

## The Production of Danger and the Economy of Fear: A Focus on Gender Relations: Notes for a Conversation

Mary Gergen

### I. The Newspaper Account

A. Body of a young woman who had been out jogging found in stairwell at 7:40 am in a "safe" part of town. She has been raped and murdered. First, it is assumed she was attacked by one assailant as she ran, but later two men are arrested for the crime. According to reported testimony from the men, the woman had come upon them breaking into a car. She threatened to call the police, became involved in a physical battle with one man, when she was set upon by the other, hit over the head with a tire iron. Eventually, the first man raped and strangled her to death in the back seat of their car. They then drove around until they came to the stairwell where they left her body.

II. Story as a prototype of the sensational violence accounts in various media forms.

This story is an example of the sensationalist themes of the media, especially involving stories of heinous, unusual and terrifying crimes against women. Stories such as these lay the groundwork for the perception that the social environment is suffused with danger. I want to argue how increasing awareness of danger, exhortations of how to increase one's safety and suggestions of methods of increasing security measures leads in unexpected directions.

The threat of danger is produced in various media: movies, most recently I saw *Juror*, in which a single mother played by Demi Moore, is totally dominated by a handsome strong Mafia psychopath, Alex Baldwin. This is but one of many films that portrays the dangers of contemporary life: television programs that feature increasingly graphic and "real life" crime footage and police work; interviews with victims and perpetrators of various crimes on various "talk shows"; and news programs, which emphasize the local mayhem - drive-by shootings, robberies, the release of criminals who commit new crimes, child abuse and murder, fires, and transportation accidents of all kinds.

The O.J. Simpson trial, which lasted over a year as the major media event of the country, made wife abuse a trivial topic, and homicide the norm for daily conversation.

Newspapers, losing circulation to other media, as well as magazines, focus on the dangers lurking abroad. Comics that focus on

street crimes; editorial cartoons that echo politicians cries to incarcerate and kill criminals, editorials that bring forth the race issue in crime; (overhead), reports of surveys that show crime the number one fear of the American public; feature stories describing the fears of the elderly, (overhead), advice columns (Herndon overhead), and most importantly, the lead stories with blaring headlines focus on crimes, especially those of a sensationalist and gruesome nature.

III. Discourse analysis of various newspapers and television programs indicate that by using a variety of rhetorical techniques, white women, in particular, are depicted as the victims of various sinister crimes, perpetrated by men.

A. Diversity of approaches to the study of the media. Some methods emphasize close textual readings, including analyses that focus on grammatical usages, pauses, repetitions, active vs. passive voices, pronouns, and sentence structures (Davies & Harre); quantitative analyses that count the number of times particular words and phrases are used (Pennebaker, 1996); detailed qualitative measurements of variables such as interruptions in conversations, tag questions, and ending inflections (Tannen, 19).

B. The approaches I wish to use takes in a broader sweep of texts. By looking at general themes, content topics, forms of presentations, and narrative forms that are part of the "interpretative repertoire", as Potter and Wetherell call it, from which people draw in order to describe their lives, it is possible to dismantle the means by which the production of social disintegration is created. While there are many possible ways to talk about what is going on in the news accounts of this particular story, I want to focus on some rhetorical techniques used for producing a sense of danger, especially among women in the city, and how the story, as it unfolds, tries to resolve the fears that are incited by the presentations. I will rely only on news items found in the Philadelphia Inquirer, the major general readership newspaper in Philadelphia, which has a moderately high national reputation for good journalism.

Textual techniques: Narratives

One of the major ways to focus on the structural elements of linguistic accounts is to look at the narrative forms by which they are produced. The narrative sets limits on what may happen, who the characters can be, and how events are unfolded. Narratives are culturally produced, and they are critical elements in the interpretative repertoires of any member of a language community. (Sarbin, 1986; Gergen & Gergen, 1984, 1986). Narratives are also important to analyse because within the structure of a narrative, people are positioned. As Althusser (1971) described it, discourse positions create subjectivities. Thus, ideology is created via a subject position. Who Kimberly Ernest was is established through the narrative lines of the newspaper accounts. Narrative began and ended as the tragedy of a friendly, naive young woman, who trusted in her environment, who was not paying attention to her safety and paid the price.

