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Every Parent's Worst Nightmare: Myths of Child Abductions in US News

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Abstract

Through a content analysis, this study seeks to uncover the predominant narrative themes centered on gender and class that shaped mainstream U.S. newspaper coverage of child kidnappings from 2000-2003. The abductions that dominated news coverage were neither random nor representative cases; clear patterns emerged in the kidnappings that garnered the most media attention. Though statistically rare, the news media disproportionally covered stories of young Caucasian girls being snatched from their middle-to-upper class homes by male strangers, manufacturing a nationwide epidemic. Our analysis reveals how gender and class were used to construct vulnerable girl victims and predatory male perpetrators. News narratives organized kidnapping stories using frames of family values, community cohesion and patriotism, while also disproportionally exaggerating the "stranger danger" myth. We argue these kidnapping narratives of vulnerable violated girls and predatory male "othered" strangers reflect a post-9/11 America struggling from the cultural aftershocks of national crisis and economic uncertainty.

Keywords

The Summer of Child Abductions

Soon after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, the national news media became focused on a string of high-profile child abductions, dubbing the summer of 2002 "the summer of child abductions" (Alter, 2002, p. 1; Wilson, Martins & Marske, 2005). Though statistically rare, the news media disproportionally covered stories of young Caucasian girls being snatched from their middle-to-upper class homes in the middle of the night by male strangers, constructing a nationwide epidemic of "every parent's worst nightmare" (Murr, 2002, p. 38). These kidnapping stories perpetuated powerful social myths about vulnerability in girlhood, hypersexuality and violence in masculinity, and deviance in strangers and "othered" groups. Through systematic treatment by the news media, the young girl victims that dominated media coverage during this time period not only embodied important social lessons about family, childhood and sexuality, but also became a metaphor for a vulnerable, fragile nation suffering from a weakened economy and the cultural aftershock of terrorist attacks (Faludi, 2007).

The high-profile cases in the U.S. that dominated national headlines during the timeline of this study included the abduction and murder of 7-year-old Danielle van Dam from San Diego in February 2002, the abduction and eventual return of 14-year-old Elizabeth Smart from Salt Lake City in June 2002, and the abduction and murder of 5-year-old Samantha Runion from Stanton, California, in July 2002. In each instance, the missing child was a young Caucasian girl from a middle- to upper-class family who was taken from her home by a male stranger.

Because this study is concerned with the predominant myths perpetuated by kidnapping stories in the news, it is important to compare the types of kidnapping that garner the most media attention in the U.S. with the most common type of kidnapping according to crime statistics. According to FBI crime statistics, kidnapping by strangers is rare and has been declining for years, constituting less that 100 cases per year (Crary, 2002, p. 1). Familial abductions are far more common; more than 350,000 children are kidnapped by a parent each year (Crary, 2002). Based on information from the United States Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Juvenile Justice Bulletin, abductions constitute less than two percent of violent crimes against children and over two thirds of abductions are perpetuated by family members or acquaintances.

Regardless of what crime statistics show, the news media's construction of kidnapping cases, of likely victims and suspects, can substantially influence public views of crime and impact policymaking. Reports show that during this time frame, the news media's increased reporting on kidnapping in general, and its specific focus on rare stranger abductions, gave the illusion of a crime wave (Alter, 2002). According to news accounts, parents frightened by the abduction reports were wary of letting their children out of the house (Murr, 2002). As one parent told *Newsweek* magazine, she could no longer let her 11-year-old daughter ride her bike in the daytime: "I turn on the TV and hear about dead little girls" (Murr, 2002, p. 38). These reports of high-profile child abductions not only led to widespread fear (Wilson, Martins & Marske, 2005), but also pushed lawmakers to fund and implement nationwide search programs like Amber Alert.

By over-publicizing the rarest types of crimes by male strangers—whether it be rape, murder or kidnapping—the media can fabricate epidemics which serve as false warnings to women and young girls (Carter, 1998). Through the deployment of myth, crime stories teach important moral lessons and mark boundaries of social control. Kidnapping stories in particular represent "how our culture views children, parenthood, and sexuality and how it defines strangers, community and crime" (Fass, 1997, p. 8). While there has been a great deal of research published on media coverage of issues like rape, child abuse and domestic violence, very little has been written about the news coverage of child abductions or of violence against children more broadly.

Through a content analysis, this study seeks to uncover the predominant myths centered on gender and class that shaped mainstream U.S. news coverage of kidnappings from 2000-2003. In the following three sections we outline the cultural circumstances and theoretical foundations that underpin our study. First, we examine previous research on the cyclical framing of crime news that relies on cultural myths to police boundaries of nation, gender, sexuality, race, class, and deviance during times of turmoil. Next, we explore the myths that influence news coverage of girls as vulnerable and fragile. Finally, we contrast myths of girlhood with those of male predators who symbolize threats to nation and family structures.

