victimized by violence, men are most likely to be the perpetrators (Flanagan and Maquire 1996). This pattern is reflected on *AMW*. In the 1989 episodes, 81 percent of the crimes against women were committed by men; in 1996, 92 percent of offenders against women were men. This difference was not statistically significant. Only a few women are shown as criminals on *AMW*, and they rarely victimize other women (Bond-Maupin 1998).

Feminists have criticized official crime statistics and news media for ignoring violence against women by intimates (Stanko 1990). Women are six times more likely than men to be attacked by an intimate (U.S. Department of Justice 1998). In

TABLE 2: Numbers (and percentages) of Offender's Prior Relationship to Victim

| <i>Relationship</i> | <i>1989</i> | <i>1996</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Husband/boyfriend | 1 (5) | 3 (8) | 4 (7) |
| Ex-mates | 3 (14) | 2 (5) | 5 (8) |
| Relatives | 1 (5) | 5 (13) | 6 (10) |
| Friends/acquaintances | 0 | 15 (39)*** | 15 (25) |
| Strangers | 12 (57) | 13 (34)*** | 25 (42) |
| Unclear | 4 (19) | 0 | 4 (7) |
| Total ^a | 21 (100) | 38 (99) | 59 (99) |

a. Due to rounding error and the small numbers of cases in some cells, percentage totals do not always add up to 100 percent.

*** $p < .001$.

nearly 75 percent of all lone-offender violence against women, the victim knew the offender. In just less than one-third of this violence, the perpetrator was an intimate (U.S. Department of Justice 1998). Rape is more likely to be committed by a relative or someone well known to the victim. Strangers were responsible for only one in five rapes in 1996 (U.S. Department of Justice 1998).

The relationship between *AMW* victims and their assailants is listed in Table 2. In the 1989 episodes, 19 percent of the offenders against women were intimates (a husband, boyfriend, or ex-husband/boyfriend); an additional 5 percent were relatives. Fifty-seven percent of the assailants in 1989 were strangers.

The 1996 episodes were somewhat different: 34 percent of the assailants were strangers to the women victims; this difference is statistically significant ($p < .001$). Only 13 percent were intimates (mates and ex-mates), but 52 percent were relatives or friends/acquaintances. Examination of the differences in victim-offender relationship across victim age groups for 1996 data (see Table 3) reveals that the high percentage of relative/acquaintance victimization in 1996 is explained by the increased number of children and adolescent victims on *AMW*. They were most frequently molested by relatives and acquaintances. Women (in all adult age categories) were most frequently victimized by strangers (46 percent). Seventy-five percent of adult women rape victims were raped by strangers. Fifteen percent of adult women murder victims were killed by strangers.

In 1989, *AMW*'s largest age category of women victims was adult (38 percent, 30-62 years). Young adult was the second largest category (29 percent, 18-29 years). These two categories account for 67 percent of women victims. In 1996, the adult and young-adult age groups each comprise 29 percent of the women victims. However, the 1996 data reveal a significant increase in attention to the victimization of children and adolescents (see Table 4). Children comprised 26 percent of the victims, and adolescents comprised 11 percent of the victims for a total of 37 percent of *AMW*'s women victims in 1996. Only 20 percent of the victims in 1989 were children and adolescents. This statistically significant change ($p < .001$) may reflect television's increasing concern with family issues during the 1990s and popular

TABLE 3: Offender-Victim Prior Relationship by Age of Victim for 1996 Episodes: Number (and percentage)

| Relationship | Victim Age Group | | Total |
|-----------------------|------------------|------------|---------|
| | Child-Adolescent | Adult | |
| Husband/boyfriend | 0 | 3 (13) | 3 (8) |
| Ex-mates | 0 | 2 (8) | 2 (5) |
| Relatives | 4 (29) | 1 (4) | 5 (13) |
| Friends/acquaintances | 8 (57) | 7 (29)*** | 15 (39) |
| Strangers | 2 (14) | 11 (46)*** | 13 (34) |
| Total ^a | 14 (100) | 24 (100) | 38 (99) |

a. Due to rounding error and the small numbers of cases in some cells, percentage totals do not always add up to 100 percent.

