

Book Review

Berns, Nancy S. (2004). *Framing the Victim: Domestic Violence, Media and Social Problems*. Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction.

Reviewed by Sherry Sheffield, LCSW

Nancy Berns presents a compelling argument for how the popular media influences public opinion about domestic violence and other social problems. Her book is the result of her research of the popular media portrayal of domestic violence. Berns' defines popular media as television, radio, newspaper, movies, internet, books, and magazines. She argues that the general public uses the media as their only resource for information about social problems. Berns' presents four main points about the problem of domestic violence and how the phenomenon is portrayed in the mainstream media. First, she maintains that the media frame domestic violence as a private matter warranting intervention only in extreme cases. Second, she argues that the media's focus on the victim holds the victim responsible for ending the violence. Third, the media's portrayal of the perpetrator emphasizes external factors for the abuse and negates personal responsibility. Finally, the media ignores social and cultural norms that foster abuse. These points are then considered in light of how they construct a common set of beliefs about domestic violence that influences public policy.

Bern argues that stories of domestic violence often are sensationalized and designed to sell books, movies, or magazines, as well as to entice viewers to watch popular news or talk shows. Berns contends that media stories affect the public perception of the problem, especially for those individuals who have not experienced domestic violence. She maintains that the general public begins to adopt the media experience as their own experience, their own reality of domestic violence. Hence, the public's perception of the problem is distorted by what the popular media is selling. Moreover, this false perception of the problem filters into and influences public policy. In addition, current research is not promoted to the general public and therefore has little effect on the public's response to domestic violence.

Berns uses the word "frame" in the title of her book for a two-fold purpose. First, she uses the analogy of a photographer framing a landscape in the lens of her camera, snapping a picture that captures the view she wants to present to the audience. However, she maintains that the media are biased photographers, more concerned about selling pictures than capturing reality. Berns contends that the landscape of domestic violence has many levels which are not realistically portrayed in the picture. What the audience does not see is the cultural and structural landscapes of gender role socialization, male dominance, and norms that support different forms of violence or oppression. Also, the institutional landscape continues to view domestic violence as a personal issue and criminalization as the only solution. Finally, the individual landscape concentrates on the victim's responsibility to stop the violence, with minimal focus on the perpetrator.

Another way in which Berns uses the word "frame" is to represent how the victim is blamed or held accountable for the violence. Berns argues that the media is driven by a cultural obsession to entertain and that social problems are transformed to sell product. She conducted a qualitative research study of popular women's, men's, and political magazines. She interviewed editors from several publications to determine their criteria for publishing. The women's magazines Berns' included in her research were *Essence*, *Glamour*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Mademoiselle*, *McCall's*, *Redbook*, *Seventeen*, *Teen* and *Vogue*. She discovered that women's magazines defined domestic violence as male violence against females and

enclosed the concept in a frame of empowerment. Although the empowerment frame implies a power shift toward the victim, this paradigm continues to focus on the victim's responsibility for the abuse. Berns found that the primary goals of the women's magazines she studied were to keep stories personal and uplifting. The editors looked for stories that were inspirational and portrayed women who were empowered to overcome the abuse. Furthermore, Berns found that the stories were selected based upon the type of victim. The victim must be deserving of empathy, acceptable, responsible, and easily empowered. Stories about helpless victims, such as the elderly and children, were considered too depressing to print.

The popular men's magazines Berns' researched included *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. These publications utilized an anti-feminist frame, countering the feminist and battered women's movements of the 1970s. This anti-feminist frame put more emphasis on violence overall, claiming that men and women are equally violent. The anti-feminist perspective posits that females are responsible for their own victimization and may even enjoy abuse. Berns found that men's publications were more like to publish stories about female perpetrators and to criticize society's tolerance of women's violence. Furthermore, men's publications protested violence legislation as discriminatory toward men and blamed feminist advocates for propagating bias against men. Berns states that these popular men's magazines are more confrontational, and she infers that they use sexually explicit pictures to subsidize their political views. Berns posits that the men's publications she evaluated were more focused on countering the feminist movement than on furthering any understanding of the problem of domestic violence.

Berns examined some of the liberal political publications such as *The Nation* and *The Progressive*, as well as conservative political publications like *National Review*, *Reason*, and *The New Republic*. She concludes that these publications are more likely to frame domestic violence from a social justice perspective. The author states that the social justice perspective actively resists blaming the victim and focuses on promoting justice through social change. Berns maintains that this perspective is hard to find in the mass media. These political publications were more likely to target social and cultural issues that foster violence. However, these magazines also viewed domestic violence as male abuse of female victims, with no consideration for abuse in same-sex relationships or abuse perpetrated against children and the elderly. These publications also presented domestic violence from a male point of view, showing reluctance to consider the perpetrator's responsibility. Furthermore, Berns reports that political publications were more likely to present domestic violence as the pathos of female victims.

Berns concludes the book with suggestions for new ways of framing domestic violence. She proposes a frame which condemns violence as a means of conflict resolution, a frame that disapproves of the abuser versus shaming the victim, and one that recognizes ways in which violence is culturally and socially supported. She suggests more research examining domestic violence in depth, identifying cultural messages that support rigid gender roles, and exposing cultural attitudes that normalize violence. Finally, Berns encourages the reader to critically evaluate media coverage and to cultivate a broader perspective on the problem of domestic violence and potential solutions to the problem.

In summary, Nancy Berns provides an interesting analysis of the media's portrayal of domestic violence and the public's perception of the same. The writing is redundant in some chapters and the use of the frame analogy becomes burdensome later in the text. Eventually the frames become confusing and too numerous to separate. Never-the-less, the overall argument that the media present a sensationalized view of social problems and how this view affects policy is reasonable. However, the writer does not discuss policy issues in any meaningful way.

Furthermore, there is no mention of any research, or lack there of, on the actual effects the media's portrayal of domestic violence has had on policy. On the other hand, Berns provides a persuasive line of reasoning with regard to the media's influence on the public and the shift from investigative reporting to what she calls "infotainment." Overall, Berns provides interesting food for thought and encourages those who are inclined to read her book to look beyond the façade of domestic violence that is portrayed by mainstream media.