Crime and Panic: Framing and Myth in News Narratives

News does more than report events; like other cultural forms it tells stories and teaches important social lessons. News is a narrative, literary form that "provides the guiding myths which shape our conception of the world and serve as important instruments of social control" (Cohen & Young, 1981, p. 12). News cannot be expected

to accurately represent reality or everyday life. Newsmakers are governed by news values that dictate that the most extraordinary, dramatic and tragic elements of stories will be emphasized. However, in order for abnormal occurrences to make sense, they must be given meaning; otherwise, they remain random, isolated events. As Tuchman (1976) notes, reporters organize events around major societal themes or conflicts trough a process of framing that offers "definitions of social reality" (p. 94). Newsmakers use societal myths to structure stories in order to "give meaning to incredible events, to explain that which cannot be explained and to reaffirm values and beliefs, especially when those values and beliefs are challenged" (Lule, 2002, p. 276).

Societies rely on negotiations of stability and crisis to survive, so myths function to simplify and maintain social boundaries (Barthes, 1972). Myth is a powerful cultural force that "has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, so it is in a literal sense 'depoliticized speech'" (p. 142-143). Myth cannot simply sustain itself by replaying the past, as new meanings arise from converged discourses. As Bignell points out, "myth is not an innocent language, but one that picks up existing signs and their connotations, and orders them purposefully to play a particular social role" (Bignell, 1997, p. 16-17).

Stories about crime and deviance are especially instructive because they mark "the transgression of normative boundaries" between acceptable and unacceptable behavior in society (Hall et. al., 1981, p. 352). In doing so, crime coverage also maintains boundaries of class (Grabe, 1996), race (Benedict, 1992), sexuality (Buckingham & Bragg, 2007), and gender (Meyers, 1997). For example, tabloid news magazine shows, which target working class audiences, are more likely to cover crimes that illustrate

middle and upper class deviance, while traditional news magazine programs more often show the upper class as victims of crime by lower class criminals (Grabe, 1996). Thus, the news media's focus on lower class suspects snatching upper class victims offers an opportunity to explore class distinctions in kidnapping narratives.

Likewise, crime news is filled with incarnations of the virgin/vamp myth. Benedict (1992) argues crime coverage constructs weak female victims who may have enticed male perpetrators to attack them. In the case of child abductions involving teenagers such as Elizabeth Smart, speculations about whether she invited sexual attention from her attacker or chose to stay with him rather than escape builds on myths that girls are "asking for it" when they are kidnapped. As Greer (2003) points out, victims must conform to gender norms in order to be granted legitimacy as victims.

Because crime news dramatizes and exaggerates, reporting of crime is out of sync with actual police statistics, both in terms of the *amount* of crime reported and the *types* of crimes reported (Gorelick, 1992; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981). Both print and television news media over represent the relative frequency of violent crimes, especially murder, when compared with FBI statistics, and public perceptions of crime more closely mirror media representations than police statistics (Sheley & Ashkins, 1981). Others have shown that the most unusual crimes, especially homicides, are over represented (Gorelick, 1992) and that the most newsworthy murders are those involving whites (either as suspects or victims) where the suspect is male and the victim is a woman, child or elderly person (Carter, 1998; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). The differential treatment of crime reporting based on race, gender, class and age is not random. Rather, this "recurring pattern of news that highlight certain kinds of criminals

and victims while downplaying others transmit daily messages about whose behavior matters most in society" (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997, p. 50).

The process of framing, of giving meaning to seemingly isolated incidences, also helps explain how independent crimes take on the illusion of a "crime wave." Journalists and editors organize individual cases around themes as a way to synthesize vast raw materials (Fishman, 1981, p. 103). The interactions among news organizations reporting on the same crimes, and the consistency with which the crimes are reported, then creates a crime wave. Furthermore, journalists feel pressure to seek out and "discover" new types of unusual crimes, at which point the news media become saturated with stories about these rare occurrences (Carter, 1998). The process of developing journalistic "story shorthand" or "branding stories" results in the type of naming (i.e. "summer of child abductions") that Kitzinger (2004) argues frame isolated incidents as cultural phenomena.

Crime "epidemics" and "moral panic" have throughout history been well-established as cyclical and intertwined with socio-economic conditions. By "amplifying" either trivial (vandalism) or serious (kidnapping) crimes, news media manufacture sensationalized coverage that prompts audience engagement and incites public outrage (Hall et. al., 1981). As McRobbie and Thornton note, "Moral panics, once the unintended outcome of journalistic practice, seem to have become a goal" (1995, p. 560). Moral panics about child sexual abuse signal "new forms of neo-liberal governmentality that have emerged to reconcile the rift between the sexual commodification of girls, public morality, and heterosexual paedophilic desire" that play out in news media (Bray, 2009, p. 173). The influence of moral panics, particularly involving children, on policies, laws, and organizations has been significant (Zgoba, 2004). As the following sections explore,

two specific groups – child victims and sexual predators – have long been at the heart of moral panics, legislation, and media narratives.

