Article

Beyond Black and White: An Analysis of Newspaper Representations of Alleged Criminal Offenders Based on Race and Ethnicity

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Abstract

Media has a substantial role in providing knowledge about crime to the public; however, many representations of crime and criminality perpetuate damaging racial stereotypes. The purpose of this study is to identify how minorities are portrayed in print media as compared to their White counterparts. The study includes an ethnographic content analysis of newspaper crime stories and accompanying images from widely circulated newspapers published between August 1, 2014, and October 31, 2014. Findings reveal minorities are not only overrepresented in crime story images, but closer examination uncovers nuanced differences in the type and quality of pictures by race and ethnicity.

In March 2015, two separate but similar stories were written in a local Iowa newspaper highlighting crimes that had taken place in the community (Herminston, 2015a, 2015b). The culprits in both events were groups of three men arrested for local burglaries. The only difference between the suspects was their race and the way they were pictorially represented in the newspaper. The group of White male suspects were featured with professional yearbook photos, whereas the minority alleged burglars had

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their mugshots displayed across the page. This differential treatment led some to question the motivation and actions of news media when selecting pictorial representations accompanying crime stories (Siede, 2015).

Although minorities are overrepresented in arrest records compared to the proportion of the population, most people arrested are White (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2014). Accordingly, it would be expected that there would be more media coverage of White alleged offenders. A substantial body of work reveals that media representations of ethnic minority groups are more favorable than the past (Tukachinski, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015); however, certain minority groups continue to be either grossly overrepresented or depicted unsympathetically in stories about criminal activities (St. John & Heald-Moore, 1996; Tukachinski et al., 2015). Viewing these inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals may impact audience members' perceptions of minorities (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000) as there is a connection between media coverage and its influence on racial/ethnic and crime-related judgments and beliefs (Castaneda, Fuentes-Bautista, & Baruch, 2015; Henry & Tator, 2005). The quality and type of pictorial representations of alleged offenders in crime stories may sway viewers' opinions regarding these illicit activities. As a result, the purpose of this study is to identify how racial and ethnic minorities are portrayed in crime stories compared to their White counterparts by completing a systematic exploration of pictorial representations in print media. This study has implications for research on racial and ethnic stereotypes, potential juror perceptions of alleged offenders, and print media.

Literature Review

Crime in the News

Although America is transitioning to a digital world where having the latest technology is a sign of affluence and sophistication, receiving local and world news from a newspaper is still a common practice. Crime stories are an intrinsic component of modern media, accounting for up to 50% of news coverage (Chermak, 1995; Surette, 1992; Tukachinski, 2015). Much of what society knows about crime comes directly from the media (Pickett, Mancini, Mears, & Gertz, 2015; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007), and reporters craft stories in a manner to sway public opinion (Chermak, 1994; Surette, 1992), potentially creating an unbalanced understanding of crime.

Because citizens often lack any direct experience with the criminal justice system, they rely on the mass media as a primary source of information about crime and its control (Callanan, 2012; Hough & Roberts, 2005; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011). Crime is overrepresented in the news (Chermak & Chapman, 2007), and newsworthy stories tend to be violent and sensationalized (Cherbonneau & Copes, 2003), playing on the fears of media consumers and distorting their perceptions of crime and criminality (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). Crime stories selected for publication may also provide support for stereotypical images of innocence and guilt regarding minorities (Halloran, 1978; Tukachinski, 2015) and may guide viewers' perceptions on a person's culpability in criminal situations, which may vary by race. Because

media agencies play an active role in constructing social phenomena in situations where there are few other information sources (Gunter, 1987; Surette, 2007), potentially reinforcing damaging stereotypes, it is vital that these representations are accurate and unbiased.

Media Representations of Crime and Race

Scholars suggest that the media's biased coverage of crime is a key factor perpetuating inaccurate stereotypes about victims and offenders (Pickett & Chiricos, 2012; Welch, 2007), with considerable differences between the reality of crime and justice and media depictions. Crime media coverage disproportionately reports on African American males as perpetrators in violent crime stories (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Pickett, Chiricos, Golden, & Gertz, 2012) and White offenders and non-White victims are underrepresented (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Dorfman & Schiralsi, 2001). These disproportionate crime reports may impact the public's perception of the crime problem.

