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# Domestic Violence in the Spotlight: From the Private Sphere to Popular Culture

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Domestic Violence in the Spotlight: From the Private Sphere to Popular Culture

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## Introduction

“If she ever tries to fuckin' leave again, I'ma tie her to the bed and set this house on fire,” raps Eminem in the emotionally charged and controversial song “Love the Way You Lie” featuring Rihanna. Released in 2010, this song debuted in the midst of a media storm of domestic abuse coverage following the shocking arrest of Rihanna’s former boyfriend, R&B singer Chris Brown. On February 9, 2009, a few days before the Grammys, Rihanna was found beaten and bloody in Brown’s car. This brutal assault contributed to the song’s massive success, with 6 million copies sold in the US, as Brown later pled guilty to “one count of assault with the intent of doing great bodily injury” (Duke and Rowlands 2009). In the four years following this episode, Rihanna and Brown’s relationship evolved under the media spotlight. While at first she was adamant about her breakup with Brown and her responsibility to act as a role model to other girls in abusive relationships, three years later Rihanna publicly forgave Brown in an interview with Oprah Winfrey (Bernard 2013). The couple’s on-again-off-again relationship is controversial to say the least, drawing the attention of everyone from celebrity gossip writers to psychologists to women’s health representatives. The intense media spotlight on such intimate and personal behavior between these two young celebrities underscores the changing societal attitude on domestic violence.

Domestic violence is not a new phenomenon, but it has only emerged as a public health concern in the past 40 years. Once viewed as a taboo topic best kept behind the closed doors of the private family, the emergence of the women’s rights movement in the 1970’s brought victims forward to share their stories of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Increased discourse on the issue encouraged the integration of domestic violence stories and themes into the media,

including movies, television, and magazines. Celebrities share their personal horror stories and break-ups in exclusive interviews and viewers experience the heart-wrenching struggles of victims of abuse in popular movies. The media has a powerful role in reflecting and shaping the public's attitudes and behaviors, and this influence extends to the issue of intimate partner violence (Meloy and Miller 2009). The portrayal of domestic abuse in the films *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *The Burning Bed* (1984), and the actions and media portrayal of the celebrity couple Rihanna and Chris Brown (2009-2013) depict and reinforce the transition of domestic violence from a neglected private issue to a public concern. In stark contrast to Rihanna and Brown's 2011 song "Nobody's Business," the couple's tumultuous relationship and the evolution of domestic violence in the media offer "proof that domestic violence is everybody's business" (Bernard 2013).

Intimate partner violence is a troubling threat for women and men worldwide. The US department of Justice estimates that about one in four American women will be subjected to domestic abuse during her lifetime (Lamberg 2000, 555). A study conducted in 2003 by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control estimated that around 5.3 million intimate partner violence victimizations occur among American women 18 years and older, which result in almost 2 million injuries and 1,300 deaths each year (Khaw and Hardesty 2007, 413). The attention and research that went into investigating domestic violence since the 1970s has brought these frightful realities to the public's attention. Although intimate partner violence is experienced by both men and women in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, the majority of studies have focused on female victims and male perpetrators; thus, this dynamic can be explored most thoroughly.

Intimate partner violence can be defined as “any acts of violence committed by one’s current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend” (Khaw and Hardesty 2007, 413). Physical abuse includes, but is not limited to, actions where “victims are pushed, punched, kicked, strangled, and assaulted with various weapons with the intent of causing pain, injury, and emotional distress” (Kyriacou et. al. 1999, 1892). Yet intimate partner violence is not restricted to physical abuse; it also encompasses verbal, psychological, and sexual abuse. Domestic violence is actually the most common cause of nonfatal injury to women in the United States, with mental and physical health effects including bodily injury, chronic pain, low self-esteem, posttraumatic stress symptoms, depression, substance dependence, mood and eating disorders, anxiety, and even death (Kyriacou et. al. 1999, 1892; Khaw and Hardesty 2007, 413; Wathen and MacMillan 2003, 590). Each year \$4.1 billion is spent on direct medical and mental health services for victims of intimate partner violence (CDC 2008). According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “35.6% of women in [the United States] are raped, assaulted, or stalked by intimate partners at some point during their lives” (Liebshutz and Rothman 2012, 2071). Further, domestic violence is not typically an isolated event. It is highly likely that a spouse or partner who abuses his wife or girlfriend will continue the abuse and in many cases the severity will worsen.

Homicide is a serious risk for battered partners trying to escape a relationship. In fact, one third of the homicides of women in the United States are committed by a spouse or partner (Kyriacou et. al. 1999, 1892). The period just after a women separates from her partner is the most risky. A study of homicides in Chicago found that 85% of killings of wives by their husbands occurred in the year after separation (Goode 2000, 6). Furthermore, a study led by Johns Hopkins University found that of 250 women who were killed by a current or former

partner, 65% had been assaulted by that partner in the past, and of the 200 victims of attempted homicide, 72% had experienced a previous assault (Goode 2000, 6). These shocking figures reveal the severity of this endemic, but there was a time when the term “domestic abuse” did not even exist. There was a time when domestic violence was out of the spotlight and an accepted part of society.

