



## Date Rape After the Afterschool Special: Narrative Trends in the Televised Depiction of Social Problems<sup>1</sup>

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*Social problems scholars have pointed to sensitive depictions of social problems like smoking, rape, and spousal abuse on television as evidence of the success of movements devoted to those causes. Media scholars have countered that the pressure on television producers to hew to formula inevitably leads to stereotypical depictions of social problems. We appraise these two perspectives by way of an analysis of the portrayal of date rape on teen television dramas over the course of 2 decades. We show that, for a period, advocates did secure portrayals of date rape that were in line with a feminist antirape agenda. However, that depiction yielded to one in which date rape figured as a narrative device, used to tell audiences something about the show's characters or their situation, not to tell them something about rape. Developments in teen serials' content and especially their form led eventually to antifeminist portrayals, in which rapes were portrayed as unjust but routine events. Behind these developments, however, were demands on television writers to produce not formula, but novelty. We conclude by theorizing more generally the effects of the demand for novelty on the depiction of social problems on television.*

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### INTRODUCTION

A young woman, drunk at a college party, begins kissing a young man she has just met. She leaves with him, presumably to an upstairs dorm room. She is raped. She is devastated but is also angry and is determined that her attacker be punished. She reports her rape to a dean.

Score one, it would seem, for the serious portrayal of date rape on dramatic television. In this episode of *Veronica Mars*, which aired in 2006, it was made clear that the woman's inebriation and seductiveness were not to blame for her rape. The woman was portrayed as a victim but also as taking action to bring her rapist to justice. The episode challenged the myth that women often invite rape through their provocative behavior (Brinson 1992; Burt 1980; Du Mont, Miller, and Myhr 2003; Fonow, Richardson, and Wemmerus 1992) and refused the stereotype of rape victims as passive and pathetic (Cuklanz and Moorti 2006; Moorti 2002). These challenges to standard rape myths have been central to a feminist antirape agenda (Cuklanz 2000).

Does this mean that antirape advocates have succeeded in changing stereotypical views of rape, at least on television? Scholars of social problems have argued

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that movements targeting a variety of social problems, from smoking to spousal abuse and including rape, have effected permanent changes in how those problems are portrayed on television (Best 1997; Curtin 2000; Troyer 1989). Scholars of the media have been skeptical. They argue that television's risk-averse reliance on formula leads it to reproduce stereotypes rather than challenge them (Buxton 1990; Cuklanz 2000; Moorti 2002; White 2006; see Hollander and Rodgers 2014 for a similar perspective on print). Activists promoting a cause are no match for the imperatives of producing profitable television.

In this article, we appraise these two perspectives by analyzing fictionalized depictions of date rape appearing on teen television dramas between 1988, when anti-rape advocates began to pressure television producers, and 2008. We show that neither perspective makes sense of the patterns we document. Media scholars' argument that the imperatives of popular television production trump any effort to challenge the status quo misses the fact that the portrayal of date rape *did* change. Social problems scholars' argument that those changes are likely to be permanent misses the fact that after several years, treatments of date rape became once again cursory and superficial.

To explain these developments, we emphasize a feature of television production that has been neglected both by media scholars and social problem scholars. Television producers are under constant pressure to generate novelty. They are expected *not* to rely on depictions that have become standard. What is "novel" is, of course, collectively defined. It is not novel in the sense of the product of an idiosyncratic artistic imagination. But paying attention to how the formula is made new (rather than how the new is in fact still formulaic) challenges the notion that television content reflects a perennial contest between socially conscious but economically risky portrayals and stereotypical but economically safe ones.

Instead, we argue that antirape advocates were initially successful in securing serious treatments of date rape in part because television producers were eager to depict this "new" social problem. Socially conscious programming was a good economic bet, and producers were willing targets of advocates' efforts. That is, at first. Once date rape as a serious social problem had been "done" on teen dramas, it became difficult for producers to treat it with the same earnest indignation. More generally, after a social problem has been widely and popularly discovered—and discussed, decried, and depicted with political sensitivity in popular culture—it is likely to continue to figure in popular culture in a much more banal way. Once shocking and urgent social problems become plot devices, used to tell familiar stories of romance and betrayal, bad guys battled and quests pursued.

However, even become banal, social problems can be depicted in ways that send a variety of messages. Patterns in their depiction often reflect conventions that are not easily classed as ideological: for example, new styles of plotting or character development or camerawork. We argue that the trends most responsible for undercutting a feminist message about rape in the 2000s had little to do with feminism, whether pro or anti. One trend was the rise of the "worldly teen drama," in which teens were presented as cynical and mature in a world without moral compass. Date rape was used to convey the moral anomie of that world. A second trend was the popularity of multiple and serial plotlines in dramatic television. This development

was much ballyhooed for its creative sophistication, but one consequence was that rape story lines were cast as no more important than any of the other dramas appearing in the episode.

Together, these trends contributed to normalizing date rape on television shows in the 2000s. In the 2006 *Veronica Mars* episode we described, the rapist was neither identified nor caught by the end of the episode. One could imagine that the clear failure of the law might send a message about the difficulty of prosecuting rape in a still-misogynistic world. But the fact that the story line ended while others in the episode continued into the next episode sent a different message. The rape became simply one more indication of the lawlessness and corruption of the protagonist's world.

More broadly, then, the pressure to novelty in television production may have consequences for how a social problem is portrayed that are separate from the political views of producers or audiences. We explore this possibility in the rest of the article, first, by rehearsing competing perspectives on the media coverage of social problems, and then by reporting the findings of our analysis of date rape in teen dramas.

## THE CAREERS OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

What happens after a social problem has been recognized as widespread, serious, and in need of concerted action? Social problems scholars have identified several scenarios. Legislative reform may eradicate the social problem. The problem, still unsolved, may recede from public consciousness as other claimants gain public attention (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Or the problem may be recognized as widespread, serious, in need of concerted action—and intractable. It becomes institutionalized: widely acknowledged and accompanied by groups committed to its amelioration and experts fluent in its explanation (Loseke and Cahill 1984).

Is that kind of institutionalization good or bad for proponents of the problem's solution? Kinnick, Krugman, and Cameron (1996) refer to "compassion fatigue," when a social problem is covered so much that it desensitizes people to the issue. A problem can come to seem excessively complicated (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). It may be reclassified from a threat to an annoyance or from an emergency to a persistent problem. To grasp the trajectories of social problems requires understanding the distinctive ways in which particular problems are treated in diverse "arenas" (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988), such as the news media, Congress, the legal system, the medical profession, and so on. Dynamics particular to those institutions, for example, the adversarial system in law, or the conventions of peer review in academia, influence the kinds of treatment social problems receive.