Vulnerable Girl Victims

Childhood and girlhood are highly contested social constructs that shift throughout time (Aries, 1962; Jenks, 1992; Lee, 2001; Postman, 1994; Prout, 2005; Wyness, 2006). Whereas modern media images of children and their involvement in media production call into question the Romantic notion of child innocence, news coverage of child abductions rely heavily upon the mythic innocent child (Prout, 2005).

Several researchers have theorized that in reporting on children, the mass media serve the contradictory function of celebrating and sexualizing girlhood while at the same time policing youth sexuality (Fass, 1997; Hartley, 1998; Levine, 2002). The modern news media have become intensely concerned about girls, as they have become the subject of an unprecedented amount of hard news reporting on youth sexuality, teenage pregnancy, pedophilia, child pornography, anorexia, and crime committed by children (Hartley, 1998). According to Holland, "The visible sexuality of young girls has had immense consequences for the imagery of childhood" (2004, p. 180). The news media police juvenile behavior by defining what is appropriate for young girls while at the same time celebrating their innocence and even attractiveness. As Mazzarella and Pecora (2007) point out, in the 1990s, girls were identified as being in "crisis" and in need of rescue even from their own deviant tendencies.

In crime reporting, the tendency to play up extraordinary crimes while normalizing ordinary ones can perpetuate pervasive social myths about vulnerability in women and girls (Carter, 1998), and sexual deviance and violence in masculinity

(Consalvo, 2003). Professional journalistic norms indicate that the most newsworthy crimes are those in which suspects are male, the crime ends in murder, and the victims are middle-class females, children or elderly. For example, while the murder of females is reported more often, statistics indicate that men are most likely to be the victims of homicide (Carter, 1998, p. 228). The rarest crimes such as stranger rape are over represented, while the more common incidents of familial abuse are downplayed. As Carter argues, this "daily diet" of media representations "constructs the world outside as well as inside the front door as highly dangerous places for women and girls" (1998, p. 231).

Predatory Male Perpetrators

Just as the news media play on myths of vulnerability in women and girls, they also perpetuate myths of violent male predators. News media routinely perpetuate stereotypes of men being "naturally" more violent than women, casting women as nurturing of children and men as threats towards them (Meyers, 1997; Silverman & Wilson, 2002). Statistically speaking, the pedophile as constructed by the news media is rare; far from being a static, ever-present figure, he emerges as a modern mythic character during times of economic and social upheaval (Brongerson, 1984; Foucault, 1977; Levine, 2002; Silverman & Wilson, 2002). For example, the figure of the pedophile lay dormant during much of the twentieth century, but emerged during the Depression when economic hardship challenged masculinity, and again after WWII with the need to restore gender roles and family life (see Bromley, 1991; Doyle & Lacombe, 2000; Levine, 2002). Our culture has a paradoxical relationship with the eroticization of childhood: "we relish our erotic attraction to children" in that we celebrate child beauty

pageants and the sexiness in the teenage body, but "we also find that attraction abhorrent" (Levine, 2002, p. 26). The pedophile thus serves as a convenient societal scapegoat: "a monster to hate, hunt down and punish" (Levine, 2002, p. 27).

Like reporting on pedophilia, stories about child theft, molestation, and the torture and killing of children use myth to mark boundaries of deviance and represent larger social tensions (Fass, 1997). For example, the major newspapers were fascinated with the sexual torture of a 14-year-old boy in the Loeb-Leopold case of the 1920s, indicative of an intense fear of sexuality during that period. Ransom kidnappings such as the 1930s abduction of Charles Lindbergh's son came to symbolize the civic decay of that period, the fear of gang and mafia crime, and the threat of economic disparity brought on by the Depression. When the nuclear family came under siege in the 1970's and '80s, the major kidnapping stories focused on parental kidnapping, representing the demise of the family unit and distrust of court system. The 1990s reporting focused on parental kidnapping, familial abuse as well as stranger abductions, representing a distrust of social and political institutions.

To date, no systematic analysis has been done to investigate child kidnapping stories in the new millennium. As with the depiction of girlhood innocence, the post-September 11 climate in the U.S. was ripe for depictions of the mythical violent male pedophile, as the nation struggled to metaphorically protect its "global dominance" and place blame on the "other" for its unraveling national and economic security (Grewal, 2005). These central concerns make this analysis of child abductions in the news from 2000-2003 warranted. Employing content analysis, we interrogated the patterns that

emerged in coverage during this time period in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How prominently did newspapers feature kidnapping stories during this time period? What were the characteristics of the stories that reached national prominence?

RQ2: What were the predominant framing devices used by newspapers to construct kidnapping stories and myths? Did these frames shift over time?

RQ3: How were class and gender used by newspapers to construct victims and suspects?

