

An Elite Squad?: Intimate Partner Violence Myths in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*

Kate Ahern

The Present Study

How do *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*'s characters represent Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) myths?

More specifically, how and how often are IPV myths suggested (supported) or opposed by characters.

The logo for the television series 'Law & Order: Special Victims Unit' is displayed on a black background. The words 'LAW &' are in a blue, serif font with a white outline and a blue glow. Below them, 'ORDER' is in a white, serif font with a red outline and a red glow. At the bottom, 'SPECIAL VICTIMS UNIT' is in a yellow, sans-serif font with a black outline and a yellow glow.

**LAW &
ORDER**
SPECIAL VICTIMS UNIT

Literature Review: The Main Points

- IPV will affect over 1/3 of women and 1/4 of men throughout their lifetime (Black, et al. 2011)
- IPV: “physical, sexual or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse” (CDC 2019).
 - Also stalking



- IPV myths function as a way to place blame on the victim and take blame off of the offender (Brinson 1992; Peters 2008)
- Peters' (2008) Domestic Violence Myth Acceptance Scale
 - Character Blame
 - Behavior Blame
 - Minimization
 - Exoneration
- Fictional media has been found to victim-blame, stereotype victims, and generally illustrate acceptance of rape and IPV myths (Brinson 1992; Britto et al. 2007; Rader and Rhineburger-Dunn 2010)

Why SVU?

- ❑ “An elite squad of detectives who investigate crimes of sexual assault, child abuse and domestic violence” (NBCUniversal 2019).
- ❑ “an incredibly progressive show, progressive idea, and really starting a conversation and taking sexual assault, domestic violence, and these issues that were traditionally under the carpet” as well as believing that the show “has really been a huge part of the cultural education of sexual violence” (Carucci 2018)

~Mariska Hargitay (Olivia Benson)

Methods

Sampling

- ❑ Read 457 episode plot descriptions (TVGuide & Hulu)
 - ❑ Key words “battered”, “abused” & IPV accused or mentioned
- ❑ 20 episodes for first viewing
- ❑ 10 episodes final sample
 - ❑ 1.13, 2.7, 6.23, 8.11, 10.8, 12.11, 14.15, 14.16, 16.8, 20.15
- ❑ Second viewing

Coding

- ❑ Character dialogue coded as a ‘representation’ of a myth
- ❑ Categorized: character blame, behavior blame, minimization, exoneration (Peters 2008)
- ❑ Suggested or opposed? (Brinson 1992)
- ❑ Who and character type



Results: IPV in *Law* & *Order: SVU*

- ❑ 10/457 episodes
 - ❑ Misrepresentation of IPV presence in society
- ❑ Throughout the entire sample
 - ❑ 56 suggestions
 - ❑ 19 oppositions



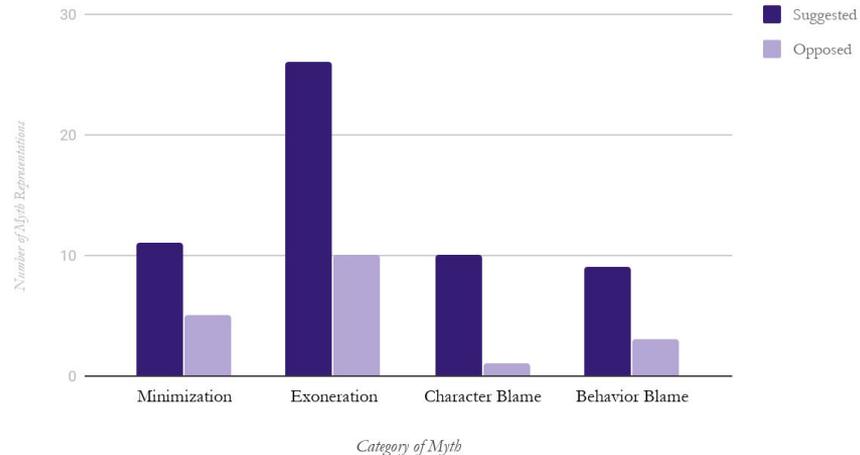
(Season 1)



(Season 20)

Results: IPV Myth Categories

Myth Representations by Category



- How often each myth category (Peters 2008) was represented overall:
 - Exoneration most suggested of all 4
 - More comfortable taking blame from offender compared to victim blaming
 - Behavior Blame least suggested of all 4
 - The idea that a victim can easily leave may be slowly phasing out
 - Concrete reasons why she cannot

