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Sidebyside

Partners on the ANROWS Research Program project *Media representations of violence against women and their children*, Dr Georgina Sutherland and Professor Patricia Eastel AM, speak with us about how their project was conceived and why collaboration between researchers from different disciplines are so important.

What attracted you to this project?

GS The abduction, rape and murder of Jill Meagher happened not far from my home and it has had a lasting impact on me. Not the act itself – unspeakably brutal though it was - but why this rare crime led to such a public outpouring of grief when domestic, family and sexual violence is so common. Violent crimes against women and their children happen in my street... definitely in my suburb; but there are no public vigils or solidarity marches or candles or floral tributes. At the time I felt uncomfortable to express such cynicism but in the intervening years I now understand that being truly concerned by violence is more than buying flowers for a stranger.

It's about taking a closer look at our society and what simmers beneath the surface. The media can do this – it can connect us with women and children who experience violence every day. In just the same way as it drove our connection to Jill Meagher – by making us connect, understand and feel an overriding sense of urgency to prevent such crimes from happening again.

PE I first became aware of the media's power as a socialiser when my four children were young and yes, watching TV. In a literature review published earlier this year, my co-authors Keziah Judd, Kate Holland and I identified some disturbing findings concerning how media portrays violence against women. Our sample revealed that media messages concerning violence against women seemed to be “essentially conservative”.¹

The media use “several framing techniques to distance acts of violence from their underlying social causes”. In this way, and as we argued in the paper, “the status quo is perpetuated” by leaving a somewhat misleading impression of the dynamics and drivers of violence against women. In short, “if the media indeed creates its own ‘reality,’ it presents a problematic picture of gendered violence”.

I am therefore very keen to be involved in a project that can further identify such trends and the need for change to facilitate effective and quality reporting.

You have dedicated your career to researching gender and social justice issues, what brought you here?

PE Over 20 years ago in my book *Voices of the Survivors*, I wrote about my personal journey. A few lines from the book seem pertinent here:

“As it may be clear by now, this writer has also been a victim of sexual assault. It would not have been possible to have done this work and kept one's own secrets. The pain of such hypocrisy would have far exceeded the pain of reading the letters and comments, editing them, writing bits and pieces, and coming out publicly as a survivor”.

How fortunate I am that I have been able to channel the awareness and anger from my experiences of witnessing and surviving violence to action through research, writing, advocacy and activism!

¹ All references in relation to Patricia Easteal's co-authored work are from Easteal, P., Judd, K., Holland, K. (2015). Enduring themes and silences in media portrayals of violence against women. *Women Studies International Forum* 48: 103-113.

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Dr Georgina Sutherland

The media have a powerful role to play in helping to shape attitudes, perceptions and behaviours that enable, minimise or excuse violence against women and their children. What are some of the key issues in relation to this that your project aspires to explore?

GS The purpose of the research is to establish a nationally relevant picture of the nature and extent of reporting on violence against women and their children. Starting from a position that is neither condemnatory nor laudatory, our project aspires to be educative.

We hope it will provide an opportunity to reflect on current practice to inform responses to the challenges faced by those reporting on gender-based violence. We also hope to explore the development of strategies to encourage informed and insightful reporting on violence against women and their children.

PE My co-authored research into media portrayals of violence against women identified a recurrent theme of mutuality of responsibility for violence against women, including victim-blaming in the narratives of domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment and reporting that can sometimes be “simplistic, misleading, and overly reliant on clichéd characters”. Therefore the importance of engaging the media in efforts to prevent violence against women cannot be overstated.

The media have a ‘transformative potential’ and a profound effect on how perpetrators and the wider community

perceive violence against women. This project will explore ideas about the kinds of interventions that could be made by both legal and media professionals, and feminists to prevent violence against women and their children.

How will your project inform and support work being done by a number of organisations across Australia to work with media to prevent and respond appropriately to violence against women?

GS It’s exciting to be part of a broad and comprehensive program of work – Our Watch’s National Media Engagement Project – that aims to engage media to be part of the solution to stopping violence against women.

This project will provide insights to inform the media on how to approach issues related to violence against women and children and tell the stories of family, domestic and sexual violence in a way that promotes open and honest reflection from the community. Equally, the project will aim to equip those who work to prevent violence against women with insights into how they might engage with the media to achieve the same outcome.

PE There is a great deal of potential (as well as challenges) for bodies such as ANROWS, Our Watch, feminist legal theorists and researchers, and victims/survivors in seeking to shape journalistic storytelling about violence against women.

This is a relatively under-researched area and so it’s fantastic that ANROWS and Our Watch have recognised that gap. It is an avenue of inquiry that could produce valuable insights into how different players and processes are implicated in the media framing of violence against women.

Our research could increase dialogue between researchers and journalists. It could hopefully result in more nuanced portrayals of sexual assault and family violence. This could be beneficial for changing community attitudes particularly those concerning

victim-blaming and minimising of harm. Improved media portrayal could also facilitate improved law reform.

How do strong partnerships between researchers at different institutions and with different disciplinary expertise contribute to the evidence base on violence against women and their children?

GS I have no doubt that violence against women is a ‘wicked’ problem – not in the sense of evil, but in the context of it being inherently complex and highly resistant to resolution. While society and governments may crave a ‘silver bullet’ response, violence against women and children requires us to think outside disciplinary-based research. While single disciplines can provide insight into certain aspects of the problem, this traditional way of working is limited. Our responses need to be informed by multi-disciplinary partnerships.

On a personal level, I feel extremely privileged to be working alongside such an incredible group of women who each brings a different perspective to this project. In particular, Professor Jane Pirkis and Dr Kate Holland, who have both been enormously influential in changing media practices around reporting mental illness and suicide.

PE I am excited to be working with such an outstanding team of academics from other disciplines. Cross-institutional and multi-disciplinary research will enable insights and perspectives otherwise not available. Our individual knowledge and experience is complementary. As with intersectionality and violence against women, our research and its findings will be different from and greater than the sum of its parts. ●