*** $p < .001$.

TABLE 4: Victim Age Groups: Number (and percentage)

| Age Group ^a | 1989 | 1996 | Total |
|-------------------------|----------|------------|---------|
| Child (younger than 12) | 2 (10) | 10 (26)*** | 12 (20) |
| Adolescent (12-17) | 2 (10) | 4 (11) | 6 (10) |
| Young adult (18-29) | 6 (29) | 11 (29) | 17 (29) |
| Adult (30-62) | 8 (38) | 11 (29) | 19 (32) |
| Seniors (older than 62) | 0 | 2 (5) | 2 (3) |
| Age unclear | 3 (14) | 0 | 3 (5) |
| Total ^b | 21 (101) | 38 (100) | 59 (99) |

a. Exact ages were usually stated for children and adolescents. Other categorizations represent coders' best approximation.

b. Due to rounding error and the small numbers of cases in some cells, percentage totals do not always add up to 100 percent.

*** $p < .001$.

conceptions of children as the most innocent victims. Seniors account for only 5 percent of the women victims in 1996; there were none in 1989. This portrait concurs with prior research (Davis 1990): Women depicted on television tend to be young.

Television is notorious for ignoring women of color (Taylor 1989). Victims' race is listed in Table 5. The majority of women crime victims on *AMW* in both 1989 and 1996 were white. The overrepresentation of white women victims appears to have increased significantly over time (67 percent in 1989 and 74 percent in 1996; $p < .05$). African Americans comprised 14 percent of women victims in 1989 and 9 percent in 1996. Asian American women comprised 5 percent of the victims in 1989 and in 1996. Latina/Hispanic groups were even more underrepresented: Only one victim was clearly a Latina in the 1996 shows, and there were no Latina/Hispanic women victims in 1989. Of course, in 12 percent of the vignettes across both time

TABLE 5: Victim Race-Ethnicity: Number (and percentage)

| Race-Ethnicity | Program Year | | Total |
|---------------------|--------------|----------|----------|
| | 1989 | 1996 | |
| White, Non-Hispanic | 14 (67) | 28 (74)* | 42 (71) |
| African American | 3 (14) | 3 (8) | 6 (10) |
| Latina/Hispanic | 0 | 1 (3) | 1 (2) |
| Asian/Hawaiian | 1 (5) | 2 (5) | 3 (5) |
| Native American | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Unknown | 3 (14) | 4 (11) | 7 (12) |
| Total ^a | 21 (100) | 38 (101) | 59 (100) |

a. Due to rounding error and the small numbers of cases in some cells, percentage totals do not always add up to 100 percent.

* $p < .05$.

periods, race-ethnicity was unclear. It may be that some women victims were race-ethnic minorities or of mixed-race descent, but that is uncertain. The relative lack of attention to the victimization of women of color on *AMW* is problematic in terms of general population composition and even more problematic in terms of crime statistics. The rate of personal, violent victimization for African American women exceeds that of white women (U.S. Department of Justice 1998).

To the extent that the race of victims and offenders was discernable on the *AMW* episodes, there were few cases in either 1989 or 1996 that portrayed interracial violence. These depictions are consistent with official crime statistics and victimization surveys: Most violent crime occurs between people of the same race (U.S. Department of Justice 1991).

Television's division of labor reflects traditional gender-based job distributions. *AMW* also exhibited these patterns. As can be seen from Table 6, in the 1989 episodes, women victims held traditionally women's low-prestige jobs and were workplace subordinates. The single largest category was bank teller (29 percent of the cases); this was followed by waitress (12 percent). The sample included one professional woman—an occupational therapist. Women victims' occupations were not depicted in 35 percent of the cases.

In 1996, five occupational categories each characterized 8 percent of the adult women crime victims: bank employee, college student, homemaker/wife, retailer, and waitress. The 1996 sample contained several women in higher-status occupations: The bank employees were a loan officer and a bank administrator, one retailer owned a small business, and one woman was a college professor. However, the percentage of women with no occupations depicted was higher in 1996 (42 percent) than in 1989 (35 percent).