In this article, we focus on how social problems are treated on dramatic television. Social problems scholars have tended to emphasize the capacity of advocates to win the portrayals of the problem and its sufferers that they seek (Best 1997; Curtin 2000; Troyer 1989). For example, Best (1997:12) writes that by the end of the twentieth century, "Newsmagazine feature stories, talk shows, made for television movies, and other press and entertainment genres regularly present

information about victims [of date rape, marital rape, sexual harassment, eating disorders, clergy abuse, and many others]; these treatments routinely adopt the views promoted by victim advocates.” In this perspective, the organizational success of social problem advocates is measured in serious television portrayals.

Scholars of the media argue, by contrast, that demands distinctive to television production render social problems on television variously personal, inevitable, and/or banal (Berridge 2011; Cuklanz 2000; Gitlin 1983; Moorti 2002; Projansky 2001; Replogle 2011). Drawing on Gitlin’s (1983) argument that television producers seek to avoid risk by imitating what has come before, scholars argue that stereotypes and standard story lines sell better than challenging ones (Buxton 1990; Cuklanz 2000; Moorti 2002). Counterhegemonic cultural messages are either rejected outright or revised in a way that ends up celebrating the status quo.

We argue that neither perspective on its own is adequate. A scenario in which well-organized advocates win serious and sensitive portrayals of their issue misses the countervailing pressure of risk-averse television production. If gay and lesbian mobilization is followed by the appearance of more homosexual characters on television, but those characters are all rich and white (Horn 2000:23), or are all hairdressers and florists, or are otherwise played for laughs, is that progress? On the other hand, a glass-half-empty scenario in which cultural challenge is inevitably blunted risks missing evidence of real change.

One can certainly join the two perspectives into a kind of “change within limits” scenario. But this synthesis does not tell us anything about *when* portrayals that are more in tune with advocates’ agendas are likely to predominate. Is it when advocates for a particular issue are most organized and influential in other domains, as Best’s account would suggest? Is the dynamic more one of a political pendulum, where portrayals reflecting advocates’ agenda dominate until a political “backlash” against them sets in (Faludi 1991)? Or does it have more to do with the specific demands of fictional television production (Cuklanz 2000; Gitlin 1983)? The second limitation of the synthesis we just described lies in its image of a tug-of-war between innovative, socially conscious, counterhegemonic programming on one side and safe, stereotypical, hegemonic programming on the other (Cuklanz 1998). That image captures part of the reality of television programming. But it implies that innovative programming is necessarily socially conscious programming. That may not be the case. Television producers are driven not only to avoid risk, but also to make imitation seem like innovation. Driven by the relentless demand for high ratings, they want to produce something that is original, new, edgy, something that pushes the envelope, that is out of the box, that creates buzz (Curtin 2000:71). If “edgy” means skirting the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate, edgy television may veer toward misogynist portrayals rather than gender-bending ones. It may depict homosexuals as action figures, in a counterhegemonic representation. But it may alternatively depict homophobes as action figures—provocative, but by no means counterhegemonic. In addition, and just as important, what is edgy may have little to do with the ideological agendas of social problem advocates or their critics. Originality may be a new mode of plotting, a new format, a new combination of genres, a new sequence of character development. These changes may have

consequences for the portrayal of particular groups, but they are difficult to label as ideological.

## **SOCIAL PROBLEMS ON TELEVISION: AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

In this article, we focus on the portrayal of acquaintance rape in prime-time television dramas aimed at teen viewers over the course of 2 decades. However, our arguments should apply to social problems other than acquaintance rape. We argue that the fictional depiction of a social problem on television goes through different stages. Before the problem has been widely discovered, it is either ignored altogether or treated in a one-sided, unrealistic, and/or stereotyped way. Attempted rapes figured in countless fictional television accounts of heroic men rescuing maidens in distress or of women being penalized for their sexually provocative behavior. Smoking was portrayed as glamorous without any indication of its danger. Drunks were represented as lovable buffoons.

Once a social problem has been discovered, it is treated seriously, sensitively, and at length. Of course, it is still likely to be incorporated into standard plotlines. Fictional television is not documentary. Still, there is an emphasis on correcting misinformation and stereotypes. Attention to the issue likely reflects in part the efforts of social problem advocates who, since the 1970s, have used a variety of strategies to pressure media executives to portray their issues in favorable ways (Montgomery 1989; Shuman and Rossman 2000). But television producers and writers are often willing targets (Gitlin 1983; Pekurny 2000). Treating a "new" problem like autism or sex addiction or global warming with sensitivity and respect can gain producers, writers, and networks status as up to date (Montgomery 1989). As advocates for immunization concluded after they successfully convinced writers to incorporate their message into a number of television shows: "We provided Hollywood television shows with something they want: new material" (Glik et al.1998:279).

The premium on novelty in television production also explains why serious and lengthy treatments are unlikely to remain the norm. The problem probably will not disappear from fictional television but increasingly it will be treated in a banal fashion. It becomes a narrative device, there to demonstrate the topicality and relevance of a particular show but not to tell us about the social problem. In particular, social problems are used as a shortcut in character development. Insofar as television narratives represent actions as motivated by characters' personalities (Thompson 2003), it is important to give the audience a sense of what characters are "like" early and efficiently. Social problems that can be displayed behaviorally signal to the audience what kind of character this is. So antagonists are shown smoking, taking drugs, driving while drunk, littering, or behaving in a prejudiced way.

The association of social problems with characters who are represented variously as evil, ignorant, or uncouth would seem an unequivocal success for groups invested in the eradication of the problem. If only bad, stupid, or unhip people engage in the bad behavior, then attractiveness, sophistication, intelligence, and moral virtue are presumably attached to people who refrain from or condemn the

bad behavior. However, there are also dangers to this development. One is that the social problem is turned into bad behavior rather than an institutional or political problem. So racism becomes a matter only of prejudice rather than also of the normal functioning of institutions. Another danger is that the behavior is made inappropriate rather than illegal. The message is to stay away from people who behave badly rather than to prosecute them. Success comes from recognizing that certain people are bad rather than from mobilizing the law to stop their bad behavior. Or, if the bad behavior is treated as reflecting not a bad person but a bad world, then the appropriate response is a critical one, but not necessarily focused on any one individual or institution. If the world is corrupt, then withdrawal or cynical detachment is the appropriate response. In each of these ways, the association of social problems with morally unattractive characters would likely not be in tune with advocates' agenda.

So our first claim is that after the issue has been treated seriously, realistically, and sensitively in popular television shows, probably in part as the result of active lobbying efforts on the part of social problem advocates, the social issue is likely to become a device for plot or character development. It tells us something about familiar characters and the world in which they live rather than serving as a focus in and of itself. However, our second claim is that even banalized social problems can communicate different messages to viewers. Whether a problem is represented as solvable or perennial, as annoyance or emergency may have little to do with the ideological views of producers and writers. It may instead reflect current styles of emplotment, pacing, characterization, and camerawork. The task, then, is to tease out the messages that are conveyed not only by way of the content of television fiction, but also by its form.

