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Double Standards in Sentence Structure

Passive Voice in Narratives Describing Domestic Violence

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Previous research has shown that passive voice predominates in mass media reports describing male violence against women. However, there has been little systematic study of narratives describing female violence against men. The authors analyzed the impact of perpetrator gender on verb voice, first in a content analysis of published news stories and second in a new procedure for eliciting written narratives with male or female perpetrators. Results reveal an increased frequency of passive voice when perpetrators are male. These findings suggest that writers specifically prefer the passive voice to describe male-on-female violence rather than for violent or negative acts in general.

Keywords: interpersonal violence; domestic violence; gender differences; verb voice; language production; mass media

W hen describing violent acts, writers and speakers make choices about sentence structure that may reveal their underlying beliefs about these acts, such as whether the perpetrator is solely responsible for the act, whether the victim is partly to blame, and how much harm the victim suffered as a result. Particularly revealing is whether the writer chooses an active or passive verb, as in the following example:

a. In the United States, a man rapes a woman every 6 minutes.
b. In the United States, a woman is raped by a man every 6 minutes (Henley, Miller, & Beazley, 1995).

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Journalists tend to use the passive voice when reporting male sexual violence against women, using passive voice by a ratio of more than 2 to 1, according to a content analysis of news stories published in the *Boston Globe* in 1981 and 1991 (Henley et al., 1995). This tendency is even stronger for other forms of violent crime, with a passive-to-active ratio of over 3 to 1 for the verb *murder* (Henley et al., 1995). By comparison, journalists tended to use the active voice for nonviolent actions such as *touched* (passive–active ratio = .66) or *thanked* (passive–active ratio = .37). Undergraduate student writers showed a similar pattern of increased passive voice usage for sentences describing rape, a pattern that was particularly strong in writers with greater acceptance of rape myths (Bohner, 2001).

Besides reflecting attitudes of writers, verb voice affects reader interpretations of violent acts, particularly with respect to the victim's role in bringing the crime on himself or herself. Psycholinguistic theories of the passive voice predict that readers will see the object of the sentence (i.e., the crime victim) as more salient in passive-voice sentences (e.g., Clark, 1965; Clark & Begun, 1968; Johnson-Laird, 1968, 1977; Tannenbaum & Williams, 1968; Turner & Rommetveit, 1968). In theory, the passive voice would also emphasize the causal role of the crime victim, relative to the perpetrator (Brown & Fish, 1983). Consistent with these predictions, both male and female readers show increased acceptance of rape and battering of women after exposure to descriptions of sexual assault written primarily in the passive voice, compared to readers exposed to active-voice descriptions (Henley et al., 1995). Male readers attributed more victim responsibility and less harm to victims after passive-voice descriptions, although female readers did not show the same tendency (Henley et al., 1995; also see Bohner, 2001). Similar effects of the passive voice also apply to nonsexual types of aggressive behavior (Platow & Brodie, 1999). These effects of the passive voice on comprehension suggest that writers' use of verb voice influences how individual readers view violence against women.

Why, then, do writers select active voice for some descriptions of violent acts and passive voice for others? Gender of the people involved in the sentence is one important factor, as men are generally seen as more active participants in the action being described whereas women are seen as passive recipients of the action (Deaux, 1976). This may be more pronounced when the social interactants are a mixed gender pair (LaFrance, Brownell, & Hahn, 1997). In assigning responsibility to the interactants of simple subject–verb–object (S-V-O) sentences, people tend to assign more responsibility to the subject of these sentences if that person is male and the object of the action is female than vice versa. Also, when a woman is the recipient (object) of an action of a man (subject), the woman is more likely to be seen as having triggered that action than in nonmixed gender pairs or if a woman acts on a man (LaFrance et al., 1997). It is important to note that all of these were active-voice sentences (S-V-O), so how people assign responsibility to passive-voice sentence interactions is more unclear, especially because it has been hypothesized that with regard to action verbs, the person who is interpreted as causal is the sentence subject (Brown & Fish, 1983).

However, this tendency to portray men as active agents may be offset by a predisposition to play down men's responsibility for violence against women (Penelope, 1990). Further complicating the picture is the fact that in mass media reports of violence, men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators, making it impossible to know whether writers choose verbs that play down men's causal role as perpetrators of violence or that play down the causal role of perpetrators in general.

Bohner (2001) favors a somewhat different explanation, suggesting that writers use the passive voice to psychologically distance themselves from disturbing, violent actions such as sexual assault. In Bohner's procedure, participants who were more accepting of rape myths used a higher proportion of passive-voice verbs to describe a rape shown in a film excerpt, compared to participants who were less accepting of rape myths. These results do help establish a connection between writers' beliefs about violence and their propensity to use the passive voice. However, given that all the perpetrators in these film clips were male, the question remains whether writers use the passive voice to deemphasize the role of men as perpetrators of violence or to deemphasize perpetrators of violence in general.