Publishers spend substantial amounts of money to provide eye-catching visuals to capture readers' attention; so powerful are these visual images that readers will opt for the pictorial first and written word second, which may impact their perceptions of alleged offenders (Enteman, 2011; Woodward, 1989) and result in increased negative racial and ethnic stereotypes (Dixon, 2007). Oliver and Fonash (2002), for example, found that White media consumers were more likely to incorrectly identify the race of suspects when presented with newspaper accounts of different types of crime: African Americans were more often misidentified in violent crime stories, whereas White suspects were more often wrongly chosen in nonviolent crime articles. This misidentification has resonating consequences, including incorrect attributions of blame and over exaggerated beliefs about criminality to the detriment of persons within that group (Allport, 1954). Furthermore, research on media and judge and jury decision-making indicates Whites are more likely to view an African American (as opposed to White) defendant as guilty and more prone to misidentify or falsely acknowledge having seen an African American suspect even when none are depicted (Dixon, 2007, 2008; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000), all of which may be compounded by media images of alleged offenders. This process is especially problematic when considering that minorities continue to be underrepresented on juries (Gau, 2016).

Current Events: Visual Depictions of Offenders in the News

As mentioned in the introduction, two different news stories regarding two groups accused of committing the same offense ran in *The Gazette* and sparked outrage as the accompanying photos were of a different quality, with the minority alleged offenders appearing in their mugshots and the White alleged burglars in their yearbook photos (Herminston, 2015a, 2015b; Siede, 2015). *The Gazette* editors claimed that the police department that arrested the White men required a formal request to acquire the mugshots while the department that arrested the African American men had these photos

readily available (Ferguson, 2015). It was, however, at the newspaper's discretion to publish the stories without both sets of mugshots, even though this decision appeared to show favor to the White individuals. Because pictorials are the "dominant and defining" (Woodward, 1989, p. 101) element of the story and visual information is recognized and remembered for longer durations than verbal information alone (Mayer, 1989; McDaniel & Pressley, 1989), the selection of pictures in print media is especially salient.

The impact of media messages is far-reaching and may have unintended consequences (Heath & Gilbert, 1996; Heath & Petraitis, 1987). For example, journalists have the ability to present alleged suspects in a manner that conveys their presumed guilt or innocence. By displaying a person via a mugshot, the media is applying the label of "criminal" to the alleged offender, whether or not the accused is in fact guilty. This label can have detrimental consequences for the accused and for those viewing the picture and reading the story.

The questions explored in this project are as follows: What pictorial representations are being utilized in crime newspaper stories? How do these photos vary by race and ethnicity? As such, the purpose of the current study is to identify how minorities are portrayed in print media as compared to their White counterparts. Newspaper companies displaying stereotypical and damaging images of racial and ethnic minorities may detrimentally impact the public's perceptions of their guilt and innocence, the culpability of those in their social networks, and reinforce negative stereotypes.

Methods

For this research project, the first author conducted an ethnographic content analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest products of social interaction can be studied by looking at one feature in the context of what is understood about other features, which allows for constant comparison. Ethnographic content analyses are focused on documenting and understanding the communication of meaning, including finding, recording, and counting the number of times each categorical unit is mentioned or shown in a document (Altheide, 1987). Data are often coded conceptually so that one item may be relevant for several purposes (Altheide, 1987), which allows it to provide great descriptive information. Thus, ethnographic content analysis is embedded in "constant discovery" and "constant comparison" of relevant situations, settings, images, meanings, and nuances (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Collection

To assess the pictorial representations of alleged offenders, the following five newspapers, which are the most commonly cited daily papers (Audit Bureau Circulation, 2007), were explored: *USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Crime stories, which were defined as newspaper stories focused on a recent criminal event or development (i.e., arrests, charges,

or convictions), were selected for further analysis.[1] A text analysis was conducted on each story ($n = 292$) to explore whether racialized text was used in the reporter's writing and crime articles that included an accompanying photo were retained for a detailed visual analysis ($n = 112$). These stories were located in newspapers published between August 1, 2014, and October 31, 2014, a time of increased media attention surrounding the officer-involved shooting of Michael Brown, an African American youth, in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014 and other similar news events. Incorporating this helps provide an assessment of the potential impact of these events on newspaper pictorial representations of crime. Microfilm from the newspapers were obtained and analyzed. Due to the national circulation of the newspapers, story overlap occurred and any repeated stories were omitted.