### **DATE RAPE ON TELEVISION: THREE PERSPECTIVES COMPARED**

We appraise our perspective, and the two that currently dominate the treatment of social problems, by way of an examination of the depiction of date rape on television serials between 1988 and 2008. Like many social problems (rape, sexual harassment, child abuse, autism, gambling, smoking, obesity, homosexuality, pollution, special interest lobbying), date rape has existed for a long time, but was also "discovered" by a variety of institutions at a point in time, in part as the result of deliberate attention-raising efforts on the part of advocates. In this case, antirape activists had brought rape to public attention since the 1970s, but the widespread concern with "date rape" was triggered by the 1985 publication of psychologist Mary Koss's research on the prevalence of acquaintance rape in *Ms. Magazine* (Curtis 1997).

Soon after that, efforts to influence television programming, especially with respect to date rape, were pursued under the mantle of public health by a network of advocates, foundations, and media scholars (Keller and Brown 2002; Winsten 2000). Advocates worked closely with television executives and writers to promote messages that would encourage healthy behavior around a variety of issues, including condom use, responsible alcohol use, and coercion in sexual relations



(Glik et al. 1998; Hinyard and Kreuter 2007). For example, the producers of the series *Felicity* worked directly with the Kaiser Family Foundation's Program on Entertainment Media and Public Health in writing the two-part episode on date rape that aired in 1998. "We were really aware of the message we were sending out," said the show's executive producer (Rosenzweig 1999). The producer of *Dawson's Creek* guessed that he met with five or six advocacy groups every season (Rosenzweig 1999).

Antirape advocates framed the issue as one of health but they promoted depictions of date rape that were in line with a feminist agenda. Such an agenda focused on challenging cultural myths about rape such as the idea that that real rapes are committed by strangers, that women often say no when they mean yes, or that it is not rape if the victim did not physically resist. Advocates sought portrayals that took the perspective of the victim and that emphasized the importance of treating date rape as a crime.<sup>4</sup>

A perspective centered on the ability of issue advocates to secure favorable coverage would anticipate that once antirape activists had secured a sensitive portrayal of date rape on television, that portrayal would become standard. Over time there might be fewer shows devoted to exposing the problem. Mainstream dramas might treat the problem more cursorily. But they would continue to represent date rape in a feminist fashion.

A perspective centered on the risk aversive character of television production sees depictions of date rape undercutting a feminist message. Scholars in this vein acknowledge that antirape advocacy efforts were responsible for some changes in portrayals of rape (Berridge 2011; Cuklanz 2000; Moorti 2002). Acquaintance rape was more frequently portrayed; the perspective of the victim was acknowledged; the victim was no longer held responsible for her own rape. But these changes were worked into formulaic story lines of gender and sexuality. For example, shows about rape counterpoised the dangerous masculinity of the rapist to the strong, moral, sensitive, sometimes feminist masculinity of the detective, father, or friend who sought to avenge the female victim (Berridge 2011; Cuklanz 2000; Moorti 2002). Or they represented raped women as agentic and even powerful, but as properly driven only by their desire to protect their families, not by the desire to punish their rapist or change the system (Projansky 2001). They represented women's solidarity as unnecessary or dangerous (Cuklanz and Moorti 2006). And they represented attempted date rape either as an opportunity for a woman to be rescued by an alluring man or as a cautionary experience for young women unaware of the dangers of adult sexuality (Berridge 2011). In this perspective, a feminist perspective on date rape has had little leverage against the demands of formulaic television.

Our own perspective emphasizes the banalization of social problems after the high point of their discovery, and the mixed effects of the pressure for novelty in television programming. Like the first perspective, we expect that advocates will influence television programming. But we also see television writers and producers

<sup>4</sup> One can identify other components of feminist perspective on rape that were not a part of this agenda: that our society perpetuates a rape-friendly culture, that authorities still sometimes embrace a boys-will-be-boys tolerance for rape, that conceptions of date rape still treat white women's experience as paradigmatic of innocence.

as open to the idea of publicizing a previously unknown social problem or injustice. However, once date rape has “been done” as a social problem, it is likely to fall back into use as a narrative device, employed to tell audiences something about characters or their world, to move the story along rather than being the story.

We also expect, however, that even though a social problems approach to date rape will be short lived, elements of a feminist perspective on date rape will be retained, resurrected, or abandoned for reasons that have little to do with the receptiveness of television writers to antirape advocates. Rather, we argue that the press to novelty will lead to efforts to tweak the date rape formula story. Innovation may take the form of twists on old story lines, new characterizations, new forms of pacing or camerawork. These waves of innovation may produce messages that are congenial to a feminist perspective or undermining of it. One cannot predict in advance whether the press to novelty will lead to politically progressive messages or their opposite. But we should see continuities. That is, a style of innovation should have the effect of communicating a similar message across the shows in which it figures.

## DATA AND METHODS

We appraise these expectations by way of an analysis of fictional portrayals of acquaintance rape or attempted acquaintance rape of a young person that appeared in American teen dramas between 1988 and 2008. We focus on teen dramas rather than on all dramatic shows in which an acquaintance rape figured because advocates for socially conscious programming concentrated their efforts on this genre (Rosenzweig 1999). Teen dramas emerged in the 1990s after the smash success of *Beverly Hills 90210*, and featured the experiences of a tight-knit group of usually affluent friends. The best known of these included *My So-Called Life* (1994–1995; ABC); *Party of Five* (1994–2000; Fox); *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003; WB and UPN); *Dawson’s Creek* (1997–2003; WB); *Felicity* (1998–2002; WB); *Freaks and Geeks* (1999–2000; NBC); *One Tree Hill* (2003–2012; WB and CW); *The O.C.* (2003–2007; Fox); *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007; UPN and CW); *Friday Night Lights* (2006–2011; NBC); *Gossip Girl* (2007–2012; CW); *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008–2013; ABC Family).

To create our sample, we used multiple sources, including the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com), TV Tropes (tvtropes.org), *Prime Time Network Serials, 1964–1993* (Morris 1997), and *The Year in Television 2009* (Terrace 2010) to identify television serials that were targeted to young adults. Then we reviewed synopses of those shows (on Wikipedia, IMDb, and tv.com) to identify possible instances of rape or attempted rape. We limited our sample to shows portraying rapes or attempted rapes committed by someone who was known to the victim (rather than stranger rapes) and in which the victim was a teenager or young adult. In addition to beginning with teen serials and searching for rapes on those shows, we also used computer search engines to find references to dramatized rapes on television and then discarded those that were in shows targeted to an adult rather than a teen audience (e.g., *Law & Order* and other crime shows). Finally, we reviewed the television



shows referred to in articles and one dissertation on sexual violence on dramatic serials that covered at least a portion of our period, looking to fill any gaps in our sample.