One way to address this question is to compare descriptions of violent acts in which women are the perpetrators with those in which men are the perpetrators. If writers are generally averse to using the active voice to describe violent acts, there will be similar proportions of passive-voice usage for woman-on-man and man-on-woman violence. If, on the other hand, writers use passive voice specifically to play down men's causal role in committing violence against women, there will be a decreased proportion of passive voice in descriptions of woman-on-man violence. We focused on domestic violence—battering one's spouse or romantic partner or other physical assault up to and including murder—because it is committed with some frequency by women against men (although the reverse is much more common as well as typically more severe; Tjaden & Thoenes, 2000).

Study 1

Using a procedure modeled after Henley et al. (1995), we searched for newspaper articles describing domestic violence in heterosexual couples. We then analyzed the prevalence of passive voice in sentences specifically referring to the violent acts that were the subject of these articles. Our hypothesis was that passive voice would be more prevalent in sentences describing male-on-female violence.

Method

Materials. We searched the *Boston Globe* for articles published in 2003 and 2004 about severe domestic violence. We chose the *Boston Globe* because it was the newspaper used in the Henley et al. (1995) content analysis and has a searchable database

spanning a number of years. To identify articles that could potentially be about domestic violence and could have either gender as the perpetrator, we selected any whose lead paragraph contained the words *death*, *murder*, *kill*, *husband*, *wife*, *man*, and *woman*. This search yielded 200 lead paragraphs for subsequent analysis.

Coding. Two coders (S.K. and J.H.) completed a training set of materials with an interrater reliability of 100% before coding the study materials. Coding consisted of identifying each verb that referred directly to the violent act that was the subject of the story and then coding that verb for voice (active vs. passive), gender of the perpetrator, and gender of the victim.

Results

Not all of the 200 lead paragraphs contained sentences that were appropriate for the coding procedure; some did not address the actual violence in the lead paragraph, others were not about specific cases of domestic violence. One verb phrase was excluded from analysis because the victims it described were a mixed-gender group, and one was excluded because the gender of the victims was not clear from the lead paragraph. Of the remaining 53 verbs coded, 48 described male-on-female violence and 5 described female-on-male violence. There were 13 passive and 35 active verbs in the male-on-female condition, compared to 1 passive and 4 active in the female-on-male condition; that is, verbs were passive 27.1% of the time when men were the perpetrators but only 20.0% of the time when women were the perpetrators. The lack of female-on-male verbs ruled out further statistical analysis of this trend.

Discussion

There was a trend toward increased use of the passive voice when men were perpetrators and women victims, but this finding must be interpreted with caution because of the small number of stories describing cases where the woman is the perpetrator. Our search turned up only 5 verb phrases describing this type of violence in lead paragraphs covering 2 years of reporting in a metropolitan newspaper, as compared to the 48 we found for violence committed by men against their spouses. This disparity may be an inherent limitation of mass media reports as the subject of content analysis about intergender violence.

Mass media reports are also impractical for examining the relationship between gender of the writer and description of violent acts, given that it is difficult to establish the gender of a story's primary writer as well as the gender of any editors or coauthors. This relationship is important for shedding light on the underlying mechanisms for use of the passive voice to describe intergender aggression, as men and women presumably have different views of important factors such as their identification with the victim versus perpetrator, perceived likelihood of being the victim or perpetrator of aggression, and motivation to psychologically distance oneself from the aggressive act.

We designed Study 2 to address the inherent limitations of using published mass media reports to study the relationship between gender, verb voice and violence. Our goal was to generate equal numbers of female-on-male as male-on-female stories as well as to track the influence of writer gender on the syntactic structure of violence descriptions. Shifting our approach from analysis of existing stories to eliciting new ones introduces a new set of challenges, as production is notoriously difficult to study using controlled experimental techniques (e.g., Bock & Griffin, 2000).

To deal with these challenges, we presented participants with highly simplified descriptions of domestic violence scenarios and asked them to incorporate these in written narratives. We then analyzed these elicited narratives for the relative frequency of active and passive-voice verbs. The scenarios were systematically varied so that there were equal numbers of male and female perpetrators, allowing us to contrast the proportion of passive-voice usage for male versus female perpetrators while holding constant the nature of the violent act as well as other details of the scenario. The scenarios were not described in narrative format, as the verb voice used in text descriptions could affect the verb voice used in participants' subsequent elaborations through syntactic priming (Bock, 1986b). Instead, we presented the parameters of each scenario in a matrix that listed information on the type of event, victim (name and age), perpetrator (name and age), weapon, date, and place.