Results: Minimization

- ❑ Diminishing the seriousness or pervasiveness of IPV (Peters 2008).
 - ❑ 'Minimizing' types of IPV
- ❑ Suggestion in *L&O: SVU*
 - ❑ "This is a case of a misunderstanding between two passionate people. This is a private matter" (16.8)
 - ❑ "Tommy hurt Annabeth's feelings" (20.14)
- ❑ Opposition
 - ❑ "Abuse doesn't have to be physical to cause damage" (8.11)



(20.14)

Results: Exoneration

- ❑ Making excuses for the offender's behavior in order to take blame away from him (Peters 2008)
 - ❑ Not necessarily blaming victim in return
- ❑ Suggestion in *L&O:SVU*
 - ❑ "They both grew up in homes where disputes got physical" (16.8)
 - ❑ "He didn't mean to hurt me. He just lost his temper" (14.16)
- ❑ Opposition
 - ❑ "[hating his job] doesn't give him the right to beat you" (12.11)



(14.16)

Results: Character Blame

- ❑ Referencing the idea that the victim, most often a woman, wants to be abused (Peters 2008)
 - ❑ Consciously or unconsciously
- ❑ Suggestion in *L&O:SVU*
 - ❑ “She had to be a martyr. I mean, I don’t think she’d know what to do with herself if she wasn’t suffering or cowering to him” (20.14)
- ❑ Opposition
 - ❑ In response to the above:
 - ❑ “Yes, because he made her like that” (20.14)



(20.14)

Behavior Blame

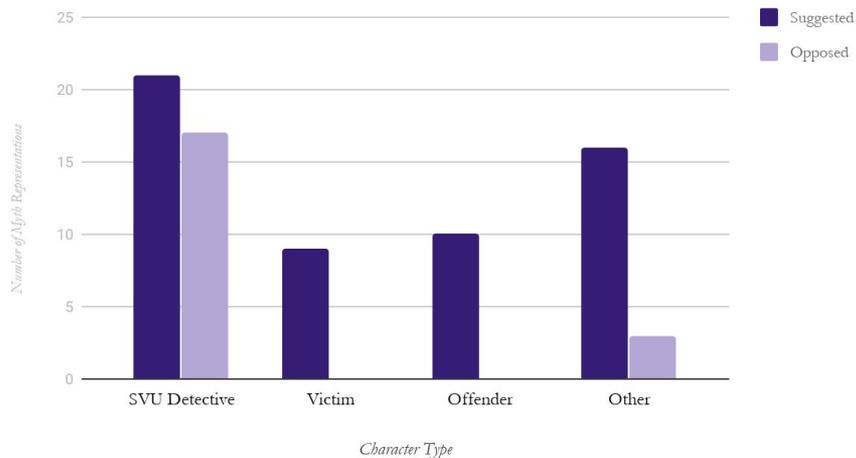
- ❑ Referencing the idea that the victim is choosing to stay in the relationship, so it is the victim's fault that the abuse is happening (Peters 2008)
 - ❑ That the victim could leave, but chooses to stay
- ❑ Suggestion in *L&O:SVU*
 - ❑ "Why didn't you leave?" (10.8)
- ❑ Opposition
 - ❑ "[the victim] was powerless to leave her husband" (20.14)



(10.8)

Myth Representations by Character Type

Myths Representations by Character Type



- Offenders
- Victims
- Others
 - Attornies, witnesses, supporting characters
 - The “everyday” person
- SVU Detectives: 21:17
 - The most screen time
 - Vast majority of opposition
 - But...
 - Over $\frac{1}{3}$ of overall suggestion of myths
 - Benson: 1:11



Conclusion

- ❑ Despite believing itself to be an advocate for victims, *SVU* suggests IPV myths more than it opposes them
- ❑ Witnessing myths in television can have real-life consequences (Kahlor and Eastin 2011; Parrott and Parrott 2015; Yamawaki et al. 2012).
- ❑ Olivia Benson is the main hero of the show
 - ❑ Could leave a positive impact on viewers
 - ❑ But...
 - ❑ The overall illustration of many IPV myth suggestions can have a negative impact
 - ❑ Especially when suggested by *SVU*



Conclusion

Limitations & Future Research

- ❑ Sole coder for content analysis
- ❑ Sampling technique could have missed episodes
- ❑ Future research:
 - ❑ Multi-coders
 - ❑ Look beyond IPV
 - ❑ More stories about sexual assault
 - ❑ Compare



20 YEARS STRONG

LAW & ORDER
SPECIAL VICTIMS UNIT

THURSDAYS  NBC

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