Interviews with women in her apartment suggest her naive, open, generous, and also careless behaviors in leaving her door open. Other behaviors are suggested such as running alone; always running in the same place at the same time; wearing earphones; not carrying mace or any protection

(Overheads on first stories to appear)

A second narrative that comes to light is that instead of being distracted, and assaulted by surprise, she had confronted the killer, threatened him, had engaged him physically, and "winning", and as a result was raped and killed in revenge for her "uppity" nature. (Overheads on this part of the story)

The fact that the rapist-killer is the young man adds to the storyline that a woman who challenges the masculinity of a man, no matter how scrawny, is heading for big trouble. This story undermines the weak passive sister version of the murder story, and the media does not strongly support it with physical descriptions of her as muscular, powerful, or as skilled in fighting. Her mother's description, for example, emphasizes her feminine qualities, not her "macho" or heroic ones. General reports from friends and co-workers emphasize her sociability, extroverted nature. Also, in keeping with the "Snow white" element of the narrative, she is virginal. Many friends, but no boyfriends. (overheads on these elements of the story)

Her family, her friends, her neighbors, her co-workers, the city at large, mourn her loss. (Overheads of memorial service)

The two disparate narratives are brought together, in a sense placing into jeopardy two separate female strategies of survival. One, the more dominant myth of the culture, is that a girl should be sweet, naive, and trusting, and the other is to be brave, daring, and physically fit. Regardless of which avenue a woman might wish to explore, she is endangered. To paraphrase the mayor, she died because she was too trusting and too brave."

Only the professionals [police] can keep one safe.

## 2. Forms of presentations,

Photographic techniques: Use of 3 photographs:

Victim: Kimberly Ernest: [ photo overhead] shows the youthful girl from a high school yearbook. Curly haired, normal, average white girl.

Culprits: two photos: one accomplice is the prototype of the evil man, heavy set, large, swarthy skinned; bearded, small eyes, the other looks like a boy, scared, bug-eyed, blond, young, small. [Important to note that they are Caucasians]

Shrine photo: deep, dark stairwell, with railing, against which flowers are arranged. Taken from above to enhance depth of the stairwell. Like an open tomb.

African-American boy on a bicycle gives scale; does he also represent the killer?

Rhetorical techniques via language

Foucaultian notions of creating meaning such that one can ask: What is the shape of "truth" and "knowledge" taken on in these accounts such that certain practices are encouraged, while others are not? In this sense power is an effect of discourse. Power is the capacity to define others.

Topic: Foucault talks about the body and sexuality as major sites of contention in terms of power relations.

The rhetorical techniques for producing a sense of danger include the use of textual evidence suggesting the victim's innocence, vulnerability, and trust in the environment; brutal violations of the victim's trust; an emphasis on bizarre, rare and violent events that appear to be unpremeditated or the result of a crazed mind; and descriptions that evoke strong emotional responses in the reader through graphic details.

Use of the word "jogger", which was the major adjective used throughout the accounts. Association of the word to the crime committed several years ago in Central Park in NYC where a young woman lawyer out jogging was set upon by a gang of youths and left for dead. After being hospitalized for some time, she survived. The story gained national acclaim. The use of the word reestablishes the feelings of fear that were promulgated among women after the last case.

Overheads: description of the rape and killing

Newspaper account recreated from several sources a "play by play" of the "jogger's violent last moments", which were not reportings of any chronological event, but a re-creation to bring the sense of drama closer to the reader's theatrical sensibilities.

The story emphasizes the effects of her violation of being pulled over the railing, and of her clothing being pulled down. Use of descriptive language, similes that set up her position: as a doll, and as a sister or daughter.

"Her body was cruelly dumped in a stairwell like some unloved and unwanted ragdoll." [Metaphor of girl as a Ragdoll - one that is without a backbone, that can be bent in anyway - a doll that can be easily manipulated, handled, twisted about, abused. This doll is silent and she does not make any sounds. As a plaything she is easily discarded when she is used up. Dumped in a stairwells, which in big cities is often a neglected place filled with trash. ]

"She is ...everybody's sister or daughter, the luckless victim of still another random killing that occurs all too often in big cities."

In this telling, the reader suffers vicariously a grave loss, of an imaginal family member. It was bad luck that she was killed, and that is all that determined it. Thus, the reader is asked to believe that anyone

at any time might be killed, without any reason; indeed this is almost becoming the expected in big cities. Thus, the story emphasizes that this was not just an almost unique occurrence, one that is of interest because of its rarity, but that it is important because of its prototypical aspects. It is a warning note to all women, in particular those who are young and trusting and "brave".

On the other side of the coin from randomness, the accounts also hint that she had not obeyed the "discipline" by leaving herself open to attack; by not taking precautions; by directly confronting the culprits.