Study 2

Method

Participants. Participants were 86 Northern Arizona University undergraduate students enrolled in an introduction to psychology course. Participants were 18 to 25 years old (age $M = 18.52$ years, $SD = 1.03$). Participants received extra credit in their introduction to psychology course for participating in this study.

Materials. We presented participants with an information grid that provided information regarding the event, victim (name, gender, and age), perpetrator (name, gender, and age), weapon, date, and place. Figure 1 shows an example grid. Names of victim and perpetrator were gender specific. Each participant viewed two grids, one for the target event and another filler crime event. Materials were counterbalanced so that for the target event half of the grids specified a male victim and female perpetrator and half of the grids specified a female victim and male perpetrator. Participants also filled out a brief demographic questionnaire.

Procedure. Written instructions stated that the study topic was how students write about crime and asked participants to write two 50- to 100-word stories that incorporated the information shown on the grids.

Figure 1
Example Information Grid Presented to Elicit Narrative
Descriptions of Domestic Violence Scenarios

Event	Death
Victim	Joe Smith (male, 31 years old, husband)
Perpetrator	Amanda Smith (female, 33 years old, wife)
Weapon	Knife
Date	June 9th, 1996 at 7:18 pm
Place	The Smiths' residence; Anytown CO

Results and Discussion

Four participants were excluded for deviating from the instructions: One wrote an opinion about the event, and three wrote stories in which the weapon was a gun rather than the knife specified in the grid. One experimenter (A.F.) read each critical story and recorded each instance of a "target sentence," defined as any sentence containing a verb that directly described the domestic violence. Some participants generated more than one target sentence, for a total *N* of 104 target verbs. Each sentence was then coded as active or passive, with passive defined as any form of the verb "to be" plus the past participle (e.g., *was beaten*, *had been killed*).

Table 1 shows all target sentences broken down by participant gender, verb voice (active vs. passive) and condition (male-on-female violence vs. female-on-male violence). Participants produced a significantly higher proportion of passive-voice sentences for the male-on-female violence condition ($\chi^2 = 3.917$, $p = .048$). As Table 1 shows, the trend toward increased passive-voice usage in the male-on-female condition was present for both female and male participants.

Examination of the elicited stories revealed an unanticipated subsidiary finding that participants often included a nonelicited justification for the violence in their stories. After coding stories for the presence or absence of a justification, we found that there was a significant relationship between condition and presence of a justification ($\chi^2 = 14.595$, $p < .001$). Specifically, participants were more likely to include a justification when describing female-on-male spousal violence than when describing male-on-female spousal violence. For the male-on-female condition, 6 stories included a justification and 44 did not. For the female-on-male condition, 29 stories included a justification and 25 did not. These justifications generally manifested themselves in later sentences

Table 1
Target Sentences Broken Down by Participant Gender, Verb Voice,
and Gender of Perpetrator and Victim

Gender of Perpetrator and Victim	Participant Gender	Active (n)	Passive (n)
Male perpetrator, female victim	Male	4	11
	Female	15	20
	Total	19	31
Female perpetrator, male victim	Male	8	7
	Female	23	16
	Total	31	23

in the narrative rather than being part of the sentences analyzed for verb voice. Participants did see the abuse differently when it was a woman perpetrator, as evidenced by more justifications, but the stories still described violence.[1]

General Discussion

Our results do not support the idea that writers use passive voice to describe violence against women simply because of a general aversion to using active voice to describe violent acts. Rather, there appears to be a more complex relationship involving gender of the people involved in interpersonal violence, such that when women are the perpetrators and men the victims, active voice becomes more common. This trend, though difficult to observe using content analysis of actual published news reports, emerged in our elicited narrative paradigm. Differences in how writers view female-on-male versus male-on-female violence are evident in the (probably) unconscious process of structuring sentences. Specifically, female attackers' causal role may be more salient than that of male attackers, resulting in descriptions that highlight women's responsibility and deemphasize men's responsibility for acts of interpersonal violence. Furthermore, participants may form more elaborate explanations about female-on-male violence, as evidenced by the increased number of spontaneously generated justifications in the female-on-male condition. This finding—that third-party writers made excuses and justifications for female perpetrators—is an interesting complement to the finding that when male perpetrators of domestic violence talk about their actions, they tend to use language that diminishes their responsibility through making excuses and justifications (O'Neill & Morgan, 2001).