AMW largely conforms to television's depiction of women, specifically of women crime victims. Predominantly white women and, increasingly, girls are portrayed as sexually and violently victimized by men. Acquaintances and relatives are

TABLE 6: Adult Victims' Occupations: Number (and percentage)

| <i>Occupation</i> | <i>1989</i> | <i>1996</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Bank employee | 5 (29) | 2 (8) | 7 (17) |
| Baby-sitter | 1 (6) | 0 | 1 (2) |
| Cashier | 0 | 1 (4) | 1 (2) |
| College professor | 0 | 1 (4) | 1 (2) |
| College student | 0 | 2 (8) | 2 (5) |
| Farmer | 0 | 1 (4) | 1 (2) |
| Homemaker/wife | 1 (6) | 2 (8) | 3 (7) |
| Model | 1 (6) | 0 | 1 (2) |
| Occupational therapist | 1 (6) | 0 | 1 (2) |
| Retailer | 0 | 2 (8) | 2 (5) |
| Retired | 0 | 1 (4) | 1 (2) |
| Waitress | 2 (12) | 2 (8) | 4 (10) |
| Not depicted | 6 (35) | 10 (42) | 16 (39) |
| Total ^a | 17 (100) | 24 (98) | 41 (97) |

a. Due to rounding error and the small numbers of cases in some cells, percentage totals do not always add up to 100 percent.

shown as the most frequent assailants of girls. Although *AMW* shows some victimization by intimates, strangers continue to be overrepresented as assailants of adult women.

Whose Voice Is Privileged?

Women's narratives offer the potential to bridge the gap between daily life and social structures in which lives are embedded (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Barber (1991) suggests that *AMW* privileges women's narratives, thus explaining its popularity among women (see Fishman 1998).

Speakers. As Table 7 shows, although women did speak about victimization, the majority of those who spoke during both time periods were men. Indeed, in 1989, only two women victims (7 percent) spoke on camera; eight women victims (10 percent) spoke in 1996. This small increase is insignificant especially when we consider that the one-hour format (of 1996) provided more on-camera time for all speakers, including women victims. In several 1996 vignettes, women victims appeared with their victim husbands, but husbands spoke and wives were silent.

The second largest category of women who spoke on camera during both periods was friends and relatives, frequently the victim's mother or sister. There were more speakers in this category than in the victim category. The large percentage of friends and relatives is probably due to the frequency of murders in 1989 (victims were dead and unable to speak) and child molestations in 1996 (young victims were protected from TV notoriety).

TABLE 7: Numbers (and percentages) of Speakers about Victims and Offenses

| | Year of Program | | Total |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|------------|-----------|
| | 1989 | 1996 | |
| Speaker | | | |
| Men | 22 (73) | 47 (59)*** | 69 (63) |
| Women | 8 (27) | 32 (41)*** | 40 (37) |
| Total | 30 (100) | 79 (100) | 109 (100) |
| Speaker role | | | |
| Women victims | 2 (7) | 8 (10) | 10 (9) |
| Men victims ^a | 2 (7) | 2 (3) | 4 (4) |
| Relatives/friends ^b | 8 (27) | 23 (29) | 31 (28) |
| Criminal justice officials | 18 (60) | 41 (52)*** | 59 (54) |
| Other | 0 | 5 (6) | 5 (5) |
| Total ^c | 30 (101) | 79 (100) | 109 (100) |

a. These were men who were victims in vignettes with women victims.

b. During both time periods, some people who spoke were both relatives and victims themselves (e.g., the father of a kidnapped child). We coded such a father as a relative.

c. Due to rounding error and the small numbers of cases in some cells, percentage totals do not always add up to 100 percent.

*** $p < .001$.

During both periods, the police (or related criminal justice personnel) comprised the largest category of those speaking on camera in vignettes with women victims. There were women police in both time periods, but most of the police were men.

Controlling the narrative. We also were interested in what the speakers said. We first considered the police. The police served as experts in the vignettes. The pattern was the same in 1989 and 1996. Police provided details about the crime (2-10-96/4), the criminal's history (2-12-89/4), and motivation (3-9-96/7) and speculated on the threat that a fugitive posed to society (4-2-89/2). The police theory of the case, not the victims' experiences, framed vignettes and dramatizations. In one vignette, police provided a motivation for a burglar—his obsession with gold and the “thrill of entering homes when people are there or might be.” Accompanying this narrative, a visual dramatization shows a thief skulking through a house while a mother works downstairs and her daughter showers upstairs (4-2-89/3). The host's frequent use of “police say” or “according to police” reinforced police expertise.