We were able to watch all the episodes we identified with the exception of five: NBC's Schoolbreak Special, "No Means No," and four episodes of the series *Step by Step*. We accessed the other shows by way of Netflix, network Web sites, YouTube, and the archives of the Paley Center for Media in Los Angeles. One author watched the 35 shows in our sample and coded each one for a variety of features: the amount of time devoted to the rape and its aftermath, whether or not the rape or attempted rape was experienced by a main or recurring character; how the rape contributed to the unfolding story line(s); and the narrative genre in which the story best fit. Early on in coding, however, we realized that the stories often did not fit obvious genre categories. At the same time, we noticed that there seemed to be a sharp shift in how authorities were involved in the story over the course of our period. Accordingly, we dropped the genre coding and recoded all the episodes for the involvement of authorities. After identifying patterns in the coding results, both authors viewed the 35 shows and wrote detailed notes on them. These form the basis for our discussion of results.

## RESULTS

Several features of the portrayal of date rape and attempted date rape are consistent across the shows in our sample. The shows all involved a man attempting to rape a woman. With the exception of one show (*A Different World*), the rapist and victim were always white (Moorti 2002). The victim was never portrayed as having deserved the rape. Alongside these similarities, we find story lines evolving over the course of the 20-year period, with three distinct patterns.

After the airing of two afterschool specials on date rape in 1988, date rape featured in episodes of teen drama serials *Mr. Belvedere*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *A Different World*, *Felicity*, and *Degrassi*. With the exception of the *Degrassi* episode, which aired in 2003, these episodes aired in the late 1980s and 1990s. In these shows, a character was raped or was the victim of an attempted rape. The focus of the show was on how the victim and her friends dealt with the experience, and in particular, the psychic struggle involved in deciding to tell authorities about the rape. The portrayal seemed aimed at debunking myths about acquaintance rape: for example, that victims provoke their own rape and that good girls cannot be raped. In Table I, these shows appear against a white background.

A second story line became more prominent in serials in the 1990s (*My So-Called Life* and *Beverly Hills 90210*) and in the early 2000s (*Dawson's Creek*, *One Tree Hill*, *Dead Like Me*). In these shows, the rape story was not centrally about the rape. Rather, the averted rape (it was always averted) figured in a story about a budding romantic relationship, with the rescue of the would-be victim furthering the relationship, or in a story about young people growing up too fast. The focus shifted away from what happened to the victim and perpetrator afterward. In Table I, shows in this category appear against a light gray background.

**Table I.** Episodes Treating Date Rape or Attempted Date Rape, 1988–2008, by Year and Features of the Portrayal

Episode	Date Aired	Is the Rape Story About Rape?	Is the Rape Completed?	Are Police/ Authorities Involved?
ABC Afterschool Special: Date Rape	1988	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mr. Belvedere: Homecoming	1989	Yes	No	No
A Different World: No Means No	1989	Yes	No	Yes
Beverly Hills 90210: The Gentle Art of Listening	1990	Yes	Yes	Yes
Beverly Hills 90210: Halloween	1991	Yes	No	No
Beverly Hills 90210: Slumber Party	1991	No	Yes	No
Beverly Hills 90210: Take Back the Night	1993	No	Yes	No
My So-Called Life: Other People's Mothers	1994	No	No	Yes
Beverly Hills 90210: Love Hurts	1995	No	No	Yes
Step by Step: Big Girl on Campus	1995	No	No	No
Party of Five: Close to You	1996	No	No	Yes
Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Pack	1997	No	No	No
Beverly Hills 90210: Cupid's Arrow (Part 1)	1998	No	Yes	Yes
Beverly Hills 90210: The Girl Who Cried Wolf (Part 2)	1998	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
Beverly Hills 90210: Law and Disorder (Part 3)	1998	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
Felicity: Drawing the Line (Part 1)	1998	Yes	Yes	Yes
Felicity: Drawing the Line (Part 2)	1998	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Seeing Red	2002	No	No	No
Dawson's Creek: Rock Bottom	2003	No	No	No
Dead Like Me: Sunday Mornings	2003	No	No	No
Degrassi: Shout (Part 1)	2003	Yes	Yes	No
Degrassi: Shout (Part 2)	2003	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
One Tree Hill: The Search for Something More	2003	No	No	No
Veronica Mars: Pilot	2004	No	Yes	No
The O.C.: The Return of the Nana (Part 1)	2005	No	No	No
The O.C.: The Showdown (Part 2)	2005	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
The O.C.: The Dearly Beloved (Part 3)	2005	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
Veronica Mars: A Trip to the Dentist	2005	No	Yes	No
Veronica Mars: The Rapes of Graff	2006	No	Yes	No
Veronica Mars: Welcome Wagon (Part 1)	2006	No	Yes	No
Veronica Mars: My Big Fat Greek Rush Week (Part 2)	2006	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
Veronica Mars: Of Vice and Men (Part 3)	2006	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
Veronica Mars: Lord of the Pi's (Part 4)	2006	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
Veronica Mars: Spit & Eggs (Part 5)	2006	[cont.]	[cont.]	[cont.]
Gossip Girl: Pilot	2007	No	No	No

After the emergence of two other trends that we mentioned—namely, multiplopped serials and teen noirs—a third pattern emerged in the mid-2000s (in *Veronica Mars*, *The O.C.*, and *Gossip Girl*). Date rape was demoted to a subsidiary plotline and was represented as unprosecuted. The latter two features combined to make date rape seem wrong but routine. If in the first phase, date rape stories were about rape, and in the second date rape stories were about the beginnings of a romantic relationship, in the third phase, date rape stories were about an immoral world. In Table I, shows in this category appear against a dark gray background.

Our categories are not neatly chronological. Two of the shows that substantively fit into the “rape is about rape” category (*Degrassi* and *Felicity*) aired after

several shows with a “rape is about a budding relationship” story line. *Beverly Hills 90210* aired a show that fit into the “rape is about rape” category soon after the series began, then aired a show that straddled the line between a “rape is about rape” and “rape is about a budding relationship” story, then aired shows about, variously, a false accusation of rape, the quasi-vigilantism of antirape activism, and a “he said/she said” conflict that divided the friends. It makes sense that after rape had been treated as a social problem in the series, writers would look for a new twist. In another chronological departure, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* introduced the teen noir genre, and its ironic approach to date rape, well before other series did. Still, we do see three distinct approaches to rape, approaches that mainly do not overlap temporally. We trace these patterns chronologically, highlighting continuities across shows as well as examples from particular shows, and attempting to connect these patterns to developments in television writing production.

