

An Intersectional Analysis of Racialized and Gendered Media Portrayals of Criminality

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Central Question

News media is able to convey a huge number of both explicit and subliminal messages to large audiences, giving it the power to influence patterns of thought and promote certain behaviors. Because representations of people of color within the news media are so often accompanied by discriminatory rhetoric and racial biases, the news also becomes an agent in the creation and reinforcement of systems of racial oppression. For example, news reporting on crime and criminality contains patterns of language and images that help to project the association between blackness and criminality. This constant media narrative only exacerbates existing racist stereotypes and strengthens systems of societal categorization by forcing groups of people into homogeneous boxes that disregard the vast amount of heterogeneity among people who are often categorized together. My research focuses specifically on representations of women of color within popular media representations of criminality. Past research on crime reporting has consistently failed to provide an adequate foundation as to how non-white women are portrayed within news reporting on crime and how this differs from representations of white women within the same context: what language is used, what images are shown, how much air time is dedicated to each news story? Overall, what explicit and subliminal messages are being conveyed about black women and criminality as opposed to white women?

Women and Criminal Justice: why are we so fascinated with violence?

In order to pinpoint the unique intersection between race, femininity, criminality, and media representations, I decided to specifically examine reports of violent crimes such as homicide, because these fall so far outside of accepted norms of behavior, especially for women. Our society is interestingly intrigued by the idea of female criminality. This fascination and sometimes even fetishization of female crime stems from the fact that it breaks within the standards of normative societal expectations. There are countless dramatizations of female delinquency within widely-consumed entertainment and documentary sources, from television series such as *Orange is the New Black* and *Killing Eve* to YouTube channels such as *Female Killers* and *True Crime Daily*. The traditional construct of criminality does not match with the traditional construct of femininity; however, the construct of femininity also differs depending on other social identities such as race. Because violent crimes are so rarely committed by female perpetrators, when one does occur, it generates particular attention, with the subsequent media representation diverging as consistent with existing power structures. Using MAXQDA analysis software, I am in the process of analyzing video footage from 30 different sources that portray the stories of white women and women of color who have been accused of committing violent crimes, in order to identify racialized and gendered patterns within reporting.

Why do stories matter?

Acts of violence such as murder or homicide are things so far outside of established societal rules that we cannot actually initially comprehend them. Therefore, while attempting to bring the terrible event back into our accepted field of understanding, we inevitably filter it through existing social lenses that create the framework for our collective worldview. In this way, racial and gender bias is inserted into every single case and greatly affects the way it is perceived and conveyed, meaning that women of color are disproportionately affected. The media is an institution that especially showcases this social phenomenon. Is it a “sad” story of a victimized woman driven to do a horrible thing by some outside influence? Or is it a “bad” woman who is inherently ruthless, inhuman, and therefore un-feminine? The way that the story is relayed within the media helps to define the overall narrative of the case, which has an enormous effect on the outcome.

Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The Story of Cyntoia Brown



On August 7, 2019, Cyntoia Brown was released early from a Tennessee prison after being granted clemency by the governor. Brown, now 31, was sentenced originally sentenced to 51 years in prison for killing a man who paid her for sex at age 16. During her initial trial, she was not provided with the protections and support necessary for victim of child sex-trafficking, and her story was represented as one of a disturbed and dangerous person. However, throughout the past decade, her story began to spread and change into one of a survivor of abuse. This is a prime example of how a changing story means changing results: her initial story landed her in prison for her life, while her new story granted her clemency. She is now a free woman, a college graduate, and an advocate for childhood victims of sexual abuse and trafficking. Cyntoia Brown’s story inspired this research because it highlights the concrete consequences of disparities in representation and demonstrates one woman’s strength and courage that changed her story.