<div align="center">Method</div>

Sampling

Since the study sought to investigate how kidnapping stories were framed in U.S. press coverage before and after September 11, 2001, the sampling time frame included stories from January 1, 2000, to the end of the calendar year in 2003. Kidnapping stories, like crime coverage more generally, are typically most salient at the local/regional level, while some extraordinary cases reach the level of national news prominence. Therefore, this study selected five prominent U.S. newspapers to sample for analysis, some which reached national news audiences and some which were more regional in scope. This study sought to understand the characteristics of abductions that reached regional significance and the characteristics of those that gained national prominence.

USA Today was selected as the preeminent newspaper in the U.S., as it boasts the highest circulation and targets a national audience. In addition, four other prominent metropolitan daily newspapers were included: *The Houston Chronicle,* the *New York*

Times, *The Washington Post* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*. The four additional newspapers were selected to complement the coverage in *USA Today* because they each rank among the top 15 newspaper circulations in the country (ASNE, 2000). The metropolitan newspapers are selected to include one from the South, one from the West coast, and two from the East coast, which helps ensure that our study addresses cases from across various diverse areas of the U.S. While the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* notably reach national audiences, they differ from *USA Today*, which features a popular, "headline" style of reporting rather than the more in-depth traditional journalism found in the other papers. These five selected newspapers, though not representative of all coverage of child abductions, nonetheless collectively offer researchers a snapshot of kidnapping stories in large circulation dailies that span different geographic areas of the country and offer greater insight into the kinds of stories that travel from traditional newspapers to more prominent popular press.

This study began by sampling stories from *USA Today*, as these were the stories and cases that reached the widest audience. Using the Lexis-Nexis database, stories in *USA Today* were searched to return stories which included the terms "abduct!" or "kidnap!"[i] International and adult kidnapping cases were removed, as well as stories irrelevant to the study (i.e. sports stories, movie reviews, letters to the editor, etc.). A total of 42 stories remained, which made up the *census* of *USA Today* kidnapping stories.

Because of the prevalence of kidnapping stories on a regional level, the original search terms yielded over 1,000 stories for each of the four remaining papers. Therefore, stories from these newspapers were sampled to parallel the coverage and distribution of the *USA Today* census. For example, in 2000, *USA Today* ran three stories about child

abductions evenly distributed throughout the year. Therefore, a random sample of three stories was drawn from each of the remaining four papers for the year 2000. In 2001, *USA Today* ran two stories in May. A random sample of two stories from May 2001 was drawn from the four papers. In 2002, *USA Today* ran 19 child abduction stories, with 14 from June to August. Therefore, the samples from the papers were drawn to match the number and distribution of the *USA Today* stories. In 2003, *USA Today* ran 18 stories with 12 of them clustered from May to June. So again, a similar distributed sample was drawn from each of the four additional papers. A total of 42 stories were sampled from each *The Houston Chronicle*, the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and combined with the 42 from the *USA Today* census, the total number of stories selected for analysis was 212.

Coding instruments

This study included three units of analysis: the story (n=212), the victim (n=400), and the suspect (n=277). Separate coding sheets were designed for each unit. For the story unit of analysis, the following variables were coded: story prominence, narrative themes, and whether or not the story included links to other cases. Story prominence was measured by the number of words, story placement, and the number of photos/graphics included with the story as indicted by the information made available through Lexis-Nexis.[ii]

Additionally, stories were coded based on the absence or presence of five narrative themes. Employing a grounded theory approach, these themes were identified from a previous in-depth textual analysis of child abduction stories that had appeared in large circulation newspapers and national print news magazines (Moscowitz, 2003).

These five narratives or frames emerged as dominant story-telling devices relied upon by journalists when covering child abduction stories:

Family Values: mention of the grieving family unit, the family as the cause, the family being reunited, or the idealized American family/suburbia

Community: mention of neighborhood/community banding together to search for child-victim, Amber Alert efforts, community prevention efforts, or neighborhood vigils

Patriotism: stories set in political or governmental settings, mention of Americana, focus on symbols of nationalism such as the flag

Stranger Danger: focus on the stranger-as-suspect or of the anonymous predatory nature of the kidnapping crime (i.e. strangers "lurking" outside homes)

Innocence: mention of innocent, asexual children in need of protection

Additionally, each story was coded based on whether it discussed the kidnapping case as an isolated incident, or whether it somehow linked to other kidnappings by either mentioning other cases in the text, visually linking cases either through photos of multiple victims or graphics, connecting cases through the use of statistics, or through phrasal wording to warn readers of an "epidemic".

A separate unit of analysis was used to code each *victim* mentioned in the story. A total of 400 victims were included in the sample of stories, and each victim was coded for the demographic variables of gender, age and class, when available.[iii] Additionally, the nature of abduction, the causal attribution, and specific victim characteristics/attributes (including vulnerability, toughness and whether or not sexual or physical details were included) were also coded. The nature of the abduction referred to what details about the

crime were included in the news report—whether it was also a murder, rape, stalking and the like, whether it was an escape or just an abduction attempt, and whether or not the victim was returned. Causal attribution specified the possible factors that brought about the abduction, such as carelessness on the part of the victim or family (parental culpability), a custody dispute, or a lack of police or laws.