## **The Evolution of Domestic Abuse**

Society in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century contained two distinct and separate spheres: the private sphere, which was “assigned to women and included the family along with specific out-of-home activities, such as charity,” and the public sphere, which was “assigned exclusively to men and was governed by different norms, predominantly the pursuit of power and profit” (Jecker 1993, 778). These spheres were an accepted doctrine of sorts, supported by the ideal of democratic government and the limits on excessive government power. Thus, family life was viewed as a sacred aspect of society, meant to be cherished and protected. To challenge the dynamics of a family was to commit an almost sacrilegious offense. The irony of the separation of spheres in society is that although women were relegated to the maintenance of family life, they did not enjoy more or equal power than their husbands within their homes. Rather, “the division of public and private spheres served to reinforce the subordination of women,” as they, along with their children, were viewed as property rights to the man of the household (Jecker 1993, 778). To an extent, these roles extended through the twentieth century and are still present in the dynamics of modern day marriages, though today they are typically referred to as “traditional roles” and are less common than in the past (Marks et. al. 2009, 232).

These gender roles are depicted in the 1951 film *A Streetcar Named Desire*, based on the play written by Tennessee Williams. The story is of a troubled woman Blanche living in the 1940's who goes to New Orleans to stay with her sister Stella and her husband, Stanley Kowalski. As Blanche struggles to hold onto her sanity, the audience also witnesses Stanley's anger and outbursts of violence towards women. He beats, yells at, and intimidates Stella and rapes Blanche, contributing to her mental breakdown. Stanley asserts his authority in his household and only Blanche is scared for the safety of Stella, though her concern is stifled by Stella and her neighbor Eunice, whose threats to go to the police on her own husband are half-hearted. When Stella tries to stand up to Stanley, he menacingly asks her, "Since when do you give me orders?" Stanley holds all of the power in their relationship. In a later scene, there is tension during dinner after Stanley reveals Blanche's dishonest past to Stella. Stanley's sloppiness and glares toward Blanche anger Stella to where she snaps and tells him to wash up and help her clear the table. Stanley responds by smashing his hand on the table and throwing a cup against the wall. He shouts, "Now that's how I'm gonna clear the table! Don't you ever talk that way to me! I'm the king around here, and don't you forget it!" Stanley clearly views himself as the superior partner, with Stella at his service, and to an extent Stella accepts this role by forgiving his outbursts and caring to his needs.

During the 1940's and 1950's, popular attitudes reinforced men's right to use violence to "control" their wives. Though it was not openly encouraged or celebrated, "domestic violence was a legally sanctioned feature of the patriarchal family, and courts generally upheld the husband's authority to administer 'moderate' punishment, usually defined as anything short of life-threatening or permanent injury" (Jecker 1993, 778). Even more, a Supreme Court in North Carolina went on to declare, "If no permanent injury has been inflicted... it is better to draw the



curtain, shut out the public gaze and leave the parties to forget and forgive” (Martin 1976). Thus, the idea of privacy was reinforced and justice was deemed inapplicable to family relationships. Moreover, in many ways women accepted it as part of their position as homemaker and wife and did not reach out to authorities. This is depicted in *Streetcar* when Eunice storms out of her apartment, telling her husband she is going to report him to the police. Stella, Blanche, and Stanley witness the commotion, laugh, and share knowing glances, as if Eunice has made these empty threats in the past. Soon after, Eunice and her husband return with Eunice in tears and her husband comforting her by saying, “I don’t do that to other girls because I love you, baby!” Eunice was not only unsuccessful in reporting her husband, but the scene is presented as almost comical, as if the notion of a man being punished by the police was ridiculous. In cases brought to their attention, police departments and prosecutors struggled to recognize wife beating as a criminal offense (Eber 1981, 899). It was not until the second half of the century that women began to stand up for their rights and for their own safety.

### ***1960’s: The Women’s Rights and Liberation Movements***

The 1960’s was a decade of change in American history, especially for women. The civil rights movements and fight for gender equality brought about a “changing political consciousness and organizing activity of women” (Schechter 1982, 29). Women began to join the workforce and the Peace Corps, thus gaining some independence. In 1965, Congress passed laws prohibiting discrimination against women in employment and required equal pay rates for equal work between men and women (Martin 1976). Increased autonomy and camaraderie motivated women to speak out about their most private and humiliating experiences, and

consequently the anti-rape movement began in the 1970's. Two major movements developed in the US: the women's rights movement and the women's liberation movement. The women's liberation movement included the claim that what goes on in the privacy of people's homes is of political concern and set the foundation for the battered women's movement (Schechter 1982, 34-40). This movement articulated the belief that "violence is a particular form of domination based on social relationships of unequal power," and women should no longer accept the power dynamic between partners (Schechter 1982, 34). Feminists first spoke out about rape and then battering, which expanded the domain of male oppression to include violence against women (Dunn 2005, 3). Women's programs separate from male control or influence were created to care for battered women. Supporters of the battered women's movement sought to "prevent women from being revictimized in court, worked to change laws requiring corroboration of the rape by a witness, and developed rape crisis centers and hotlines to assist victims" (Schechter 1982; 36-7, 46-47). In 1971 Women's Advocates in St. Paul, Minnesota evolved from a consciousness raising group, which allowed for the voice of women to be heard when it had so often been oppressed, to one of the first shelters for battered women (Schechter 1982, 33). This surge of support for victims of domestic abuse rippled throughout other facets of society and elicited action from groups outside of feminist circles.

The women's movements affected police policy and improved support from the criminal justice system, though the transition was not smooth. The police force was put under a lot of pressure for their failure to protect beaten women (Martin 1976). Police response to cases of domestic violence had typically been diversion by dispatchers and low priority assignment. For officers that did respond, the tendency was to mediate and depart quickly without achieving meaningful intervention (Martin 1976) If and when cases went to trial, they were directed to civil

court instead of criminal. Thus, the punishment for a man found guilty of assaulting his girlfriend or wife was much milder. However, the situation changed in 1972 when the San Jose Police Department was sued on behalf of Ruth Bunnell for wrongful death due to police negligence. She called the police requesting assistance but was refused and soon after she was killed by her husband. In the year prior to her death, she called the police 29 times complaining about the violent acts her ex-husband committed against her and her daughters, but they failed to protect her (Martin 1976). Though the case was dismissed, it received extensive publicity and led to other lawsuits that acted to change legislation. The 1975 *Scott v. Hart* suit against the Oakland police department settled with the police's agreement to stop training officers to avoid arrest in domestic violence cases, to train officers in how to address domestic violence cases, and to hand out resource cards to victims. Following this decision, several more lawsuits led to police policy reform and "the era of crisis intervention, family court diversion, and policy inaction seemed to [come] to an end" (History of Battered Women's Movement 2009).