Descriptions of the suspects:

Descriptions of the killers as men who preyed on the marginal people, supposedly going out when no good people go out, stealing and beating up homeless people, drunken people, and prostitutes who inhabit the night streets and who do not report these crimes to the police. Accounts emphasize that there is a level of danger out in the streets at night that decent people, and even the police do not know about. So the question is raised in the reader's mind: How can I be protected from such diabolical dangers, when they aren't even known by the police?

The newspaper accounts described one suspect to fit the personification of the "cold-blooded killer", by stressing his relaxed demeanor and joking with the police.

The other suspect as the threatened male who seeks revenge.

Topic of community: Accounts emphasize the destruction of the social fabric: a murder victim found in a "good" part of town.

Ways of handling the issue of danger:

2 seemingly safe elements of the story undermined: Safe neighborhood (many statements to support the idea that this was a nice neighborhood.) Interestingly, the body was deposited there, but the assault was elsewhere.

Also a safe time of day, 6-7am. Stories sometimes changed the time phrase to "early morning hours", which usually implies 1-4 am, which is often the period at the end of an evening, not the beginning of the day. One strategy emphasizes that danger lurks even in the safe times of day. The other hooks on to the more normative presumption that bad things are more likely to happen just after midnight.

In early accounts, the profile of the suspect included the possibility of a serial killer.

Reestablishment of the Community: Basic thread is that danger is present, and individuals, particularly girls, cannot do anything except exercise vigilance. Police problem. People can resist, and can honor the death of the girl. Metaphors of community are spatial (close-knit); organic (growth, regeneration), agentic (one-mind, affirming).

Shrine created with flowers at the stairwell.

Also metaphor of "family" (mother of girl; city father; sisters; police as "big brother", [one policeman following her path looking for the suspect.]

Mother's comments about city: Everyone caring for her on her visit to the city, from the mayor to the street cleaner.

Mayo Rendell's involvement: Speaking at the memorial service Warns people to call police before trying to intervene in a crime. "That wasn't Kimberly Ernest. That wasn't her personality. That was why she was one of the most beloved people I have ever seen in this city." [comment brings together several threads: that she could not help herself - that the quality that made her beloved, also lead to her death. Time sequence gets twisted in the making of this grandiose comment, in that she only become "one of the most beloved" after she was killed. The theme of martyrdom, which is the major heroic [sic] form of heroism, is at hand.

Memorial service: Bringing together the various co-workers, acquaintances, friends and the strangers who read about it.

Memorial contributions to Kimberly Ernest were requested for the "Please Touch" Museum in Philadelphia. Much could be made of this connection. "Please touch" is a children's museum, which can remind the reader of the youthfulness of the victim, And in a deep irony, "Please Touch" suggests the breaking of the injunction that children not touch things because they might break or harm them, suggests a certain intimacy of holder and beholden, and at the same time recalls the brutal way in which Ms. Ernest's body was handled by her murderers.

Silenced Voices, missing voices, alternative voices:

Girl's father, sister, small voice on editorial page for "innocent until proven guilty."

Editorial by Claude Lewis that emphasized that the first concern of the African-American community was that it was not a black man, which is often the silent supposition, and then the concern to the victim.

No attention paid to the credibility of the chief witness against the two men: John Hall, the stepfather of one suspect. Doesn't fit any narrative, so is pushed aside. A loose thread.

Descriptions of the victim that do not match the "innocent girl" personification. No information on her education, her intellectual achievements, her career, her physical training, size or strength, or her moral or religious background. Her mother described her as "tidy", "organized", "predictable", and as making cookies, having many friends, including those from abroad. It is not clear from any descriptions of her, except that she was outgoing, how it happened that she got involved in a physical confrontation with one of her assailants. On this there is no speculation.

Eating disorder issue comes to play, as the mother suggests that "it is better to be fat than dead." One might interpret that as saying

that women are motivated to go out to exercise in order to lose weight. And it is more important to be alive than to be thin, even if it means that you won't gain that pleasing figure. Her comment can be seen as one more injunction against going out alone in public.

Also no formation of a description that stresses her sexual attractiveness or her seductive clothing or style. The description of her clothing as torn, missing and pulled down do feed into a sado-masochistic tale, one in which the victim is innocent of the scripts of sexual provocation. In this sense it might be seen as more perversely erotic.

#### IV. External Validation and Motivational Sources of Interest in Promoting the Sense of Social Disintegration and Danger in the City.