Data Analysis and Validity Strategies

The text of each article ($n = 292$) was analyzed to explore whether race was mentioned as a factor related to an element of the crime (e.g., victim or offender). Of this sample, 112 were retained for visual analysis because the article had an accompanying photo. Using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), an inductive analysis of the crime story photographs and news story text commenced, examining both the manifest (e.g., race, clothing, and arrest details) and the latent content. The manifest coding was documented in an Excel file (e.g., suspect's gender, race, age, whether the suspect was arrested, charged, or convicted, a section outlining the photo type [e.g., mugshot], the clothing worn in the photo, and the date if available). In some instances, the race of the subject was clear; however, through use of a microfilm reader, grainy images and photographic negatives produced low-quality pictorials, making it difficult to decipher at times. As indicated by Welch, Price, and Yankey (2004), the media has ways of conveying the race of suspects by means of photographs, placing the onus on the public to understand the racial configuration of the suspect. To amend this, the authors relied on the darkness or lightness of the print and facial features of the individual being photographed. There were four cases in which the race of the pictured individual was difficult to decipher. When this occurred, an online search of the person's name was conducted to verify their race. If the gender of the suspect was not clearly indicated, this was coded as "not stated."

Detailed memos of the latent data analysis project were also maintained, describing the contextual nuances in the photos and texts. Constant comparison, an analytic process whereby data units are compared to each other to raise questions and discover assorted points of the data, occurred during the data immersion process, leading to the emergence of discrete patterns and themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rodwell, 1998). During this interactive process, special care was taken to interpret the meaning within the context from which the crime story pictorial was consumed: a public, daily periodical, which impacts the meaning conveyed to readers. Collaborative data conferences were also conducted by the authors regarding the coding of the specific crime story pictures and text.

Results

Two main themes emerged from the visual analysis: (1) suspect photos and (2) non-suspect photos. Within the suspect photo theme, there were two subthemes. First, there are *suspect mugshot photos*, which refer to judicial photographs that are taken upon arrest of a criminal suspect. Second, there are *non-mugshot suspect photos*, which are other pictures of the alleged offenders and include photos of suspects in and out of court. For the second theme, *non-suspect photos*, there are pictures of other people who may be related to the crime in some way other than being the alleged offender (e.g., victim, suspect's family members). The findings related to these themes and subthemes are detailed below.

Suspect Photo Analysis

Suspect mugshot analysis. Of the mugshots available ($n = 32$), White mugshots comprised 48% of the data ($n = 15$) and non-White mugshots comprised 52% ($n = 17$), with 23% African American ($n = 8$), 16% Hispanic or Latino ($n = 5$), 10% Middle Eastern ($n = 3$), and 3% categorized as "Unknown" ($n = 1$) due to an unclear photo. When referencing the UCR data for the year 2014 when the newspaper analyses were conducted, Whites accounted for 72.6% of total arrests, while non-Whites comprised 27.4% (FBI, 2014), revealing that our sample had a significantly higher proportion of non-White mugshots compared with the number of arrests that year. Male mugshots comprised 84.4% ($n = 27$) while women comprised 15.6% of the sample ($n = 5$). In many of these photos, the suspect appears expressionless in their mugshot photo (i.e., the suspect is not displaying any emotion and is staring into the camera; $n = 17$). A total of eight mugshots were shown with a menacing or angry expression in the mugshot; however, seven of these mugshots came from non-White individuals, whereas only one was of a White male. Facial expression assessments were made by looking at eyebrow and jawline positioning of the individuals pictured with a mugshot (Figure 1). Finally, one White man appeared disheveled in his mugshot (e.g., his head and facial hair appeared unkempt and dirty, eyes were open very wide, and his gaze was averted from the camera). The analysis of these photos was generally limited to facial appearance due to the zoomed in nature of the picture. In one article, Rick Perry, a politician, was even shown smiling in his mugshot, and the related text mentioned that he said he was going out for ice cream afterward. Had Perry been any other race but White, this behavior would likely not be considered appropriate or even mentioned in the article.