Perhaps most influential case was that of Francine Hughes, the inspiration for the 1984 TV movie, *The Burning Bed*. The film tells the true story of the battered wife Francine who set her husband, Mitch, on fire in his bed after over twelve years of abuse. She called the police multiple times during her husband's attacks; however, by the time they arrived Mitch would stop beating her. Since they did not witness the assault, the police did not have the legal authority to arrest him, leaving Francine vulnerable to more attacks. This was an unending cycle. The police could not protect her and as his threats escalated, Francine's life was in danger. In the end, the system failed her and she was pushed to a point where she saw murdering Mitch as her only way out. At trial, the jury actually sided with her and found her not guilty of murder by reason of temporary insanity. This verdict signified a change in the public and legal attitude towards

victims of abuse. The police officers were put on the spot for ignoring his threats and taking the situation too lightly. Francine's trial laid the foundation for the introduction of a new concept to the issue of self-defense and domestic violence: the battered spouse defense.

Following the actual trial in 1977, feminists debated whether or not the verdict sent the wrong message. It was not the acquittal that they disagreed with, but the "premise that a woman who kills an abusive husband must surely be insane" (Carpenter 1989). This especially bothered the feminist psychotherapist, Lenore Walker, who proposed that killing an abuser can be a "'normal' response to an abnormal situation" (Carpenter 1989). Ms. Walker has appeared as an expert witness in more than 150 murder trials. She argues that her defendant's actions are self-defense because they do not perceive imminent danger as an ordinary person might. Since they live under constant stress of unpredictable abuse, an attack can trigger the fear of death, thus inciting them to kill their husbands in self-defense, even if the husband is not actually attacking them at the time of the killing. Ms. Walker developed the concept of Battered Woman Syndrome, which essentially proposes a context for self-defense for battered wives in court (Carpenter 1989).

Not surprisingly, Ms. Walker and battered women syndrome were opposed by many prosecutors. In the majority of cases, her testimony was ruled inadmissible because judges did not perceive battered women syndrome as being a recognized field of psychological study. In the trial of Joyce Hawthorne, the first battered woman to be acquitted on a plea of self-defense, the state's attorney argued that Ms. Walker's testimony would mean an "open season on killing men" (Carpenter 1989). While this is not the case, it certainly affected the trials of other battered wives. In a 2009 interview with *Lansing State Journal*, Francine's attorney Arjen Greydanus reflected on the barrage of phone calls he received following Francine's acquittal. Women

pleaded with him to defend them in court, claiming they were in the same situation as Francine and had killed their husbands. One woman even persuaded him to go to her home, only for Greydanus to find her dead husband's body still rotting in the garage. He says, "I wondered if this was a woman who had heard about Francine and maybe...I was just uncomfortable with it" (Aherne 2009). For this woman and many others, Greydanus refused to defend them, though he empathized with many of their situations. Despite Francine's success, "as many as eight out of 10 battered women accused of killing their husbands in the United States are convicted or end up pleading guilty" (Aherne 2009). The battered spouse defense continues to be inconsistent in court. Prosecutors argue that a battered woman had the opportunity to seek help and had more choices than to revert to killing her spouse (Bilefsky 2011). Nonetheless, trials concerning abused wives gain media attention and public support. A recent episode of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" featured Barbara Sheehan, a woman who was eventually acquitted of murdering her abusive husband. She became "a symbol for battered women, and many of her supporters in court wore purple ribbons in solidarity with victims of domestic violence" (Bilefsky 2011).

### ***Domestic Violence as a Public Health Concern in the 1990's and Beyond***

While the criminal justice system became involved in the prosecution of domestic abusers, the health care system was slower to follow suit in its outreach to patients suffering from domestic violence injuries. This delay was once again due to the preconceived notion of the privacy of the family. Despite the intimate nature of their responsibilities in primary and emergency care, many physicians felt uncomfortable asking patients about abusive histories or even implying that injuries may be caused by abuse, especially to patients of the middle to upper

class. Since they received no training in intimate partner violence identification and care, they struggled to address it or simply dismissed it. It was easier for them to treat isolated injuries with prescriptions and bandages rather than explore the real reasons for complaints (Lamberg 2000, 554). Some physicians even believed the patients were partially to blame for their abuse for “[making] a bad choice in men” or concluded that the patient “didn’t seem to mind that [her husband] pushed her about a bit” (Taylor et. al. 2013, 494). Despite an overall change in physician attitude since the 80’s, the notion of blaming the victim still exists today with both physicians and the general public. Additionally, many physicians see their intervention efforts as fruitless, since many times their patients return with more injuries and an intact relationship (Rhodes and Levinson 2003, 602). However, focus groups and interviews have shown these beliefs to be unsupported. In reality, “brief discussions with a physician, conducted in a concerned and nonjudgmental fashion, can help to change the way abused women view their situations, even if they do not disclose the abuse” (Rhodes and Levinson 2003, 602). Thus, physician screening has become a vital part of identifying and providing support to victims of abuse.