Likewise, a separate unit of analysis was used to capture each suspect mentioned in the sample (n=277). The suspect was also coded for demographic characteristics such as gender, class, and age. Additionally, the relationship of the suspect to the victim was coded.

Intercoder Reliability

The process of establishing intercoder reliability included an exhaustive training procedure, a pretest of stories not used in this study, and a posttest of stories which made up this study. First, initial training was provided to five coders using stories pulled from the *Associated Press*. Next, a formal pretest was conducted to calculate intercoder reliability from newspaper stories not included in the study from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. A Krippendorff's alpha test yielded 76 percent agreement for all categories combined.[iv] Finally, after coding was complete, a posttest was conducted in which all five coders coded 10 percent of the total sample. The posest yielded a Krippendorff alpha of 78 percent for all categories. Only variables which met the threshold of 70 percent reliability were included in this analysis.

Findings

Story Prominence

The first research question dealt with the difference in prominence of abduction stories before and after September 11, 2001. We have previously noted how, in terms of national newspaper coverage, there was little coverage before 9/11, but coverage spiked soon afterward (Wilson, Martins & Marske, 2005). *USA Today* had only three child kidnapping stories in 2000 and two stories in 2001, followed by 19 stories in 2001 and 18 stories in 2003.

In several ways, *USA Today* placed kidnapping stories more prominently than the four smaller, more regionally targeted papers. For example, approximately 14 percent of abduction stories were placed on the front page of *USA Today*, while only 9 percent of stories appeared on the front page of the other papers. Additionally, while all stories combined had an average number of 600 words, there was a difference in the mean number of words between the national paper and regional papers. *USA Today* averaged 742 words per story, while regional papers averaged 565 words. Finally, relying on information available through the Lexis-Nexis database, all stories in the sample had an average of 0.8 photos. Nevertheless, *USA Today* printed an average of 1.9 photos per story, while regional papers had an average number of 0.56 photos per story. Therefore, while one might expect the regional and more quality oriented newspapers to cover child abductions more prominently, as crime stories are more salient to the local community, this study found that it was the popular "nation's newspaper," *USA Today*, that played up abduction stories more prominently.

Dominant Themes

The study's second set of research questions concerned the dominant narrative devices used by newspapers to tell kidnapping stories. Specifically, we were interested in whether these themes shifted over time, or differed between the national newspaper coverage and the more regionally targeted coverage. The themes of family values and community were the most prevalent in kidnapping stories, mentioned in 55.2 percent and 53.8 percent of all news stories respectively. Stories that contained the "family values" frame broadly used kidnapping stories to reflect upon how the American (nuclear) family is in need of protection or salvation. Stories coded for the presence of the "family values" theme sometimes centered on how the suburbs/small towns are "supposed to be safe," expressing disbelief that child adductions could happen "here, in our neighborhood." Other stories described how the streets and parks, once filled with childhood laughter, are empty now as a result of fear. A key component of this theme was the need for the family unit to be kept intact, thus focusing on the grieving family members, or the need for the family to be protected from scrutiny by police and media.

Additionally, stories containing the "community" theme focused on the local community coming together to mourn the victim, organize search efforts, wear ribbons of support, erect shrines, attend vigils, and the like. Stories also contained information about local efforts to raise money to assist in the search, offer a reward, organize an Amber Alert, or establish community prevention/warning systems. Additionally, compared with the more regionally targeted newspapers, the national newspaper had significantly more news articles with the family value theme (76.2 percent compared with 55.2 percent).

The theme of "stranger danger" also appeared in 34 percent of the kidnapping stories, even though such kidnappings are statistically rare (constituting less that 100 cases per year). This theme stressed the stranger nature of suspects and the randomness of kidnapping crimes. Stories were coded as containing the "stranger danger" theme if the suspect was identified as a stranger to the family or "unknown" to the family, as well as if the story included warnings to parents such as a list of "stranger traps" children should avoid (Preventing child abductions, 2002, p. 10A). At times, stories relied upon the "stranger danger" theme even in cases where initial evidence pointed to a family member. For example, stories indicated that when family members were interviewed by police, as in the case of Elizabeth Smart's uncle Tom Smart, it was only a part of police routine to rule out relatives. In fact, when the local paper reported a police theory that the culprit may be an extended family member, the Salt Lake City community and the Smart's Mormon congregation became enraged (McMahon, 2002, June 10).