We next considered *AMW's* host John Walsh. In 1989, Walsh narrated all vignettes. Walsh also narrated most of the 1996 episodes. However, in 1996, the format also included “correspondents” who narrated some vignettes. There were three correspondents, all women. Only Lena Nozizwc, an African American woman, narrated any vignettes with women victims. Walsh remained the driving force in developing the master narrative of most vignettes with women victims.

In both time periods, Walsh frequently referenced the police as his source of information, but he was also an expert in his own right. He provided dates and locations of crimes (4-2-89/2), details about stolen property (1-13-96/6), and details about physical wounds (4-16-89/4; 4-21-96/1). He offered caricatured social histories of criminals (4-2-89/3) that also dealt with motivation. One vignette began with documentary-like footage about a cult, the Lamb of God, and its leader. Walsh said that the cult swore revenge on members who left the cult. After the leader's death, his son and daughter plotted a series of murders to punish former members. Cult assassins murdered an ex-member and his little girl (3-2-96/5).

Like the police, Walsh sometimes speculated on a fugitive's threat to society. In a vignette, he speculated that the kidnap/murder of a woman was "just the beginning of a bloody rampage" (3-16-96/2). Like all storytellers, Walsh framed the vignette's narrative. In addition to his depictions of the crime or his commentary about criminals, this framing included comments on the victim's feelings of fear and anger (3-19-89/2; 1-13-96/6). For example, Walsh described one victim as "an angry young woman" (5-11-96/9). In another vignette, he said, "My heart goes out to the family [of a manslaughter victim]. They don't need sympathy, they need justice" (1-13-96/10).

Walsh provided information about victims. He fleshed out a portrait of each victim with details about her life or referred to her by her given name. The portrait grew more lifelike as family and friends told anecdotes about the victim. These anecdotes were an important aspect of the narrative structure of the vignettes: They described mundane details of the victim's life and, as we will see later, helped to establish her worth. The narrative was combined with the dramatization to help the audience get to know the victim. For example, in one vignette, Walsh noted that the murder victims had "married young" and "started with very little but had built a fortune"; they were described as a "happy couple" (4-27-96/5). Walsh described a 14-year-old kidnap victim as "very athletic" and as someone who "loves to play basketball"; her minister added that she read the Bible daily (5-4-96/9). A young mother who was murdered was described by a relative as someone who "would give her last dollar" to help others and was depicted putting on clown makeup in preparation for entertaining a group of elderly citizens (2-26-89/3). Often, friends or family of the victim discussed the emotional side of victimization, commenting on the victim's fear (3-9-96/7) and promising not to rest until they knew what had happened to their loved one (4-21-96/4).

Though a rare occurrence, women victims expressed powerful emotions when they spoke on camera. Some described their anger at the criminal (4-13-96/4); others talked about their fear. For example, a woman who was assaulted by her ex-boyfriend said, "His ways are real sweet, but you never know. I hope they catch him because someone else may be his next victim" (3-19-89/2). Some women apologized for their victimization. A woman's ex-husband tried to kill her in a bar; instead, he killed and injured several others. She said, "I blame myself: two people died, people were injured. I shouldn't have gone to that bar" (4-6-96/3). Other

women talked about the trauma of victimization. The victim of a serial rapist said, "I used to feel safe here, but no more" (3-23-96/4).

Our analysis of who talks and what is said in these vignettes concurs with research about crime news. The news uses crime victims as emotional aids to help consumers to understand what it is like to be victimized (Chermak 1995, 103). For example, *AMW* dramatized these women's emotions. The soundtrack cued the appropriate emotion—sorrow or fear. Camera shots dramatized the sensational nature of the crime, sometimes in slow motion (3-19-89/2) or seemingly from the victim's point of view (2-12-89/4).

These findings offer very limited support for Barber's (1991) claim that *AMW* empowers women. It is true that women told stories about their victimization or that of a loved one and recounted their emotions. However, men's voices were privileged over those of women victims. The police and *AMW*'s host, mostly men, provided a wealth of detail about the crimes, the criminals, and the victims. Their comments located the crimes in time and space and provided a master narrative for the vignettes. Their technical expertise and theory of the case framed the vignettes. Because these experts overwhelmingly were men, the voices of authority on *AMW* were men's.

These findings parallel Carol Smart's (1989) argument that in criminal justice proceedings, women victims' voices are lost when their experiences are converted into official legal discourse. A similar conversion occurs on *AMW* as the host and police weave the master narrative of women's victimization experiences. The findings also support the claim that although women speak about their victimization, these narratives reinforce cultural stereotypes about men and women.