A survey of therapists conducted in 1990 regarding domestic violence revealed that 41% failed to identify what was later determined to be “obvious evidence” of violence. Furthermore, none of the therapists identified the lethality of the situation and of “those who did identify conflict... 55% said they would not intervene” (History of Battered Women’s Movement 2009). These results indicate how doctors contributed to the struggle for victims to escape abuse by denying their services. However, two years later the U.S. Surgeon General published that abuse by husbands was the leading cause of injuries to women ages 15 to 44. Soon after, the American Medical Association released guidelines that suggested that doctors screen women for signs of

domestic violence (History of Battered Women's Movement 2009). A study by the Family Violence Prevention Fund in 1993 identified that most battered patients were not identified as victims of abuse in emergency departments. As a result, California passed the first legislation to require health care providers to get training in the detection of domestic violence and hospitals to have a written policy on how to treat battered people (History of Battered Women's Movement 2009).

Physician screening includes a "standardized assessment of patients, regardless of their reasons for seeking medical attention" (Cole 2000, 551). When a patient seeks care for injuries that could be the result of abuse, they now encounter a new setting: the physician includes questions about abuse and home life in the patient's medical history. Abused women are often reluctant to admit their abuse, however when a health professional directly asks them they are more willing to discuss it (Taylor et. al. 2013, 490). This simple question opens up communication for the victim with their doctor and has powerful implications for identifying an abuse victim and providing her with resources for support. If a patient admits abuse, the clinician is encouraged to do the following: first, acknowledge the patient's admission of abuse; second, connect the patient to advocacy services; third, offer the patient the National Domestic Violence hotline number; fourth, consider if child protective services are required; and fifth, screen the patient for coexisting depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Liebshutz and Rothman 1012, 2071-2072). In the mid 1990's clinicians in most states were required to report injuries caused by domestic violence to the police (Rodriguez et. al. 2001, 580). Though controversial, supporters of the policy argued that it encouraged doctors to identify domestic violence and facilitate the prosecution of batterers. Mandatory reporting, however, may lead to an escalation of violence by

boyfriends and husbands. Thus, some victims of abuse avoided seeking help from doctors and emergency departments (Rodriguez et. al. 2001, 580-581).

As domestic abuse grew into a public health concern, it required more attention than just physician intervention. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) established the Violence Epidemiology Branch in 1983 in order to “focus its public health efforts in violence prevention” (CDC 2008). Big steps were made in 1994 when Congress approved appropriations for intimate partner violence prevention and funded rape prevention education block grants. The Violence Against Women Act was passed, which provided \$1.6 billion toward investigation and prosecution of violent crimes against women, as well as directed the establishment of the Office on Violence Against Women within the Department of Justice (CDC 2008). This act was expanded in 2013 to protect Native Americans, transgender individuals, homosexuals, and immigrants. Domestic abuse received even more attention when October was proclaimed Domestic Violence Awareness month. This led to the implementation of prevention and awareness programs. For example, the CDC launched its program Choose Respect, which is designed to educate people on how to prevent unhealthy relationship behaviors (CDC 2008). According to the CDC, “Public health is the science of protecting and improving the health of families and communities through promotion of healthy lifestyles, research for disease and injury prevention and detection and control of infectious diseases” (CDC 2013). Domestic violence is no longer a private and personal issue, but rather it is now addressed on a global scale as a public health problem.

Fortunately, these efforts have been very successful in reducing domestic violence. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice, between 1994 and 2010 “the overall rate of intimate partner violence in the United States declined by 64% from



9.8 victimizations per 1,000 persons age 12 or older to 3.6 per 1,000” (Catalano 2012, 1). This decline can be attributed to “a broad shift in attitudes that began in the 1980s and '90s,” as well as the “public awareness campaigns, national legislation protecting victims, and subsequent training of police and prosecutors to recognize intimate partner violence as a crime, rather than as a private matter” (Eulich 2013). The efforts since the 60’s and an increase in public awareness have contributed to outreach and support for victims. During the 10-year period from 2001 to 2010, however, the “decline in overall intimate partner violence rate slowed and stabilized, while the overall violent crime rate continued to decrease” (Catalano 2012, 1). According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, more efforts are needed to continue the fight against domestic violence for the slowed rate can be due in part to the issue of underreporting. Intimate partner violence is one of the most chronically underreported crimes, with only “one-quarter of all physical assaults, one-fifth of all rapes, and one-half of all stalkings perpetrated against females by intimate partners...reported to the police” (NCADV, 2013). Hence, the issue is far from resolved. Not only should women have the resources and support to escape from and hold their abusers accountable, but the abuse itself needs to be addressed and efforts to stop the violence before it occurs is needed.

## **Movie and Media Portrayal of Domestic Abuse**

Within a period of fifty years, domestic violence evolved from an acknowledged product of a patriarchal power dynamic in the private sphere of the household to a public health concern involving various outlets of the public domain, including law enforcement, medical establishments, and various government programs. Throughout this time domestic violence

permeated the film industry, revealing itself first in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The depiction of domestic violence in movies literally brought the issue into the homes of millions of Americans. For those who are ignorant of the risks and realities of domestic abuse, these films and celebrity cases bring light to the issue, and for those who are suffering abuse themselves, they can empathize with characters like Francine and Stella. The media mirrored society's education about domestic abuse and its complexities and furthered the movement of domestic abuse into the public's attention.