Non-mugshot suspect photo analysis. There were 52 non-mugshot suspect photos with a small number containing more than 1 suspect. In looking at the racial distributions of these photos, most of the individuals shown in these non-mugshot suspect photos were White ($n = 32$), with the remaining identified as African Americans ($n = 14$) or Hispanics or Latinos, Middle Easterners or those classified as "Unknown" ($n = 12$). Males were featured in 94% of the photos ($n = 49$), while women were pictured in
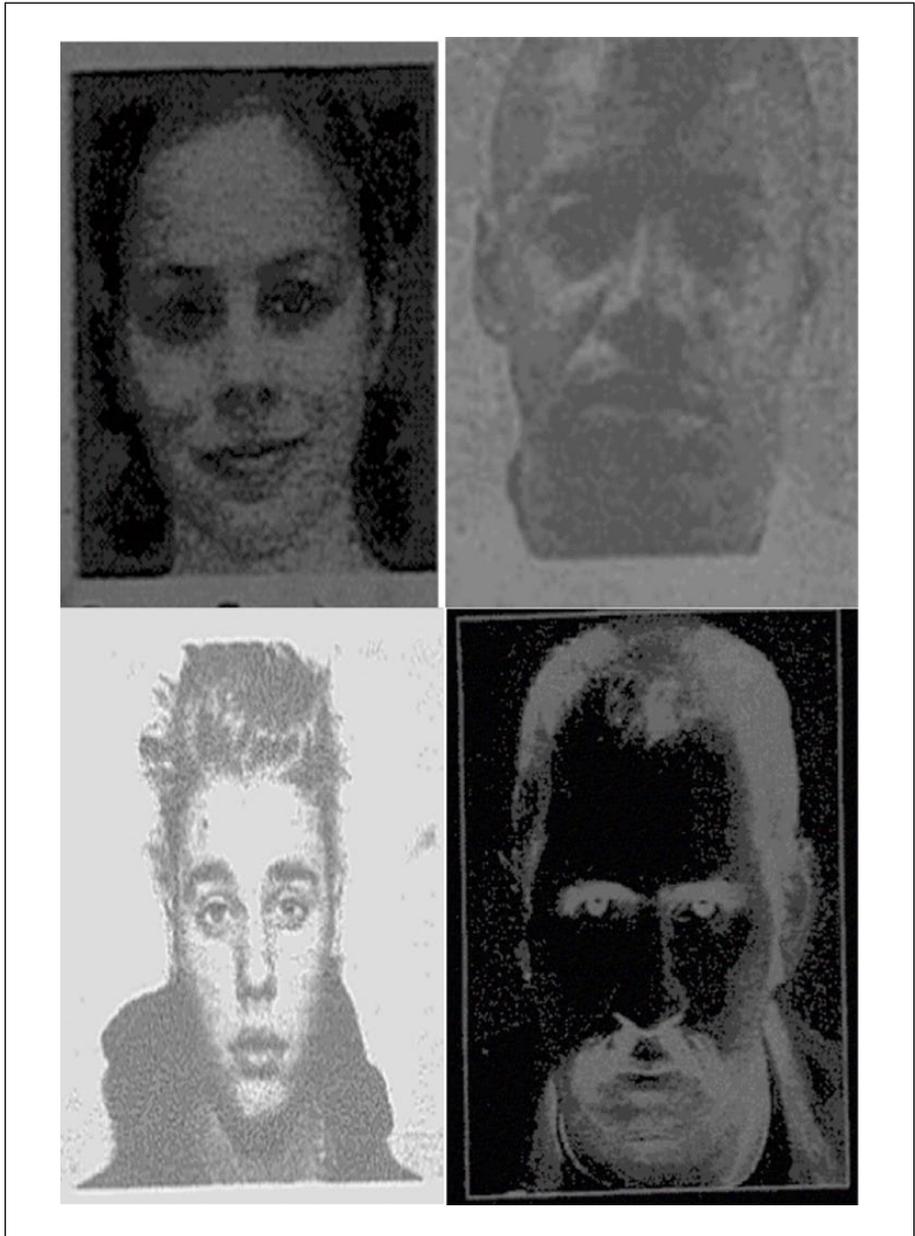
Figure 1. Example of smiling, expressionless, and menacing facial expressions in mugshot photo.
Note. Top left suspect is smiling. Top right and bottom left suspects are expressionless. Bottom right suspect has menacing expression.

17% of the photos (*n* = 9). Of these, 40 photos showed suspects not looking at the camera, including those taken from a side angle, providing a profile of the alleged offender's face and body.

There were many different depictions of individuals of different races and ethnicities, mostly men, shown in these side-angle photos. Some men were wearing business attire (*n* = 21), while others were in prison jumpsuits (*n* = 5). Most of the individuals shown in these non-mugshot suspect photos were White (*n* = 32), with the remaining identified as African Americans (*n* = 14) or Hispanics or Latinos, Middle Easterners or those classified as "Unknown" (*n* = 12). There were four White individuals and one non-White individual shown wearing a prison jumpsuit and only one of the five women was shown wearing a prison jumpsuit; the others were wearing business attire.

As an example in terms of how individuals were portrayed in these images, a 27-year-old African American man found guilty of second-degree murder was pictured with a do-rag on his head and visible cornrows. He was photographed in a repentant position with his head bent as the judge is speaking to him in court. Selected images such as these have been found to convey a criminogenic image of an African American man that allows others to assume he is a "gang member" (Muniz, 2014). In comparison, a vast majority of White men appeared to be well dressed in photos showing them in court. Only one photo displayed a White man in court who was not wearing a suit and tie; however, he was still wearing a collared shirt. Many of these photos show the accused looking away from the camera, even when it is pointed right in front of them. This almost gives the impression that the accused is avoiding "eye-contact" with the camera, potentially communicating decreased accountability for the crime. Both Middle Eastern men pictured had a beard; this is significant due to the prejudices associated with beards, as they can be seen as a threat to Western culture after the events of September 11, 2001 (Razack, 2005).