The theme of stranger danger showed an interesting pattern across time, as this study found the use of the theme shot up rather dramatically across all newspaper coverage after the events of September 11, 2001. In the years 2000 and 2001, only 13.3 percent and 10.0 percent of all stories respectively contained the stranger danger theme; this percentage increased to 38.1 percent in 2002 and 35.6 percent in 2003. Additionally, interesting patterns emerged when examining how the news stories that used the stranger danger myth linked cases. Compared with stories without the stranger danger theme, stories with the stranger danger theme mentioned significantly ($p < .05$) more cases (52.5 percent), had significantly more linking phrases (48.6 percent), and used significantly fewer statistics (25.0 percent). Linking unrelated cases is consistent with the journalistic

tendency toward integration—to amalgamate individual cases into a "trend" or "social phenomenon"—in particular in crime reporting. In the case of abduction reporting, integrating disparate cases into a single report can increase the perception of a "kidnapping" epidemic and fears surrounding "stranger danger," while the use of crime statistics only shows how rare stranger abductions are. In some cases, this pattern resulted in conflicting messages within the articles themselves. On the one hand, coverage claimed that stranger abductions were rare based upon crime statistics, but also included warnings to parents about how to keep children safe from strangers. While information about preventing abductions is certainly vital to parents even when the crime is rare, the sensationalized language and framing of a manufactured kidnapping epidemic combines to strike fear in readers and then place responsibility on them to take action to protect their children as a means of alleviating that fear. Thus, the news framing both creates the epidemic and prescribes the cure for the symptoms of fear and uncertainty.

The patriotism theme was present in 23.5 percent of all child abduction news, bringing kidnapping cases in the context of the whole nation, framing the crime as a national problem that required a national solution. For example, when President Bush announced in the fall of 2002 additional federal resources to improve the nation's Amber Alert system, mainstream newspaper accounts discussed "federal efforts" and "national standards" to end what Bush dubbed "this nightmare across America" (Bumiller, 2002, p. 21). Stories containing the patriotism theme specifically mentioned America being "under attack," sometimes eluding to the events of September 11, 2001 by referring to abductions as another "homeland security threat" and "a different, and much older, sort of terrorism" (Strange, 2002, p. 13A). Stories with this theme specifically mentioned

America as a nation; described the victim, victim's family, or town as "All-American;" or included national symbols like the flag. For example, these stories included descriptive details like a returned victim dressed in a t-shirt with the American flag on it, of a child as a Girl Scout who sold cookies door-to-door, or mentioned the presence of American flags at a victim's funeral or of small flags dotting the yard where the child went missing. Perhaps not surprisingly, the patriotism theme was employed significantly more often by *USA Today*, present in 38.1 percent of the stories compared with 23.6 percent of all stories. *USA Today* was thus more likely to frame news of child abductions in a national context, perhaps stimulating solidarity among nationwide readers.

This study found other critical kidnapping narratives by coding for the place of abduction, the nature of the abduction, and the relationship between victim and suspect. Across all news stories, 29.8 percent of victims were abducted from their homes, including 10 percent from their bedrooms, which was significantly more than victims abducted from public places (20.3 percent). Regarding the type of abduction, only 19.3 percent of the victims covered by the newspapers in this sample were children who were still missing. In contrast, newspapers were much more likely to cover victims who had been returned (35.0 percent) or murdered (33.8 percent), even though crime statistics indicate that in most kidnapping cases children remain missing.

As previously mentioned, parental abductions are by far the most common type of abduction, constituting more than 350,000 cases per year. In this sample, however, only 13.3 percent of the victims were abducted because of a custody dispute. In contrast, in 64.5 percent of the stories children disappeared with no known cause. This "no cause" treatment contributes to the stranger danger myth and the perception of randomness.

Finally, the suspects' relationship to the victims further reinforced the stranger danger theme. More than half of the suspects coded (n=400) were strangers to the victim, or the relationship to the victim was unknown. In some cases, even if the family knew the suspect (i.e. the handyman, as in the Smart case), he was still framed as a stranger. Even when the police had no leads, the suspect was still often framed as an anonymous stranger. Another 26.0 percent of suspects had connections to the victim's families, and 20.9 percent of suspects were family members. These low figures drastically underestimate what crime statistics show, that a child is much more likely to be taken by a parent or someone close to the family.

Gender and Class Constructions

Our third set of research questions concerning how gender and class are constructed in child abduction narratives yielded several significant findings. First, the number of female victims was significantly higher ($p < .05$) than the number of male victims. Out of a total of 400 victims, 76.5 percent were female, while 18 percent were male. This gender differentiation was exaggerated on the national level, with 86.7 percent of victims being female and 12 percent being male. Men were more than twice as likely to be reported as suspects than women. Out of 277 total suspects in our sample, 71.8 percent of were male, while 24.9 percent were female. Again, this differentiation was inflated on the national level, with 82.1 percent of suspects being male and 15.4 percent being female.

Socio-economic class was a difficult category to code, because it was rarely obvious in the text of the news article. However, when class was mentioned, usually through a description of the neighborhood, home or occupation, it was used to construct

both victim and suspect. For example, in the coverage of Elizabeth Smart, whose case received the most prominent coverage, the press routinely described her "million dollar home" as a "seven-bedroom hillside mansion," and stressed her father's employment as a "real estate broker." On the contrary, the initial suspect in the case was assumed to be a homeless man: "The hunt continues for Bret Michael Edmunds, 26, a transient whom police think may have been in the neighborhood before the disappearance" (McMahon, 2002, June 17). Another qualitative example shows how class was used to demarcate victim and predator:

> The two neighborhoods couldn't be more different. Almost four weeks after 14-year-old Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped from her home in the wealthy foothills of Salt Lake City, the spotlight had shifted across town to a modest trailer park in the southwest suburbs. The focal point: the home of Richard Albert Ricci, a 48-year-old ex-con and handyman who had worked at the Smart's million-dollar mansion more than a year ago. (Peraino, 2002, p. 41).