Images of Women

Crime news uses women victims as evocative representations of victimization (Chermak 1995). This usage makes crime stories sensational and newsworthy. Crime drama accomplishes the same end through story construction and character development (Surette 1998). *AMW*'s use of women crime victims parallels crime news and drama. Its narratives offer an image of victims as worthy, sympathetic, innocent women. In a few vignettes, a less flattering image suggests that women are partially to blame for their victimization. These two stock media images of women—virgin and vamp—although disparate nonetheless reproduce culturally emphasized images of femininity (Benedict 1992). *AMW*'s narratives dramatize a dangerous world in which women are vulnerable and must fear crime.

Women as crime victims. For 50 percent of the women in both time periods, their primary characterization was as "crime victim." Horror movie techniques were used in vignettes to portray women victims. The crimes were described in terrifying detail. Descriptions of "brutal," "savage" crimes (3-2-96/4; 3-23-96/2) combined with the gruesome details of physical wounds (4-16-89/4) were used to convey the

horror of victimization. The iconography and narrative intensified the effect. This was especially true in vignettes about stranger rape (see Walkowitz 1982 for an earlier discussion of media iconography). In one vignette, a young woman's car broke down, and she was raped by a stranger who offered help. The host's narrative noted that "roads turned forbidding . . . [with] every shadow a hiding place." The accompanying visuals depicted the woman's frustration with her car, her uncertainty about what to do, and her emerging fear as she realizes that she is alone on a dark, lonely road (4-13-96/4).

Another case involved a young woman who was locked in a car trunk and later was brutally raped (5-11-96/9). The narrative in a vignette about a serial rapist played like a serial killer movie. "The city of Dallas is on guard tonight against a dangerous predator who has raped a woman once every eight weeks for the last year." The unknown assailant was said to "carefully select his victims based on their physical appearance" (3-23-96/4).

The rapist in another vignette did not seem to be a stranger. In fact, the situation resembled a "date rape" scenario: The victim, a college freshman, had dinner with the assailant. However, the assailant's identity proved to be false. The victim disappeared; she was found raped and murdered. The rapist was only posing as a student (3-23-96/2).

Women and family. AMW, like television programming generally, stressed the family in its imagery of women crime victims (see Rapping 1994; Taylor 1989). A woman in a 1989 vignette who had been shot by her husband explained that she had stayed with him despite his violence because "that's what marriage is for" (4-2-89/3). More poignant was a segment in which a woman was beaten by her husband, who then abducted their five-year-old daughter. The vignette featured photos of the girl accompanied by a voiceover of the woman singing "You Are My Sunshine" (4-6-96/2). In another vignette, a mother who would be murdered by her son was depicted as trying to help him, as encouraging him to have dinner with her and the boy's father (2-26-89/4).

A second category of family-related vignettes depicted stalking. Stalking, which was not mentioned in the 1989 vignettes, is now more commonplace in the crime lexicon, and two 1996 vignettes featured it. One featured a woman who was beaten and stabbed by her ex-boyfriend. She left him because she "did not want to raise kids in such an environment." He stalked and tried to kill her (4-6-96/3). In a second vignette, a young woman met a man in a bar. They dated, but she rebuffed him when he became obsessive. He stalked her and, in an attempt to kill her, mistakenly killed her sister (3-23-96/3).

A third category of family-related vignettes focused on children victims. Vignettes both in 1989 and in 1996 dealt with kidnapped children and with how their disappearance disrupted family life (2-26-89/2; 4-6-96/2). Interestingly, although no 1989 episodes in our sample depicted the molestation of young/adolescent girls, seven (32 percent) of the victims in the 1996 episodes were molested;

four other vignettes featured girls who were rape victims. As the truest icons of innocence (David Altheide, personal communication, 23 April 1998), their victimization may represent an attack on the family.²

Other defining images of women victims. The physical appearance of women crime victims was commented on in both time periods; it helped to establish their worth (see Benedict 1992). In one vignette, the host explained that a murder victim's "beauty cost her life" (2-10-96/3). In another, he simply noted that "the beauty was dead" (2-5-89/2). A girl killed in a hit-and-run incident was described as having "beautiful, long hair" (1-13-96/10).