### *Date Rape Is About Date Rape*

Two Afterschool Specials on date rape aired in 1988. Both ABC’s *Afterschool Special* “Date Rape,” and NBC’s *Schoolbreak Special* “No Means No” portrayed a sympathetic girl who was raped on a date and then struggled to deal with the aftermath. Afterschool Specials emerged in the 1970s in response to vocal public criticism of commercial television for promoting sexual promiscuity and violence. But television networks also saw in teenagers a potentially lucrative new market (Elman 2010). Afterschool Specials, which dealt with teen problems like pregnancy, disability, parental alcoholism, and sexually transmitted diseases, combined education with the sexual titillation of teenage romance. The demise of the series had in part to do with the absorption of its subjects into primetime teen dramas (Elman 2010). *Beverly Hills 90210* was the first of the genre, and its smash success paved the way for a number of comedic/dramatic serials about a circle of teenage protagonists. Problems such as teenage pregnancy, drug use, and alcoholism that had featured in the Afterschool Specials appeared in these shows too, often in “special episodes” that were followed by a public service announcement about the issue.

In the shows in this period, the depicted rape was about rape. The primary messages conveyed by the stories were that date rape was a crime, even though people might be reluctant to see it as one (*ABC Afterschool Special; A Different World; Beverly Hills 90210* [“The Gentle Art of Listening”]); that the victim was a victim rather than someone who brought it on herself (*ABC Afterschool Special; A Different World; Mr. Belvedere; Beverly Hills 90210; Felicity; Degrassi*); that victims often dealt with feelings of guilt and shame (*ABC Afterschool Special; Mr. Belvedere; Felicity; Degrassi*) and that reporting the rape to authorities was difficult but was part of what was necessary to overcome that guilt and shame (*ABC Afterschool Special; A Different World; Felicity; Degrassi*).

The serials incorporated the date rape into different kinds of story lines. In *Beverly Hills 90210*’s “The Gentle Art of Listening” (1990), main character Brenda is working at a rape crisis hotline when she takes a call from a cheerleader who is not sure whether what she has experienced with members of the football team is rape.

In the style of a detective genre, the dramatic tension centers on whether Brenda will figure out who the girl is in time to save her from being raped again. By contrast in *A Different World* (1989), the focus is on a young man, Dwayne, who discovers that his friend, Garth, has probably date raped women in the past, and is going on a date with Dwayne's female friend. After getting confirmation from an older man that rape is rape, Dwayne rescues his friend from Garth in the nick of time. In *Mr. Belvedere*, the young woman fights off the would-be rapist but is unwilling to tell her parents because they are so taken with his sports star status. In the *ABC Afterschool Special*, "Date Rape" (1988) the focus is on both victim and victimizer. The victim struggles to assert her innocence against fellow students who hold her responsible. The victimizer, for his part, finds his efforts to acknowledge that the sex was forcible blocked by his father, who protests that a rape conviction will ruin his future. In a two-part *Felicity* (1998) episode, the focus is again on victim and victimizer. The baby-faced rapist is portrayed sympathetically: he is initially respectful of the young woman he has begun seeing, he is fumbling in his advances to her, and though he is initially defensive, he later shows genuine remorse for what he has done. The victim, meanwhile, struggles both with her self-blame and with the realization that reporting the rape may not lead to the rapist's prosecution. In *Degrassi* (2003), the dramatic tension also centers on whether the victim will report the rape to authorities. As in *Felicity*, the victim musters the courage to stand up for herself by drawing on the help of other young women.

Each of these shows narrativized date rape in the sense that they worked the rape or attempted rape into familiar stories of mystery, rescue, and overcoming. Still, date rape was the focus of the show and it was approached from a distinctly social problems perspective. This was evident in the way the story was presented. *Degrassi* had a special introduction which alerted viewers to a Web site with discussion questions about date rape for parents and their children. *A Different World* provided a parental advisory for this "very special episode." The *Felicity* two-part episode was followed by a public service announcement and a rape hotline number. The social problems perspective was also evident in the way that characters were made to variously voice, question, and reject rape myths. That rape was a crime and that reporting it was important to the victim's recovery were views frequently articulated by characters in the story. They were also communicated by way of the involvement of police or school authorities. In a way that was quite different from later serials, authorities were part of the story: either the police arrived in time to prevent a rape (*Beverly Hills 90210* "The Gentle Art of Listening") or the story ended with the victim reporting the rape to school authorities or police (*Degrassi*) or the show followed the victim through the process of reporting the rape (*Felicity*). Reporting the rape was not represented as the sum total of a solution to the problem, as making right what had happened to the victim. To the contrary, characters in the *Afterschool Special*, *Felicity*, and *A Different World* refer to the difficulty of prosecuting date rape and the victim in the latter two shows decides to get psychological counseling. Still, rape and attempted rape were represented as assaults that should be prosecuted and punished.

Beginning in the late 1980s, then, it seems clear that antirape advocates succeeded in securing portrayals of date rape that were serious, sensitive, and feminist.

Writers embracing the second perspective we described earlier all argued that in the late 1980s, rape was used in prime-time television to tell stories that were not about rape: they were about good masculinity, about the importance of women's maternal role, or about the dangers of women's press for equality (Cuklanz 2000; Moorti 2002; Projansky 2001). Yet, as we have shown, television serials in this period made date rape the central theme of one or sometimes multiple episodes. Why, then, have previous analyses missed these portrayals? Probably for two reasons. One is that analysts have seen pressure to produce sensitive portrayals of rape as coming only from the feminist rape reform movement (Cuklanz 2000; Moorti 2002; Projansky 2001). However, as we noted, advocates working under the mantle of public health promoted a feminist antirape perspective in the 1980s, and they did so effectively. The other reason is that previous analysts, with the exception of Berridge (2011), have focused on adult-oriented shows rather than teen dramas. Yet the advocacy efforts we described were targeted to teens rather than adults. Berridge focuses on teen dramas but does not include *Felicity* or *Degrassi*, two serials within her time period that treated date rape in a feminist fashion.

In line with the first perspective, then, our analysis suggests that advocates may have a real impact on the depiction of social problems. But their impact may not endure. After the period we have described, date rapes and attempted date rapes continued to figure in teen dramas. However, they became not so much about date rape as about something else. There was little emphasis on the aftermath of the attempted rape for the victim. There was no attempt to understand the motives of the rapist. The rape or attempted rape went unprosecuted.