Consistent with this framing of class, the quantitative findings from this study found that when class descriptors were used in news stories, clear differences emerged between victims and suspects. Of all victims, 7 percent were coded as being described as from middle-to-upper class families, while 3.8 percent were from lower-to-working class families. Class distinctions were exaggerated in the national newspaper coverage. 14.4 percent of victims were described as being from middle-to-upper class families and only 2.3 percent were from lower-to-working class families ($p < .05$).

Suspects were described overall as being significantly (p < .05) more low class, with 16.3 percent being lower-to-working class and 7.3 being middle-to-upper class. Again, this difference was exaggerated from the regional to the national level. Suspects in national papers were almost twice as likely to be lower-to-working class than middle-to-upper class (28.2 percent compared to 14.4 percent respectively).

The characteristics of victims also yielded several significant results. Even though toughness was a rare characteristic, it was more likely to be found in female victims. Only 44 out of 400 victims were described as "tough," with 12.4 percent of all female victims and 9.1 percent of all male victims being coded as tough. Toughness was often used when the victim fought back against the abductor, attacked the abductor in any way, tried to escape or was able to escape. The toughness characteristic also included descriptions of the victim as gutsy, muscular, scrappy or athletic. For example, Erica Pratt, a 7-year-old from Philadelphia, was touted as a "role model for kids everywhere" when she escaped from her kidnappers by chewing through duct tape, punching out a window, kicking out a panel in the floor and screaming for help (Peterson, 2002, p. 7D). This case is also an instructive example of how media narratives combined details of "toughness" and "femininity." Pratt was described as "petite," and "clad in bright pink," and shy, burring "her face in a stuffed animal" (Ewers, 2002 p. 6).

This study also coded whether or not the report revealed physical or sexual details about the victim. Although 65.8 percent of all victims in the sample were under 12 years of age, physical or sexual details were revealed for 17.5 percent of the victims. In addition, over twice as many female victims (19.3 percent) included these reporting details compared with male victims (9.7 percent).

Discussion

The abductions that made the news in our study were neither random nor representative cases. Clear patterns emerged in the abduction cases that garnered the most attention in U.S. press coverage, in particular in *USA Today*: The victim was likely to be a young female from a middle-upper class neighborhood who was abducted from her home by a male, low-class "stranger." Furthermore, the exaggeration of victims as female and suspects as male in "the nation's newspaper" suggests that the stories achieving national prominence are those that successfully perpetuate the myth of predatory males abducting young girls (Levine, 2002). Furthermore, not all young girls that get abducted have the same degree of newsworthiness; media workers grant that images of "cute teenage girls" is part of the marketing strategy used by news stations to attract audiences and garner higher ratings (Kurtz, 2002, p.2). The coverage of child abductions has real consequences for families of missing children; kidnapped children who receive widespread publicity in the mass media are much more likely to be returned home safely and quickly, whereas those whose kidnappings go unreported are rarely found (Crary, 2002; Fass, 1997).

In addition, the differences between regionally-targeted coverage and the more popular, nationally-targeted coverage suggests that national coverage exaggerates the myth of low class male vagrants snatching girls from stable suburban homes. This finding becomes significant when considering that, as Grabe (1996) found with crime in television news magazine programs, the class of the suspect is related to the class of the target audience. The mainstream newspapers tend to reach an audience of older, middle-to-upper class, Caucasian readers (ASNE, 2000), while the content perpetuates the image

of low class criminals victimizing the middle class. Thus, child abduction narratives help to maintain class boundaries by "othering" members of the lower class. Class distinctions are used to show how kidnappers come from a different world than that of victimized families. By stressing these "differences," U.S. media reports may create perceptions that abductors are underclass vagrants, when in reality most kidnappings are committed by a family member or someone within the family's social circle.

While race was not able to be coded in this sample of stories due to the lack of visual information and linguistic description available, racial identity was undoubtedly a common marker used to further differentiate victims and suspects. Media coverage routinely ignores the problem of missing minority children, especially if they are taken from lower income urban neighborhoods where crime is assumed "normal." During this same time period, several children representing diverse class and racial identities disappeared across the U.S., but did not receive the same media attention. For example, 2-year-old Jahi Turner was kidnapped in San Diego, and 7-year-old Alexis Patterson from Milwaukee was abducted when walking home from school. Both kids were black. While their cases generated a great deal of local media attention, they did not rise to the level of national media obsession like the cases of Smart, Van Dam and Runion, the middle-to-upper class Caucasian girls (Murr, 2002). Future research on child abductions should further explore the role of race in reporting kidnappings crimes.

