Life Imitating Art: Representations of Domestic Violence from the Silver Screen

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Social learning theory recognizes that through the observation of others, people learn how to participate in certain behaviors and the outcomes that result from those behaviors. Behavior is generally classified as either prosocial (i.e. actions that are helpful or beneficial) or antisocial (i.e. actions that violate social norms). For this study, we were interested in how domestic violence was being portrayed in films. We worked to identify the consequences of the violence as well as how the situations were resolved. Most importantly, we wanted to note what was being learned from instances of domestic violence and what that means for the future.

Introduction

Oscar Wilde once said that "life imitates art far more than art imitates life." While Wilde may have been speaking tongue-in-cheek, there is some truth to this saying. Numerous researchers have investigated the role observations and social learning have on an individual’s conduct. Most famously studied by Albert Bandura (1977), we see that people learn how to participate in ambiguous situations by modeling others. Furthermore, people “learn” what are appropriate and inappropriate behaviors based on outcomes (i.e. actor’s behavior is “punished” as “wrong”). This has been shown for both prosocial (i.e. actions that are helpful or beneficial) and antisocial (i.e. actions that violate social norms) behaviors.

Prior to the mid 1960s, few films portrayed themes of domestic violence. On the rare occasions it was present, it usually was presented as justifiable actions (e.g. Rhett Butler slapping a hysterical Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*) or portrayed in a humorous manner (Ralph Kramden threatening to strike Alice Kramden "one of these days" in *the Honeymooners*). During the feminist movement (from 1960s through late 1990s), there was a shift to a realization that violence towards women was wrong, and it
was viewed as a societal issue. Intervention by law enforcement officials or social service workers was viewed as the appropriate and necessary way to deal with issues of domestic violence. This is evident in films of this era, as women were presented as incapable of helping themselves and in need of outside support to deal with violence.

In the current post-feminist environment, there has been a gradual shift towards gender equality. The gap between men and women socially, economically, and politically has narrowed over this period. There has also been a more noticeable participation by women in deviant, antisocial behavior (i.e. gang related behavior). This shift has been reflected in films, where more and more women are in roles of power and control over men. This may suggest to society that women can and should help themselves, and thus, it is unnecessary to have societal intervention services, mandatory arrest laws, and domestic violence training for police officers.

For this study, we were interested in how films portrayed domestic violence and its consequences. We identified various themes of domestic violence across three eras: the pre-feminist era, the feminist era, and the post-feminist era. We organized how instances of domestic violence were portrayed in films and noted whether or not the violent behavior was rewarded or punished.

**Methodology**

A non-random sample of films was used. Of the 40 films viewed, 25 were included in the analysis. Small group discussions (SGDs) were facilitated to establish general themes related to the consequences and resolutions of the domestic violence. SGDs addressed the film’s attitudes and representations of law enforcement and social
services agencies as they relate to domestic violence. Films were divided into three eras: the pre-feminist era (pre-1960s), the feminist era (1960-2000), and the post-feminist era (2000-present). The films were categorized as follows:

**Pre-Feminist:** Gone with the Wind (1932), Reap the Wild Wind (1942);


**Post-Feminist:** The Opponent (2000), Enough (2002), Devil’s Pond (2003), Mr. & Mrs. Smith (2005), Broken (2006), The Brave One (2007)

Representations of violence across the eras were identified. Types of violence included physical violence (i.e. hitting, slapping, kicking, pushing down), psychological violence (i.e. acts that increase terror and/or doubt in victim’s perception), and life-threatening violence (i.e. multiple blows, use of weapons, strangulation). Films in the pre-feminist era displayed instances of physical violence only. Into the feminist era, there was a marked increase in instances of psychological and life-threatening violence, which continued into and stabilized during the post-feminist era.

Consequential themes across the eras were developed. During the pre-feminist era, no consequences were noted in the films, as violence against women was generally trivialized. Films in the feminist era began to display a trend of the woman leaving the man or the man being killed by a family member/friend as a last resort option. The post-
feminist era films, in increasing instances, showed the woman killing the man in a pre-
emptive attack or the woman leaving the man to his own devices.

Resolution themes across the eras were noted. The films of the pre-feminist era
displayed no resolution. Into the feminist era, the films presented instances of domestic
violence as being resolved through the aid of outside sources (family, friends, etc.) or by
the woman leaving the man or killing the abuser as a last resort. The domestic violence
situations in the post-feminist era films were resolved by the woman asserting herself and
leaving the abuser.

Summary

In pre-feminist era films, abuse was marginalized and mainly used as a
disciplinary action to infantile women. Because of the trivialization of violence, no
consequences or resolutions were noted. Representations of violence were more realistic
and increases in life-threatening and psychological violence were noted in the feminist
era. Women were shown as needing outside sources (family, friends, etc.) to resolve the
situation, or killing the man as a last resort. Toward the end of this era, women began to
build personal empowerment and learned to walk away from the situation and the abuser.
The level of brutality was similar in the post-feminist era films, but consequences of
violence were marginalized. Women largely resolved the situation on their own and often
used violence against the abuser as the initial resolution.

Conclusion

Results indicate greater acceptance of a woman’s independence in dealing with
and resolving domestic violence situations. Due to this idea of women empowerment and
competence in dealing with domestic violence on their own, changes in domestic violence statutes and laws could occur.

**Future Topics and Focus**

While our research did not include psychological thrillers in our sample of films, future focus could be given to the transition of the helpless female victim (in *Gaslight*, 1944) to the righteous avenger (in *P2*, 2007), as well as to the development of the female super villain from a sexy vixen to an unstoppable killing machine.