Episodes of *Beverly Hills 90210* that treated date rape after the first one occupy an interesting position between the first and second kinds of portrayals. This supports our argument that the evolution of social problems depictions takes place both across serials and within serials. In other words, once date rape had been done from a social problems perspective in a particular series, education yielded to entertainment. In *Beverly Hills 90210*, the episode "Halloween" (1991) combines a social problems approach, in which the protagonist has to be convinced that she was not responsible for being sexually assaulted, with a romance. In the episodes after that, a date rape serves to solidify or test the friendship circle: "Slumber Party" (1991), in which a protagonist's revelation that she was raped bonds her with her female friends; then two episodes about false accusations ("Take Back the Night" [1993] and "Love Hurts" [1995]; and then a three-episode sequence in 1998 in which one main character accuses the other of raping her, an accusation that divides the friends. Police are portrayed as ineffectual in prosecuting the crime, which is solved by a member of the friendship group.

### *Date Rape Is About the Character*

With the exception of the *Degrassi* episode in 2003, by the early 2000s date rape had been refigured into a plot device. It was always averted: a young woman was about to be raped and someone walked in just in time to save her. The focus of the story then usually became about the developing relationship between the rescuer

and the would-be victim, not about the victim's experience of the rape or efforts to bring the rapist to justice. For example, in *One Tree Hill* (2003), a young woman who has treated the show's male star badly in an earlier episode goes to a college party and is slipped a roofie by a young man she meets there. Her female friend walks in before she is raped, but the friend does not know how to handle her drug-induced stupor, and she calls the show's star to help. He confronts the would-be rapist to find out what the drug was, knocks him to the ground, and then tends gently to the drugged woman. In *Dead Like Me* (2003), a working-class man happens upon a beautiful co-ed in a dorm and rescues her from an attempted date rape. He falls for her in a doomed pursuit: he is a working-class drug dealer; she is a college student who reads sonnets. In *Party of Five* (1996), main character Bailey rescues his roommate from an attempted date rape, and then begins to fall in love with her.

Sometimes, the date rape served both to foster a relationship and to enlighten the young, often naive protagonist about the dangers of adult sexuality (Berridge 2011). For example, in *My So-Called Life* (1995), the teenage protagonist sneaks out with her sexually precocious friend, gets drunk, and sees her friend attacked and almost raped in the parking lot of a club. The episode makes her appreciate her straitlaced mother, from whom she has been estranged. In *Dawson's Creek* (2003), the teenage protagonist is drunk and cheerfully promiscuous until she is almost raped; then she reassures the friend she has disappointed that she will go to rehab.

In both kinds of story lines, the rape and its effects were treated only briefly. In the shows in the first category, the rape was the only story line in the show (*ABC Afterschool Special*, *A Different World*) or had one additional minor story line for comic relief (*Mr. Belvedere*, *Beverly Hills 90210* "The Gentle Art of Listening," *Degrassi*). By contrast, the rape story line was one of four story lines in the *Party of Five* episode, and one of three story lines in *Dawson's Creek*, *Dead Like Me*, and *One Tree Hill*. During this period, several of the serials that aired episodes with averted date rapes also aired episodes that were introduced as a "very special episode" and/or included a public service announcement about teenage homelessness (*My So-Called Life*), alcoholism (*Party of Five*), and teenage violence (*One Tree Hill*). However, the episodes in which an averted rape figured were not advertised as a "very special episode." This suggests that date rape had aged out of the category of social problem.

Police and other authorities were much less in evidence in these story lines, although not altogether absent. In *My So-Called Life*, they arrive on the scene of the attempted rape. In *One Tree Hill*, the friend of the victim decides not to call the police because her friend has been drinking and is underage. In *Dawson's Creek*, the would-be rapist is beaten but there is no evidence that police are called. In the *Beverly Hills 90210* episode "Halloween," the would-be rapist is beaten by the victim's friends. In these shows, rape has become something to be prevented and prosecuted more by one's friends than by police.

These story lines effectively made attempted rape into objectionable behavior rather than a crime. Attempted rape figured in the story line in a way that communicated something not about rape but about particular characters, usually the rescuer. For audiences, the message about date rape would not be: This is a crime that



should be prosecuted. Rather it might be: Danger lurks and if you can't learn to avoid rapists, then you should hope that you are rescued if you encounter one—and the rescue might be the beginning of a romance. As Berridge (2011) points out, either way, the message is that women fare best when protected by men.

### *Rape Is About an Amoral World*

We noted that in the last phase, the date rape story was made only one of several story lines in the episode rather than the only or main story line. After this point, story lines in teen dramas multiplied even further, with some story lines left hanging at the end of the show. The effect was to move further away from a feminist portrayal of date rape. A second trend had a similar effect. Themes of moral directionlessness and of actions without consequences became prominent. Rape became an indicator of contemporary moral irresoluteness.

We discuss the latter first. By the late 1990s, television creators were increasingly uncomfortable with the earnestness and didacticism of the “special episode” genre of teen dramas. Teen dramas now sometimes had a character ironically referring to Afterschool Specials, as for example when a character on *The O.C.* was reproached by a friend for getting stoned instead of going to his college interview and replied “We’re getting dangerously close to an Afterschool Special here” (Meltzer 2006). In addition, however, creators of a new breed of shows rejected the model altogether. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator Joss Whedon declared that there would never be a “very special” *Buffy* (Wilcox 1999:34). Teenage characters in the show dealt with adolescent social anxieties in the form of supernatural killers. Characters were ironic, worldly, and mature. This trend continued. Rob Thomas, who developed the “teen noir” genre in his series *Veronica Mars*, explained, “This idea that I was attracted to. . . was this vague notion about teenagers being desensitized and jaded and sexualized so much earlier than I feel like even my generation 15, 20 years before had been” (Havrilesky 2005b). Sexual maturity was combined with a knowing cynicism. Thomas had been a writer for *Dawson’s Creek*, and said that he had been frustrated by having to write admirable characters. “The element I find attractive about noir is the shades of grey in characters” (Hughes 2006:6).

In adult series like *The Sopranos* and *Deadwood* that were being aired in this period, the emphasis was on the pervasive immorality of the shows’ “heroes.” No one was a good guy. “What had interested me was the idea of order without law,” said *Deadwood’s* creator. “As you watch *Deadwood*, you find yourself believing in this moral relativism. You start to fear the hand of the law more than you fear the chaos of unchecked crime” (Havrilesky 2005a).