### *Causes of Domestic Abuse*

While the prevalence of domestic abuse may be well understood and studied, identifying and preventing the factors that lead to the abuse in the first place is a challenge. How does a loving relationship turn into something so destructive? What pushes a man to inflict pain on his girlfriend or wife? Perhaps if the answer to these questions was clearer there would be an effective way to prevent domestic abuse. Nonetheless, there are external and personal factors that are considered highly influential in a man's fall to violence. The men at greatest risk for injuring their partners are those who "abuse alcohol or use drugs, are unemployed or intermittently employed, [and] have less than a high-school education" (Kyriacou et. al. 1999, 1892). Alcohol and drugs severely inhibit an individual's self-control and blur his sense of morality, so combining these factors with a stressful marriage or a personality imbalance can put a woman at high risk of injury. Especially when these substances are abused, the man cannot think clearly and is more likely to express and act on his anger. Additionally, low levels of education can be "an indicator of poor communication skills," which makes it difficult for the man to resolve

conflicts with his wife or girlfriend (Kyriacou et. al. 1999, 1897). This becomes an issue especially when there are stressors in the couple's lives, including financial instability. The pressure of finding work for an unemployed or irregularly employed man can be a trigger for domestic abuse. Particularly when a man has a preconceived notion of husband as the provider and head of a household, unemployment can be shameful and he can take out that frustration on his partner.

Alcohol plays a large role in Mickey's assaults in *The Burning Bed*. Mickey struggles to find consistent work and when he is incapacitated by his car accident he drinks more often and heavily. The director Robert Greenwald creates a disturbing mood with a scene that shows only the outside of the Hughes home while shouts, bangs, and screams are heard penetrating the walls. After, a drunken Mickey holding a beer calls Francine into the room. When she enters the audience cannot see her face. "I'm sorry, I love you," Mickey pleads. Francine replies, "Why'd you do it, why?" through her tears. Finally, her bruised and bleeding face is revealed to the audience. This shocking image depicts the escalation of violence in the context of Mickey's drunken stupor. Unlike in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where Stella appears unbruised and normal after Stanley's attack, the realistic and gory image of Francine, played by Farrah Fawcett, reveals to the viewers the severity of domestic violence injuries and sends a powerful message. In a later plea for Francine to come back to Mickey and the kids, Mickey tells her that he quit drinking and promises that with his sobriety the violence and anger will stop. Unfortunately for Francine, she believes him and returns to him for the second time after escaping his grasp.

Some men are naturally inclined to violent behavior. Abusive partners that escalate to homicide usually "suffer from severe personality disturbances" that induce a feeling of extreme insecurity in their relationship (Goode 2000, 6). But even in less severe cases, many abusive

men “have a terror of being abandoned and express their dependency in extreme jealousy and controlling behavior” (Goode 2000, 6). There is a fine line between a devoted boyfriend who surprises his girlfriend at work with flowers and spends his day texting her and a boyfriend who checks up on his girlfriend unexpectedly out of distrust, calls her to keep tabs on her location at all times, and has an unhealthy concern with friends and family interfering in their relationship. Though it “may sound like Prince Charming...in reality that kind of possessiveness is designed to isolate a woman from other sources of support in her life. It is a foreshadowing of violence” (Goode 2000, 6). A man with this kind of jealousy is more likely to be provoked by his partner’s innocent friendships, especially with other men, and act on this anger. Possessiveness turns into a cycle where the man’s desperation to keep his girlfriend or wife in his life leads him to hurt her and physically force her to be with him.

In *The Burning Bed*, Mickey justifies his first attack on Francine by proclaiming, “I love you so much. I can’t stand to think of you dressing up for anyone else.” She had bought a new outfit and styled her hair, but after a day of searching for a job with no success he had taken out his frustration on her, and when she did not accept his insults he attacked her for shaming him in front of his family. Soon after this incident Francine suffers another attack when Mickey suspects that she was flirtatiously looking at another man. His jealousy and controlling behavior escalate throughout the film, to the point where he refuses to allow her to leave the house without his permission. This is evidence of the influence of the aforementioned societal structure of male patriarchy and female suppression in the family circle. An abusive relationship is one characterized by “an imbalance of power, with one partner exerting coercive control” (Kyriacou et. al. 1999, 1896). An asymmetric power structure can lead to conflict, especially when the man

thinks his partner has embarrassed him or his reputation in some way, overstepped her role in the household, or made a decision he disagrees with concerning their home or family.

Lastly, domestic abuse experienced as a child puts that child at risk of becoming an abuser himself, whether it was witnessing his father beat his mother or being beaten himself (Cole 2000, 555). Sociologists Richard Gelles explains that in this cycle of violence “the more an individual is exposed to violence as a child (both as an observer and a victim), the more he or she is violent as an adult” (Pagelow 1981, 397). On a similar note, Gelles asserts that “women who observed spousal violence in their family...were more likely to be victims of conjugal violence in their family of procreation” (Pagelow 1981, 398). For example, in her interview with Oprah, Rihanna spoke about her troubling relationship with her father, who abused her mother when Rihanna was growing up. Although Rihanna sided with her mother at first, she grew to forgive her father and claims that though he was a bad husband, he was a good father. She even acknowledges that it was mending her relationship with her father that allowed her to forgive Brown and rebuild her friendship and relationship with him (Oprah’s Next Chapter: Rihanna 2012).

### ***Why Battered Women Stay***

For many onlookers, what is even more confounding than how a man abusing his wife is how she can choose to stay with her husband. Though from an outside perspective it seems like an easy decision, in truth there are many obstacles and pressures for why women stay in abusive relationships. Their abusers are not strangers they met at a bar or a random attacker. Rather, they are the men they have committed their lives to. In the beginning stages of an abusive

relationship, it is hard for a woman to grasp that the person she loves is hurting her or will hurt her again. Marriage especially is a sacred and serious commitment. Women want to be good wives and mothers. However, the responsibilities of marriage, especially from a traditional standpoint, can be twisted and then reinforced by friends and family. Francine especially struggles with this in her relationship with Mickey. After her second beating, she immediately leaves and escapes to her mother's house. Although she initially intended to divorce him and go back to school, her mother dissuades her:

Francine: "Momma, I don't wanna go back."