Sometimes, a woman's image was defined by a combination of physical appearance and occupation. One victim was described as a "pretty college freshman" (3-23-96/2). In another case, a husband shot his "pretty school teacher wife" (2-5-89/1). A vignette featured "a top model" with "one of Hawaii's most photographed faces" (2-5-89/2).

A woman's occupation alone was rarely the defining characteristic in *AMW* vignettes (only 17 percent of total vignettes for both 1989 and 1996). In the 1989 vignettes, these were the traditionally women's occupations that we mentioned earlier. The situation changed somewhat in the 1996 episodes in which a few women held more professional positions, although women's occupations continued to be ignored for a large percentage of victims.

In some vignettes, a woman's image was defined through narratives that dealt with sociability or a selfless devotion to others. For example, a woman murder victim was described as a person who entertained kids and the elderly (2-26-89/3). Another murder victim "took care of everyone, including her sister in a wheelchair" (3-9-96/7).

Ironically, the very characteristics that defined women's images—for example, being giving, family-oriented people—were sometimes depicted as contributing to their victimization. Often, their victimization was the result of gullibility, naïveté, or trust in others. One woman who was characterized as "a trusting girl" who loved to help outcasts was murdered by an outcast (2-26-89/3). In several cases, women responded to men's flattery in a way that put them in danger. One young woman got into a car with a rapist who asked her, "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" (2-19-89/3). In another vignette, a murdered woman's friend recounted the victim's decision to take her husband back in. The friend said, "She knew he would kill her, but she loved him, and I couldn't talk her out of it" (2-10-96/4).

Distorted love and misplaced trust were common themes in the vignettes. Several women met with estranged husbands or lovers whom they feared and were murdered by them (2-26-89/3; 3-19-89/2). This theme also figured prominently in the 1996 vignettes about child molestation. In one vignette, the narrative described the criminal as a person who "came across as a grandfatherly type" but who really was a "sick individual," a "monster." He befriended a family and, while baby-sitting for them, molested three girls (1-27-96/8). In a second vignette, a single father, new to the neighborhood, used his daughters to lure in and molest two children

(3-9-96/6). These two vignettes, which are similar in narrative structure, portray the danger to children when parents are not careful.

In a few vignettes, a woman's "deviance" contributed to her victimization. In one episode, a woman was an "unwed mother who dressed provocatively" (3-19-89/2). Another woman left a bar alone at night after a fight with her boyfriend and accepted a ride from a stranger (2-19-89/3). A successful model, murdered by a drug-dealing ex-boyfriend, used drugs (2-5-89/2).

For the most part, *AMW* presented an image of women as innocent victims who were worthy of audience sympathy. This was especially true for children victims. The narratives depicted caring, sometimes careful women. Nevertheless, these women were murdered, raped, or ripped off. Some had loving families and mates, but love could not protect them. Others were victimized because of love or because they trusted dangerous people. Most of these women were victimized by men: Although a few adult women were victimized by intimates, most were victimized by strangers. Girls' assailants were more likely to be acquaintances or relatives. The vignettes also convey images of socially appropriate femininity and corresponding lessons about some women who endanger themselves by acting inappropriately. In both time periods, *AMW* projected a message that danger is all pervasive and that women and girls are vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of a reality television crime program, *AMW*, is grounded in the view that gender is a social construction and that the media are a primary agency in that construction. *AMW*'s depictions largely conform to Connell's (1987, 1993) notions of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Our findings offer only limited support for the argument (Barber 1991) that the program's format empowers women. A few women appear on camera and discuss their victimization. Their narratives focus on matters that are important to the women victims and presumably to women in the television audience, especially the pain and emotional loss associated with being a crime victim or losing a loved one. However, more in line with Schlesinger et al. (1992), we find that *AMW* also (re)creates a portrait of peril and disseminates subordinating images of women. Women rarely speak on *AMW*, and when they do, their stories are embedded in hegemonic narratives that appear to let women constitute and interpret their lives but that also maintain, in a taken-for-granted fashion, structures of oppression that constrain women's lives (Ewick and Silbey 1995, 201). This portrait of peril is heightened by *AMW*'s reality claims.

AMW's depiction conforms to television's typical portrayal of women. The women victims who appear on *AMW* are usually white and relatively young. Many work in what are traditionally women's jobs, although a few hold more professional positions; often no occupation is noted. These women are defined by their selfless sociability, by their fragile relationships with intimates, by their motherhood, and by their physical beauty (see Connell 1987). Often, these very traits cause their

victimization. As victims, they are simultaneously idealized and blamed. In any case, their victimization is the common thread in these narratives.