In teen-oriented shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Veronica Mars*, *Gossip Girl*, and *The O.C.*, soap opera elements were combined with jaded skepticism on the part of too-mature teenagers (and often childlike parents). As one commentator put it, “Instead of encountering brand-new situations with innocence and naivete, television teens make out with their teachers, swill vodka from flasks, and run to the corner store for ribbed condoms” (Havrilesky 2004). *Gossip Girl’s* creator said he hoped the show would be remembered for depicting an era when people “were ruled

by gossip and technology” (Bruce and Rose 2012). Criticism of the show’s immorality was turned into advertising: posters featured naked teenagers and headlines reading “Mind-Blowingly Inappropriate” and “Every Parent’s Nightmare”—quotes about the show from the Parents Television Council (Bruce and Rose 2012). Neptune, the setting for *Veronica Mars*, was, as one set of commentators put it, “lawless” (Burnett and Townsend 2011:99).

What stood behind this new fashion for anomie? Scholars have identified broader cultural trends: for example, 9/11 and an American response that shifted uncomfortably between justice and vengeance (Burnett and Townsend 2011); concerns about technology’s effects on young people (Bruce and Rose 2012); and the rise of entitled teenagers (Havrilesky 2004). What is important for our purposes is that these trends seem unconnected to pro- or antifeminist ideologies.

The two *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episodes treating date rape in 1997 and 2002 represented an early incarnation of the genre. In the first, the attempted rapist, Xander, is a good friend of Buffy’s. He and a group of bullying high school students have been demonically possessed by hyenas, and they rampage through school, attacking innocents and devouring the school’s principal. Xander’s attack on Buffy is portrayed as in line with the other depredations to which teenage packs are prone. Buffy fights Xander off and refers casually to the attempted rape as a “felony sexual assault,” but makes no move to report it. In the second date rape episode, Buffy is attacked by a vampire for whom she has ambivalent feelings. He mocks her beliefs about love as he tries to pin her down. She fights him off. Police are involved in the show for another crime, but no one makes any effort to involve the police for the attempted rape.

These features were reproduced in subsequent serials. Teenage rapists and would-be rapists appeared casually aggressive and remorseless (*The O.C.*, *Gossip Girl*, *Veronica Mars*). The rape or attempted rape is recognized as a crime by the victim but there is scant effort to prosecute the rape (*The O.C.*, *Gossip Girl*, *Veronica Mars*). Rather, the rape is interpreted by all involved as just one more consequence of an amoral teenage world. For example, the pilot episode of *Veronica Mars*, about a teenage detective, has Veronica’s voice-over asking, “You want to know how I lost my virginity? So do I.” Flashbacks show her being drugged at a party held by her former friends, who turned on her after she accused the scion of a local family of killing her best friend, and then waking up in bed with her underwear on the floor. She goes to the police chief but is accused by him of making up the charge to get back at the town’s elite. “But what does it matter?” she concludes. “I’m no longer that girl.” The date rape is thus used to show and account for Veronica’s jaded, knowing, and alienated character. As she puts it, “So this is how it is: the innocent suffer; the guilty go free; and truth and fiction are pretty much interchangeable” (quoted in Wilcox and Turnbull 2011:8). In *Gossip Girl*, the attempted rapes are by one of the central members of the affluent and jaded group of friends portrayed in the serial. No one talks about reporting either of the attempted rapes to the police, nor does anyone talk about ejecting the young man from the friendship circle.

The fact that the rape was passed over quickly is a second aspect of shows in the period, one that also contributed to a kind of normalizing of rape. Television

serial dramas before the 1980s typically had one main plot that was resolved by the end of the show, sometimes with a subsidiary comic plot (the “B” plot involving the same actors as the central “A” plot). In the late 1980s, however, dramatic plotlines began to proliferate. It was not only that serials became “multithreaded,” with as many as 10 plotlines per episode (Johnson 2005:72). They also became more complex, with crucial pieces of evidence withheld, developments presented out of temporal order, genres combined, and the line between fantasy and realism blurred. While authors have disagreed about the aesthetic value of these complex, multiplotted shows (Johnson [2005], for example, is unequivocally celebratory while Mittell [2006] worries that complexity sacrifices depth), they have not discussed the possible significance of this development for how particular social issues are portrayed. With respect to date rape, one effect may have been to make the rape less significant. Made into one among many plotlines, and often not the plotline that created suspense for the next episode, rape became even less “the” plot of the story.

All the shows in the third category had at least three simultaneous story lines. *Veronica Mars* consistently had four. In addition to the profusion of plotlines, pacing was faster and sequencing increasingly complex. Scenes were intercut so as to render chronology confusing. Attempted rapes were passed over so quickly that they seemed without consequence. For example, as the protagonist fights off her attempted rapist in *Gossip Girl*, the scene cuts back and forth to flashbacks of her earlier affair with her best friend’s boyfriend. After she gets away and when we next see her, she seems unaffected, planning a date with the young man she met as she fled. In Buffy’s first experience with date rape, scenes of her struggling to fight off her assailant are intercut with scenes of the other demonically possessed students devouring the principal. Then the episode cuts to an unscathed Buffy dragging her assailant, whom she has knocked out with a desk. In her second date rape experience, Buffy cries briefly after the vampire for whom she has feelings attacks her, but when we next see her she is calmly going over evidence she needs to pursue a monster, whom she fights in the next scene.

In multiplotted serials, plotlines that did not carry over into subsequent episodes seemed less important than ones that did. For example, in the episode in which Buffy is almost raped by the vampire, the episode ends with her being shot by another monster. That, not the attempted rape, is the cliffhanger. In the episode of *Veronica Mars* that we described at the beginning of this article, Veronica is asked by a former boyfriend to help exonerate him from an allegation of date rape at the college they are visiting. Veronica proves that he was not the one who raped the young woman, implicates instead a fraternity, reports that the fraternity where the rape took place has been banned from having parties, and ends the episode in a state of cautious détente with the ex-boyfriend. No one has been identified as the rapist, however, and there is no indication that an investigation is continuing. By contrast, three other story lines in the episode seem obviously continuing: Will Veronica’s classmate rekindle a romance with the young woman whose father has barred him from contacting her? What is in the briefcase that Veronica’s father has been asked to track down? Who wants the explosives that Veronica discovered? The effect, then, of the rape being unprosecuted but the story concluded—while

other story lines continue—is to make the rape seem simply a sign of a lawless world.<sup>5</sup>

Note that in the earlier period of shows, there were rapes that either went unprosecuted or were prosecuted but did not conclude with a conviction (*Felicity*, *Party of Five*). But this was the main story line. The failure to resolve the rape was the point of the story and thus could be expected to elicit indignation in the audience. By contrast, in these later stories, there seemed to be no role even imagined for the criminal justice system.