Mother: "...Lots of women have to put up with their men, especially if there's children. But mostly the men don't mean it....If you make a hard bed you have to lay in it."

Francine: "It ain't fair."

Mother: "Now you know Mickey's gonna be comin' by, he's already called you."

Francine: "I don't wanna talk to him."

Mother: "It's his baby too. I know he's jealous but that's only natural. It's your duty to stand by him. Francine, he loves you. (*touching her bruised lip*) It's not really so bad, is it?"

Francine: (*uncertain*) "No, it ain't so bad."

This was a crucial point in Francine's life. Her mother presents the abuse as something that happens in every marriage and urges her to take him back. She reinforces the idea that once a woman gets married she should stand by her husband and stay with him no matter how tough it can be. Undermining the severity of Francine's situation, she underscores the traditional beliefs of a woman's place in the home. Francine depends on her mother's advice, especially because she married Mickey at a very young age due to his insistence and determination. She adopts and reiterates her mother's point of view on another occasion when Mickey slaps her in front of their friends. Her best friend, Gaby, shows concern and does not approve of their relationship. However, Francine insists, "We're a family now. I gotta try to be a good wife. I gotta figure out

what he wants and what he's thinkin'." She sees it as her job to anticipate his moodiness and anger and do everything in her power to avoid provoking him. Even more, when he is provoked she sees it as her duty to forgive him. Despite the overall progress in society's perception of a woman's role in the home by the 1980's, Francine's experience portrays a woman's individual choice to take on the subordinate role to her husband.

What makes these acts of abuse even more challenging for a woman to understand is how after "an abusive episode, many men apparently show genuine regret for what they have done, and...they can be extremely loving and kind at this time" (Herbert et. al. 1991, 313). Perhaps one of the most famous examples of this scenario can be summed in one word: "STELLAAAA!" What led to the dramatic balcony scene between Stanley and Stella? A poker game at the Kowalski house gets heated when Blanche turned on the radio, provoking the drunken Stanley to throw the radio out the window. Stella furiously calls him a "drunk animal" and yells for the other men to leave, after which Stanley pulls her outside and out of view where the viewers can only see Stanley as he punches his pregnant wife. The men pull him off and douse him in cold water while Stella escapes to Eunice's apartment. The minutes following show Stanley realizing with horror what he has done. He holds his head and starts to cry. He calls Eunice's apartment where Eunice berates him, saying "You can't beat on a woman an' then call 'er back! She won't come!" Stanley makes his way outside where he cries out, "Stella!" Finally, Stella makes her way to the stairs against Blanche's warnings. Stanley drops to his knees in tears and she slowly makes her way toward him, ending with an embrace and a passionate kiss. The following morning Blanche's concern is hushed by Stella who makes light of the situation. She excuses him and the fight:

Stella: "I know how it must have seemed to you and I'm awful sorry it had to happen, but it wasn't anything as serious as you seem to take it. In the first place, when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen. It's always a powder keg. He didn't know what he was doing...He was as good as a lamb when I came back and he's really very, very ashamed of himself."

Blanche: "And that—that makes it alright?"

Stella: "No, it isn't alright for anybody to make such a terrible row, but people do sometimes."

Stella's physical attraction to Stanley also plays a large role in her forgiveness. Stanley, played by Marlon Brando, is the epitome of masculinity and sexiness. In the first scenes of the film Stanley is arguing with his bowling team at the bowling alley and all Stella says is, "Isn't he wonderful looking?" Stella focuses on the positive aspects of their relationship, like their sexual chemistry, which allows her to excuse the negative. A study determined that "women still involved with abusive partners perceived more positive aspects to their relationship...and reported that their relationship was not as bad as it could be" (Herbert et. al. 1991, 321). The victim creates a state of mind where she can "view their relationship in a positive light" (Herbert et. al. 1991, 321). Stella maintains an illusion by "focusing on the rewards provided by the relationship (e.g. love and affection expressed) rather than on its costs (i.e. the abuse)" (Herbert et. al. 1991, 313).

Children are another compelling force in a woman's decision to stay with an abusive husband (Khaw and Hardesty 2007, 426). Many women stay with their husband for the sake of their children, though for the same reason they could choose to leave in order to protect their kids. In the case of Francine, Mickey forcefully took their children when they were staying at her mom's house. His threats to kick down the door scared Francine into letting him take the kids, hoping that he would not cause them any harm. He eventually convinces her to come back by emphasizing how much the kids miss and need her. For Francine, the only way she could see her



kids was to move back in with Mickey, at least until she could financially support the kids on her own. After she kills Mickey she explains to the court, “I ran for my life, I ran for my kids.”

Financial dependence is a major obstacle to battered wives. Women are trapped because of “lack of access to economic resources” with “no money and nowhere to go” (Herbert et. al. 1991, 312). If a woman cannot pay for her own rent or support her children, what choices does she have? In *The Burning Bed*, Francine meets with a social worker to apply for welfare, since Mickey’s inconsistent income was not enough to support the family. The viewers empathize with Francine as she struggles to keep her kids under control and manage her stressful circumstances. After her son pulls off her sunglasses and reveals her bruised eyes, the social worker urges her to legally separate from her husband in order to get her own welfare. When Francine reveals that Mickey threatened to kill her if she left him, the social workers assures her that the courts will protect her. In a moving gesture, he even pays the \$7 divorce paper fee for her. Though the divorce does not successfully free Francine from Mickey’s clutches, she later signs up for a course to become a secretary. The possibility of independence and financial freedom lift her spirits and fill her with hope of a life without Mickey. In the final scenes of the film, Mickey forces her to burn her notebooks since he believes her “thinking” and education are “trouble”. This was the final straw for Francine, and that night she burned him in his bed.