Also, Bock (1986a) has demonstrated that normal sentence production utilizes an abstract representation that includes the semantic information about the information contained in the sentence. This abstract representation is influenced by the semantic information available; therefore, semantic characteristics can directly influence the syntax of the sentence. In the current study, this means that semantic characteristics

related to "male" and "female" may have influenced the selection of active and passive voice. Bock also made note of the fact that the passive voice is used relatively little by English speakers, especially when the sentence contains a human agent and a human patient. Taken together, this suggests that the semantic characteristics of men and women may differ with regard to violent behavior, resulting in increased passive-voice usage for male-on-female violence.

It is also important to consider how participants represent victims and perpetrators, not just men and women. Linguistic devices or operations, such as the passive voice, may be used in a variety of ways to manipulate the representations of the violent events and, as such, are able to be used to conceal violence, reduce the responsibility of perpetrators, and even blame the victim for the violence (Coates & Wade, 2007). In doing this, third parties are constructing misleading accounts of violence. As this relates to the passive voice, it seems that it is one way of both reducing the responsibility of the perpetrator and blaming the victim for the violence, by placing the victim in what is generally the causal role of the sentence, the subject (Brown & Fish, 1983).

Previous studies have found asymmetries in passive-voice usage for the domain of sexual assault by men against women; our findings extend to a new domain, domestic violence, in which gender roles can be more easily reversed and which is not specifically sexual in nature. This asymmetry may extend to a number of other types of acts for which writers wish to deemphasize the responsibility of the agent, for example, deemphasizing their own role in making a mistake (Penelope, 1990). It should be noted, however, that Henley et al. (2002) found no increase in passive voice in news reports of violence by heterosexual individuals against gay men and lesbians, another arena in which writers may be motivated to emphasize the role of the victim over that of the perpetrator. Although the present results suggest that the findings from the domain of sexual assault do generalize to other actions, there may be subtle differences in attitudes that affect passive-voice usage across these other domains. These differences could be explored in future research.

Future research can also examine the pattern of passive-voice usage when the nature of the interpersonal act changes altogether, such as for positive acts. For example, in the case of the verb *save*, is the passive voice more common when a woman saves a man versus when a man saves a woman? Such an investigation could shed light on whether writers' tendency to deemphasize male agency disappears when the action is positive and whether it reverses when a woman is the subject of the sentence. Henley et al. (1995) found that the passive voice was relatively rare for verb *thanked*, suggesting that readers emphasize the subject in sentences describing positive behavior. However, these results were not broken down by the gender of the people involved in the action, leaving open the question of whether gender-related attitudes affect descriptions of positive actions as well as the negative ones examined here and previously. Preliminary follow-up research by the authors has indicated that regardless of whether positive actions that are typically gender specific (e.g., a marriage proposal) are male-on-female or female-on-male, the active voice was used almost exclusively (Frazer, 2007). This lends credence to our supposition that the

passive-voice usage for violence against women is not simply a result of the inter-action being male-on-female.

Turning now to questions of gender differences among writers, our results replicate and extend Bohner's (2001) finding that men and women are similar in how they use passive voice to describe interpersonal violence. These findings are somewhat sur-prising in that men and women presumably have different views about interpersonal violence, given that women are far less likely to perpetrate this type of act, are less accepting of rape myths (Muir, Lonsway, & Payne, 1996), and are less likely to blame victims of domestic violence (Bryant & Spencer, 2003). The findings also suggest an asymmetry in production versus comprehension of passive voice, as men were more affected by reading passive voice compared to women (Henley et al., 1995).

The effect of the passive voice on comprehension brings us back to the wider social significance of patterns of verb voice in descriptions of domestic violence. Structuring sentences in a way that emphasizes women's causal role in such violence, while deemphasizing men's role, may be one of several mechanisms by which writers and speakers express their attitudes about gender, sex, and power. These mechanisms include the use of erotic rather than violent terminology in rape trials (Bavelas & Coates, 2001), passive-voice use in rape descriptions (Bohner, 2001; Henley et al., 1995), and victim-blaming language in descriptions of rape (Kanekar, Kolsawalla, & D'Souza, 1981). Such expressions may in turn shape whether readers and listeners interpret these acts as voluntary acts of violence against an undeserving victim or as unfortunate experiences that women—at least in part—bring on themselves.

Note

1. An example of female-on-male violence with justification narrative is as follows:

> There was a brutal murder last night at the Smith residence. Joe Smith's, husband of Amanda Smith, life was cut short. The unbelievable happened. His wife of 8 years stabbed him to death in their living room with a kitchen knife while he was taking a nap. She claims that he was cheating, and when confronted, he lied. She wasn't going to harm him, she just wanted to scare him, but he attacked first so she had no choice. But the repetitive stab wounds tell a different story.

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