The contradiction of showing females as more sexual (revealing sexual details about the victim) yet also "tougher" reveals a specific nuance in the narratives of child abductions. Because crime news focuses on the rare, it is perhaps "newsworthy" for girls to exhibit toughness. The finding that young girls were more likely to be sexualized in the

news media is consistent with research contending that the media promotes girlhood sexuality even as it attempts to deny and protect it (Fass, 1997; Hartley, 1998; Levine, 2002). Girlhood elicits our collective "protective response" toward childhood, symbolizing desires to protect family life, community, and national identity more broadly.

In contrast, the predatory male abductor elicits our collective fear and hostility (Levine, 2000). While the number of stranger abductions is declining, the newspapers in this study played up the theme of "stranger danger," linked together individual yet unrelated cases which implied a broader stranger kidnapping "trend" or epidemic, and were ambiguous about reporting the relationship of the suspect to the victim (implying stranger). As Levine (2000) suggests, these news reports show how the pedophile once again becomes a popular social construct during times of economic and social upheaval. Furthermore, by over publicizing crimes by male strangers—whether it be rape, murder or kidnapping—the media may create false warnings to women and young girls (Carter, 1998; Fernandes, 2000). Although family members perpetrate most violence against women, media reports stress the "extraordinary" crimes where the stranger is the culprit.

This study sought to build upon previous cultural studies research by quantifying the dominant themes used by newspapers to tell stories of child abductions, uncovering narrative devices which have the potential to teach powerful social lessons about family, community, strangers, girlhood and nationality. In the 1990s kidnapping reporting centered on parental abductions, representing distrust of the court system and family structures (Fass, 1997). This study shows that in the 2000s, U.S. mainstream news media fixated on rare but dramatic stories of helpless young girls disappearing from culturally

recognized "safe havens" at the hands of predatory male strangers. Considering the cultural context of post-September 11 America, this study further suggests how media stories of fragile, vulnerable, violated girls become metaphors for a fragile, vulnerable, violated nation. Girls studies scholars have long noted that narratives of girlhood carried out in the media and popular culture come to "signify the endangered purity of the nation" more broadly (Mankekar, 1997, p. 29). Faludi's recent work on post-9/11 media culture reminds us of the ways in which deeply embedded cultural myths like cowboy masculinity and puritan sexuality pervade contemporary media frames during times of national crises (2007). Specifically, she argues that in the cultural aftershocks of the terrorist attacks, U.S. media sustained narratives of idealized girls and women as fragile virgins or mothers, objects in need of protection by and from men. This study, by uncovering patterns in the journalistic selection of young female victims "snatched" from their homes and the narrative framing devices used to tell their stories, extends Faludi's analysis. By "othering" the kidnapper/pedophile as low-class and a stranger, and re-inscribing family values, community cohesion and patriotism, these kidnapping stories reflect a post-9/11 American society struggling to protect its families and its nation.

This study is limited to a systematic sampling of U.S. newspaper coverage—both national and regionally-targeted papers—across a three-year time span in which coverage of child abductions saturated U.S. news media and captured the public imagination. Future research should consider how the U.S. case and context differs from abduction/child crime coverage in non-U.S. and other global contexts. Research should also include how coverage differs across print, broadcast and online media forms, focusing more on how visual representations of victim and suspect (especially race)

frame the story in important ways that print media do not. This study nonetheless offers an important empirical contribution to the study of U.S. press coverage of age-and-gender-related crimes in hopes of fueling additional investigation into coverage of gender, children, and crime news.

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[i] The exclamation mark at the end of the search terms covers derivations of the word. For example, "abduct!" would return stories with the words "abduction," "abducted," "abduction" and so on.

[ii] The Lexis-Nexis database offers information as to whether or not visuals were included with the story, and how many were included (for example: "graphics: photo of Van Damn, county map of abduction cases" was coded as two graphics). The actual photographs and other visuals from the national paper*, USA Today*, were examined by looking at the microfilm copies of the paper. At the time of this study, microfilm copies of the four additional papers were not available, so the content of the photographs themselves could not be analyzed, only whether or not images were included with the story.

iii While gender and age were often obvious in the news stories, we did include options for "other" for use when gender could not be determined. Variables such as class and race were more difficult to code. For the purposes of this study, class was oftentimes referenced through descriptions of the victim's or suspect's home, neighborhood, or occupation. Racial determination, while important to the narrative framing of abduction stories, was often not available in the story. Since photographs were only available for the *USA Today* stories, it was not possible to code for race across the other four newspapers.

iv Only categories for which there could have been disagreement were included in the alpha test to ensure the figure was not "padded." Therefore, obvious categories in which there was 100 percent agreement, such as story number and date, were excluded from the alpha test. Likewise, any individual category for which intercoder reliability fell below 70 percent was eliminated from this study.