Women who are abused often blame themselves and are overcome by shame. Evidence suggests that “women who fail to leave abusive partners employ self-blame more often than they blame their partners” and this “self-blame leads to low self-esteem, depression, and feelings of helplessness, which in turn traps women in such relationships” (Herbert et. al. 1991, 312). The longer they feel trapped in the relationship, the less likely they will be to extricate themselves from the relationship (Herbert et. al. 1991, 312). Furthermore, it is often the case that observers,

friends, and family blame the victim herself for “going back for more.” Since others “may hold the woman responsible for finding a solution to the abuse (i.e., leaving the relationship), they may be unlikely to respond in a sympathetic fashion” (Herbert et. al. 1991, 311-312). Thus, the woman suffers from dual victimization.

In her interview with Oprah, Rihanna expresses her shame and humiliation under the spotlight of the media. With her celebrity status, Rihanna struggled to maintain her composure and privacy. She describes the experience through tears:

Nobody could feel that more than me. I was hurt the most. Nobody felt what I felt. It happened to me and it happened to me in front of the world. It was embarrassing, it was humiliating, it was hurtful. It's not easy. I lost my best friend. Everything I knew switched in a night and I couldn't control that so I had to deal with that and that's not easy for me to understand or interpret. And it's not easy to interpret on camera, not with the world watching (Oprah's Next Chapter: Rihanna, 2012)

Yet despite all of these feelings, Rihanna forgave Brown and in early 2013 they were officially dating once again, after which she received a lot of backlash from the media. “Hollywood Life” reporter Jennifer Kamm argued that Rihanna was unworthy of her *TIME Magazine* nomination as one of 2012's most influential people. She explains that although “Rihanna did create a national dialogue about domestic abuse, [it was] for the wrong reasons. She made it forgivable” (Kamm 2012). In the January issue of *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Rihanna told contributing Josh Eells, “I decided it was more important for me to be happy. I wasn't going to let anybody's opinion get in the way of that. Even if it's a mistake, it's *my* mistake” (Bernard 2013). But is it really that simple? Her mistake reaches and influences thousands, even millions, of fans. While Rihanna once asserted her responsibility to young girls in abusive relationships, she changes her stance, stating her discomfort in being called a role model. She says, “Society has made that title.

It has become a title of perfection and that is something no one can achieve” (Oprah’s Next Chapter: Rihanna 2012).

No longer ashamed, unlike other battered women, Rihanna’s shame has turned into a stubborn defense of Brown. She shifts the blame from Brown to an illness she believes he can be cured of. She explains to Oprah her worry that “the only person [the public] hates right now is him” and although she was angry and hurt, she “felt like he made that mistake because he needed help” (Oprah’s Next Chapter: Rihanna, 2012). Her concern to protect his image and her public forgiveness contributed to the revitalization of Brown’s career. The pair even recorded two songs together after the incident. At the 2012 MTV Video Music Awards, Chris Brown won an award and embraced Rihanna, drawing a response from the media. Considering that Video Music Awards are determined by the public’s votes, this win for Brown indicated the public’s support, whether or not his abuse is forgiven. Though indicative of an ambiguous attitude of domestic abuse, especially when celebrities are involved, the media response to their relationship at least shows that the public is paying attention to abuse. The couple broke up again in 2013, but the public will be watching to see if the infamous duo rekindles their relationship in the future.

### **Media and the Movement of Domestic Abuse into the Spotlight**

Not only do *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Burning Bed*, and Rihanna’s experience depict characteristic aspects of the complexity of domestic abuse, but they also create a timeline to examine the transitioning social attitude on the topic. *Streetcar* was filmed in 1951, a time when intimate partner violence was not yet a formal term. Even more, the direction, reviews, and criticism of *Streetcar* indicate how the movie industry felt about this ground breaking film.

Acclaimed film critic Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote a telling critique of the film in 1993, providing a retrospective analysis on what made the film unlike any before it.

*Streetcar* was the fifth biggest hit of 1951, earning an estimated \$4,250,000 at the US and Canadian box office (*Variety* 1952). Ebert explains that before *Streetcar*, “there was usually a certain restraint in American movie performances. Actors would portray violent emotions, but you could always sense to some degree a certain modesty that prevented them from displaying their feelings in raw nakedness” (Ebert 1993). Marlon Brando’s animalistic aggression changed the style of male leads in Hollywood, influencing the work of James Dean, Jack Nicholson, and Sean Penn. Interestingly, the film adaptation of the play left out several key and more risqué moments that would have shown with even more detail the brutality of Brando’s abuse as well as Stella’s intrinsic lust for her husband, ending with Stella abandoning herself to her husband instead of her ambiguous retreat to Eunice’s apartment (Ebert 1993). This censorship is indicative of the time period. With little to no discussion on the issue of domestic violence in the rhetoric of the 1950’s, Warner Bros. had to tailor the movie to the audience’s taste and comfort level. Even so, Ebert reflects how “when *A Streetcar Named Desire* was first released, it created a firestorm of controversy. It was immoral, decadent, vulgar and sinful, its critics cried. And that was after substantial cuts had already been made in the picture, at the insistence of Warner Bros.” (Ebert 1993). Even with the controversy, the film earned itself four Academy Awards and set an Oscar record when it became the first film to win in three acting categories (NY Times: *A Streetcar Named Desire* 2010). Its success transformed and expanded the emotional and physical spectrum for actors.