The incidence of these reports far exceeds probabilities derived from crime statistics. Stories of this type are exceedingly rare. The production of danger in the media is sustained by a variety of economic institutions that profit from fear. The paper considers three perspectives on these constructions of danger: The reinstatement of traditional male dominance hierarchies, a backlash against women's accomplishments in public arenas; and the appeal of sadomasochistic themes, especially to male audiences.

5. Consequences of promoting scenarios in which women in public are preyed upon by men, and that more and greater security measures are needed to stop these horrible events from taking place.

Path 1: Alarmist media messages creates a sense of danger, which leads the public to greater knowledge and attention, which results in increased "security measures", which in turn, leads to a greater sense of security and a greater trust in the police and other guardians of the peace. For women, while recognizing that they are dependent upon stronger [male] safety forces, they can have confidence they will be protected if they only reliant upon them. Good men will sacrifice more of their resources to protect women, children and less able men from the disruptive criminal elements that are out to destroy communal tranquility. As a result of these necessary protective measures required to obtain 'zones' of peace and order and with the proper vigilance on the part of the people to respect, maintain, and perhaps extend these measures, all law-abiding people will feel secure.

Path 2: Alarmist media messages create a sense of danger, which leads to increased "security measures", which in turn, leads to greater vigilance, anxiety, a loss of trust in other people, and a belief that the community is falling apart. Women are thought to be weak, passive, and fearful, and are discouraged from venturing far from home, disciplined to believe that they are unsafe alone, and to believe that if they do "take chances" they should feel guilty about their actions, and/or ashamed that they caused potential grief to their loved ones by their reckless behaviors. All people guard themselves at all times, be vigilant against

unanticipated attacks, buy weapons, burglar alarms, car clubs, resist contact with strangers, especially those who are clearly not identified with their own group, only help those they know, don't get involved in other people's business; organize against "outsiders", have additional security measures, such as gates, doors, metal detectors, xray machines, security guards, locks, bolts, telephone screeners, and other detection devices added to one's person and place. Sexual activities are particular sources of danger; abstinence is the best possible strategy; otherwise "safe sex" only. Everyone takes special precautions to teach children the rules of wariness; children should never get involved with strangers; no one should touch them but their parents, under certain conditions. They should be registered, via photos and fingerprints, with the police. As men bear special responsibilities to guard women, women bear special responsibilities to guard their children.

People vote and support increasing police involvement in all areas of life, with favorable views on such measures as constant surveillance of all public areas in the neighborhood via recorders and video cameras; random checkpoints for sobriety and other testing of cars on roads; armed security guards in various establishments; greater penalties for criminals, fewer paroles, fewer privileges for prisoners, less vocational and educational training opportunities for prisoners; more informing of the community after a prisoner is released about the nature of the past record.

More control over the internet, mails, photographic studies, and private consensual behaviors of individuals.

This path increases the gap between individuals, groups, residence areas, races, social classes, sexes, ages; reduces the possibility of solidarity among diverse groups of people. Reduces the possibility of cooperation, the creation of peaceful solutions of mutual benefit, and reduces the availability of resources that might otherwise be used for education, welfare, recreation, and the general betterment of all community members. These resources are taken up with the costs of "security measures" (e.g. new prisons, guards, parole officers, and the products and services designed to increase "security"). (overhead, Gov's budget.)

Path 3: Where there is power, in the Foucaultian sense, there is also the capacity for resistance.

Are there indications in the accounts of resistances?

Alarmist media messages lead to a recognition that sensationalist communications increase the revenues of the media source, the power of patriarchal authorities, and the titillations of sado-masochistic sexuality. This perspective induces skepticism, and to the rejection of the media form on the part of the recipient. Women, especially, as the particular targets of much of this messaging, find alternative methods for responding to these "disciplinary" threats to their identities, by casting them as helpless victims. These alternatives can enhance their sense of freedom and integrity, their rights to utilize public spaces at all times, and their opportunities to form cooperative collectives with other people -

women and men of diverse backgrounds. People create alternative discourses that undermine the destructive consequences of path 2, which, if not checked, can eventuate in a society that is the "jungle" the authorities claim to be protecting us from.

Resources and efforts are put into reducing the gaps between the economically disadvantaged and the rich so that criminal careers are not attractive to those who may pursue them out of desperation and neglect; to increase multi-cultural respect and involvement; to refuse to demonize those who are "down and out"; to develop forms of communal outreach; to support regional efforts for interchange; to oppose greater surveillance, censorship, and "security" precautions in the name of temporary dangers, as it seems that once installed, they only escalate.