We argue that that absence was a function of two features of shows in this period. Thematically, the failure to prosecute rapes or attempted rapes was one indication, along with rampant drug use, flippantly cruel behavior, and casual sex, of the amorality of the teens' world. At the same time, the fact that the plotline in which rape figured was so quickly passed over in favor of other plotlines diminished the impact of the failure to prosecute the rape or attempted rape. To be sure, rapists were depicted as repugnant characters. But, as we suggested at the beginning of the article, when a social problem is used to signal a bad character or a bad world, it sends the message that the character should be avoided or the world criticized, not that the problem demands action.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Scholars have seen in television writers' dependence on formula an obstacle to the progressive portrayal of social problems. We have emphasized, by contrast, the obstacles created by writers' dependence on novelty. Writers are pressed not just to reproduce existing formulas, but to tweak them, adding a new twist or putting new characters in old roles. To be sure, they do so in ways that are often imitative of other shows; they do so in ways that avoid departing too much from the formula; and they do so in ways that are shaped by their own absorption of popular cultural myths and stereotypes. Still, that press to novelty, just as much as a reliance on formula, may reproduce deeper hegemonic understandings or even amplify them.

We have argued that the press to novelty resulted in three overlapping but distinct depictions of acquaintance rape on prime-time teen dramas between 1988 and 2008. In the first depiction, which featured in shows mainly in the 1990s, date rape was the focus of the episode. Sometimes in direct consultation with antirape advocates, television writers treated date rape seriously, sensitively, and at length. In the second depiction, which became prominent in the early 2000s, an attempted rape was a development in a story that was about something else: usually, a budding romance between characters. In the third depiction, which gained ground in the late 2000s, again, the attempted rape was a development in another story line. The rape

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the rape is taken up again, but not until the third season, when more rapes are committed at the college. Veronica discovers that the rapist is the college radio host; she is assaulted by him but is rescued by her former boyfriend. Interestingly, critics of the show argued that the third season reverted to conventional story lines (Wilcox and Turnbull 2011). Although the rape story line continued to emphasize the lawlessness of the characters' world, the fact that Veronica was rescued by her boyfriend makes the story line in some ways like those of the earlier period.

was more likely to be completed than in the second period, but unlike the first period, there was often no indication that the rapist would be prosecuted.

If the goal of antirape television advocates is to secure portrayals of acquaintance rape that are realistic and that encourage victims of rape to report their experience to authorities, it is hard to see the trajectory of fictionalized depictions of date rape over the 20-year period as ending on a high point. Certainly, for viewers in the 2000s, the early 1990s “special episodes” about date rape would seem heavily moralizing. Still, they did seek to portray date rape more realistically than dominant rape myths portrayed it and they did deal with the effects of the experience for the victim, conveying the sense both that reporting the rape would be difficult and that it was important. Date rape stories now do none of these things. Attempted date rapes serve to set scenes and shed light on characters in the story; they are not themselves the story. If these shows are communicating messages about how to respond to an attempted rape appropriately, the idea of reporting the attempted rape to authorities seems off the table entirely. There is no mention of that even as a possibility. There is no victim-blaming here, and the rape is represented as clearly unjust, but without any effort to prosecute it, the injustice of date rape is effectively normalized.

We have argued, however, that this development should not be attributed to a backlash phenomenon, or to what inevitably happens after the heyday of social problems’ discovery. Rather, we identified two trends in televisual narratives that were not obviously ideological but had the effect of making date rape into something wrong but routine. One was the proliferation of plotlines in serials, with some plotlines extended over multiple episodes. Insofar as the rape story was just one of those plotlines, its importance was diminished. Insofar as the rape story concluded by the end of the episode, it was cast as resolved—no matter what the outcome. The other trend was the emergence of a genre of drama in which the emphasis was on the moral anomie of the modern world. Date rapes, casual and unprosecuted, reflected that world. To treat the depictions of date rape we have described in terms of antifeminist or postfeminist ideological constructions of womanhood would miss these factors, which, arguably, were not about feminism at all.

We have limited our empirical investigation to the fictional television depiction of date rape. We suspect, however, that the processes we have described here operate in the televised depiction of other social problems. After a period in which the social problem is widely discovered, and in which television writers seek to portray the problem seriously and accurately (often in consultation with advocates on the issue), the problem is demoted to a narrative device. It is used to set the scene, reveal a character, or move the action forward. Its currency makes the show seem topical, but the show’s purpose is not to tackle the issue. If we are right, date rape will never again receive the serious treatment that it did in the 1980s and 1990s. It will be used to depict certain kinds of characters or to advance sequences of events. It will not be the focus of the show.

Of course, it is possible that date rape is a special case, or that different kinds of social problems have different televisual trajectories. One question is whether institutional problems are treated the same way as behavioral problems. In other words, do we see the same sequence with global warming and the world financial

crisis as with date rape, domestic violence, and teenage drinking? Because behavioral problems are often used to shed quick light on a character, perhaps institutional problems are more difficult to use that way, and are more likely to disappear altogether from dramatic television once the period of their discovery has ended. This was the trajectory of television's treatment of solar power: energetic efforts by a nonprofit organization to integrate positive references to solar energy into dramatic programming yielded a few successes during the 1980s energy crisis, but then failed, and the organization was forced to disband (Montgomery 1989).

We mentioned the fact that over the course of our 20-year period, the organization of the television industry changed dramatically, but we did not explore its implications for the coverage of date rape or of other social issues. This is an important omission. For example, we attributed the complete absence of the criminal justice system in later depictions of date rape to the rise of a genre in which date rape was used to signal the amorality of teens' world. But an alternative interpretation begins with the proliferation of channels and shows aimed at teens. Increasingly, teenagers in teen dramas were depicted as living in their own worlds, unconnected to authority figures save for parents who were portrayed as self-involved and childish (Feasey 2012). We have interpreted the latter as signaling a world without moral compass, but it would be worthwhile to probe the connections between changes in the organization of television and changes in its content (Bielby and Bielby 2003). Another way in which organizational changes may influence the depiction of social problems has to do with just whom advocates target. Describing their 1996 campaign to get television shows to promote inoculations, Glik et al. (1998) argue that they were successful in part because once one show adopted the theme, other shows became interested in it. In a 500-plus channel world, surely, advocates have more targets available. But on the other hand, that kind of imitative pressure might not work as effectively for advocates. This, again, demands more attention.

Dramatic television is only one among the many arenas in which social problems are treated. We have argued that television producers' drive to produce shows that are simultaneously novel and safe has been responsible for changing depictions of date rape but in an indirect way. For example, multiplotted story lines came to be seen as a sign of narrative sophistication, but they also had the effect of demoting date rapes to discrete events rather than a continuing saga. The rise of the teen noir genre had little to do with how writers and producers thought about rape, but writers used rape in this genre to communicate what an amoral world looked like. The challenge, then, in studying the treatment of social problems in other arenas is to identify both the pressures shaping production (whether of news, commentary, legislation, or policy) and to recognize that those pressures may influence how social problems are portrayed in ways that are unintended by producers.

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