Writing his critique years after its debut, Ebert had the luxury to compare *Streetcar* to more modern movies. He explains that while it was “hailed as realistic in 1951, now [it] seems

claustrophobic and mannered” (Ebert 1993). A more realistic depiction by modern standards is seen in *The Burning Bed*. This 1984 TV movie overcame the challenge for its lead actors, Farrah Fawcett (Francine) and Paul Le Mat (Mickey), to realistically depict the violence of domestic abuse. Compared to Stanley’s hidden punches, viewers of *The Burning Bed* get a first-hand look at the force, punches, slaps, and bruises Mickey inflicts on Francine. Some of the most chilling fights are those when Mickey menacingly holds his fist up to Francine’s face while she squirms and shivers with fear. Both the use of visual violence and the lingering threat of violence keep the audience on edge so that they too can get a taste of the fear Francine was living with. Heightened violence in a film, especially one that is accessible to families at home, reinforces a modern viewers’ awareness of violence in the home. The actors do not hold back because they do not have to—audiences today are exposed to and educated about violence more than in the past (Keegan, 2013). For example, online movie critic Marilyn Ferdinand praises *The Burning Bed* for its progressive influences. She explains that “although it isn’t expressly stated, it is clear that the women’s movement showed Fran options she might not have reached for in another era. Her best friend Gaby (Penelope Milford) is sketched as another divorced mother who has gotten her act together on her own, and Gaby urges Fran to leave Mickey with a no-nonsense attitude that feels distinctly modern” (Ferdinand 2009).

Fawcett’s performance earned her Emmy and Golden Globe nominations (NY Times: *The Burning Bed* 2010). The made-for-TV movie aired on NBC and “premiered with a household share of 36.2, ranking it the 17th highest rated movie to air on network television” (Brooks and Marsh 2003). *The Burning Bed* was one of the first movies to directly address the issue of domestic abuse, but it certainly was not the last. Audiences are now accustomed to domestic violence in both movies and television. Shows like *Law and Order: SVU* and *Criminal Minds*

highlight domestic abuse from the viewpoint of law enforcement. Some notable films include *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), *Enough* (2002), and *Safe Haven* (2013). A connecting thread of these films is not just domestic violence, but highly dramatic and violent abusive relationships that have escalated to the point of homicide. Actually, all four of these films end with the battered wife killing her abuser in self-defense. It would be interesting to explore the consequences of this narrow depiction. Does it inspire women with the courage to stand up to her husband and leave? Does it paralyze victims with fear of homicide? Or does it encourage risky behavior that can get a woman killed?

Similar questions can be asked of Rihanna and her tumultuous relationship with Chris Brown, which shed light on the less addressed issue of dating abuse. Both singers are famous and successful performers with double-platinum records and hundreds of awards. Following the assault, both Rihanna and Chris Brown addressed the public in interviews, magazines, and statements. Even when they requested privacy, the conversation and rumors did not stop. For the general public, it would have been difficult to avoid news on the incident, especially when pictures of Rihanna's injuries surfaced. The media coverage of Brown's assault was extensive, especially in tabloid magazines. Everyone had something to say on the matter—psychologists, family violence prevention representatives, other celebrities, and even a “Barbados fish-market operator” from Rihanna's home country (Rothman et. al. 2012).

The results of a 2012 study published by the *Journal of Health Communication* are especially concerning and raise questions about the influences of the mass media. In the aftermath of the event, many US teens expressed the belief that Rihanna somehow provoked or was responsible for her abuse, which begged the question if the media played a role in fostering this belief. The researchers reviewed 20 leading U.S. single copy sales magazines published between February

and April of 2009 for five frame categories: “(1) abuse is objectionable; (2) victim-blaming; (3) abuse is sexualized/romanticized; (4) myths about abuse perpetration; and (5) abuse is normalized” (Rothman et. al. 2012, 733). While the majority of articles (83%) made “at least a passing reference to the idea that abuse is wrong, a minority [of articles] (40%) used a dominant frame that condemned abuse” (Rothman et. al. 2012, 733). Instead, “the majority of articles communicated ‘mixed messages’ about dating abuse; it’s wrong, but also sexy, potentially deserved, and often a component of supposedly loving relationships” (Rothman et. al. 2012, 741). These ambiguous messages reached a large audience, especially young teens. Research suggests that “media are one of the most powerful influences in shaping public perceptions about crime and victimization” (Meloy and Miller 2009). To susceptible teenagers, the media’s portrayal of Rihanna and Brown’s blame in the assault is especially powerful.

Despite these discouraging results, one thing is certainly evident: domestic abuse is in the spotlight. Thus, “the anti-domestic violence movement has achieved some of its original messaging goals, which were to promote the idea that domestic violence is inexcusable and not a private matter” (Rothman et. al. 2012, 741). Domestic violence has penetrated the public’s televisions, magazines, newspapers, and music. Numerous outlets of support have come forward, from law enforcement to the medical field to the government legislation. It can no longer be hidden, but with its exposure comes new concerns. What responsibilities do the media have in shaping public opinion on domestic violence? Now that the public is aware, will the media accidentally (or purposefully) influence the public to not only tolerate, but even excuse domestic violence completely? Or will it take advantage of its position and encourage abuse victims to find support and leave their destructive relationships? This has yet to be determined. But in over 630 million views on YouTube, abuse victim Rihanna sang to the world, “Just gonna

stand there and watch me burn, well that's alright because I like the way it hurts. Just gonna stand there and hear me cry, well that's alright because I love the way you lie."



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