Women and girls are murdered, raped, molested, and kidnapped. Portraits of intimates as assailants draw attention to risks frequently ignored by media, but images of stranger danger still predominate (see Stanko 1990). Risks of violent crime to women, especially white women, are exaggerated.

Through its narratives, *AMW*'s women crime victims offer an emotionally compelling pedagogy about the brutal potential of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity: physical violence. Wives and mothers, standard characterizations of women on television generally and especially on *AMW*, are brutalized each week. Their victimization happens in titillating detail, accompanied by a soundtrack and the host's narratives, which speak of gruesome wounds, stark fear, and painful loss. This imagery is sharpened by television's visual power. The audience sees in close-up the pain of a mother who has lost her child or the terror before a woman is shot. This imagery references a recurring iconography about masculine violence against women (Walkowitz 1982).

These vignettes are pedagogical because of the lessons they embody: Bad things happen to women who go out alone, who are gullible (apparently a feminine trait), and who trust the wrong men. Bad things also happen to women who follow the rules. The world is a dangerous place for women on *AMW*.

Scholars identify the media as a central vehicle for disseminating culturally dominant forms of masculinity and femininity (Connell 1987; Press 1991). Our analysis reveals the ways in which new media forms shape these cultural definitions. The reality television format effectively blends "fact" and "fiction" in ways that both reproduce extant gender stereotypes and give them a heightened sense of legitimacy. Because of its vignette format, *AMW*'s constructions of women victims receive more airtime than those on the news. *AMW*'s dramatic techniques, drawn from entertainment programming, make the vignettes more compelling. Yet, *AMW* can claim that these gender constructions are real. *AMW* builds on television's folk-like tradition in which the viewer "lives" seen experiences, which confirms them as "truths" (Fiske 1987). Moreover, *AMW*'s format is now a model for both news and dramatic programming, further blurring televised reality and fiction (see Greenfield 1998).

AMW offers a powerful, pedagogical construction of gender in society. Juxtaposed against a dangerous world and the vulnerability of emphasized femininity is modern hegemonic masculinity—the voice and face of technical competence (see Connell 1993). The police and hosts know about crime. Their knowledge of dates, locations, and motivations epitomize Man, the Expert. Gullible women must trust these reasonable, reasoned men, who are the voice not only of reason but also authority. The host enjoys the authority of a storyteller; the police represent the state. Encouraging women to rely on police protection is especially ironic given the well-documented history of the neglect and abuse of women victims by police and the rest of the criminal justice system (Hammer, Radford, and Stanko 1989).

We noted at the outset that the media present women crime victims in stereotypic ways that may enhance women's fear of crime (Madriz 1997). Traditionally, such presentations of women crime victims are sketchy in terms of details (Chermak 1995). Our analysis reveals something new in television's gender constructions: *AMW* not only presents a wealth of detail about women crime victims, but it does so in a lurid way that, more than ever, blurs reality and fiction (Bond-Maupin 1998). This blurring of reality and fiction occurs in a style that appears to give real women a voice and validation as victims and to locate them in a community of concerned others, including their family and friends, the host, the police, and the audience. But as we have demonstrated, *AMW* embeds these women's voices within the prevailing cultural constructions of gender. Indeed, *AMW*'s "realistic" production of feminine vulnerability sends a message to the audience that the only defense against the ever-present dangers to women is to trust in the police and in *AMW*'s television community of surveillance.

NOTES

1. One television crime drama that presented oppositional images to the "woman as victim" stereotype was the 1980s series *Cagney and Lacey*. The program featured two strong women characters working as partners in the nontraditional occupation of policing. They were crime fighters, not crime victims. Series images diverged from culturally emphasized images of femininity. Despite popular and critical acclaim, network executives pressured the series producers to make the characters more closely conform to television's standard image of women as beautiful and subordinate to men (D'Acci 1994).

2. Our 1996 sample contained many other vignettes that depicted child molestation, which we have not included in our analysis, either because they were updates or because the victims were boys. Moreover, almost every week, *AMW* presented a "Missing Child" alert; the missing children were about evenly divided between girls and boys.

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