In addition, there were seven photos of athletes: one White female soccer player, one Hispanic baseball player, and three African American football players wearing their uniforms. It is possible that these photos are taken from a football game as the individuals had visible sweat and, gauging from their facial expressions, were very tired. For two of the football players who had been arrested, one for abuse and the other for theft, the articles simultaneously mentioned the men's recent athletic highlights along with their criminal activity. Furthermore, professional sports alone generate a lot of media attention, and coupling these stories with the criminal conduct of athletes is of "intense interest to the public" (Kim & Parlow, 2009, p. 593).

Non-Suspect Photo Analysis

Other person photo analysis. There were 19 non-suspect person photos. There were more photos of White individuals (*n* = 11) compared to African Americans (*n* = 4), and the remaining photos were of Hispanics or Latinos, Middle Easterners and those classified as "Unknown" (*n* = 4). These photos depict individuals who are not directly associated with the featured crime and include police officers, protestors, family members, and victims. For example, there were four photos of police officers

accompanying the crime story. These photos depicted surveillance or protection, as they were most often seen with large guns, on top of buildings, or inspecting police vehicles. For example, there was a photo of officers standing guard atop the White House after a mentally impaired man attempted to break in. There was also one instance that officers were shown at a press conference and standing at a podium speaking to the audience. While these photos depicted the officers in their usual law enforcement roles, there were additional photos that may cause one to question the safety precautions taken to promote and ensure social order in the community.

Other photos depicted police within closer range to the general public, typically with officers attempting to maintain order in situations where individuals were protesting different social issues. This was more common toward the beginning of the sampling frame in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death when many stories focused on people's outrage. The photos depicted mostly non-White individuals holding signs and seemingly yelling with their mouths open and fists raised (Figure 2), with other photos of the prayer vigils held after the shooting.
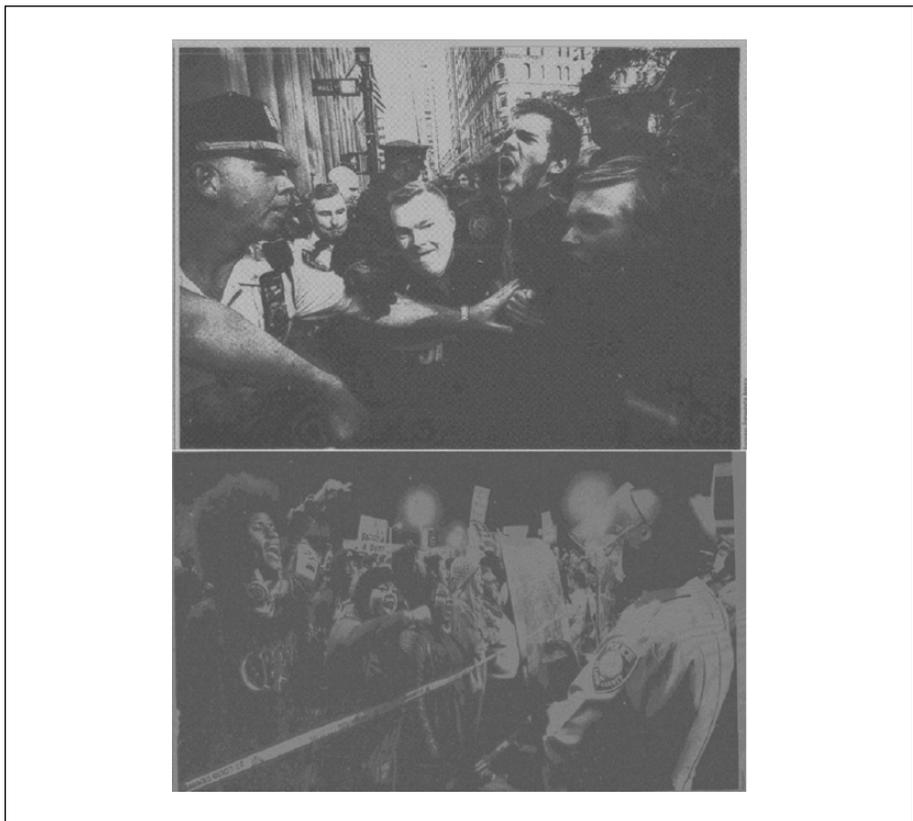
Figure 2. Examples of White and minority individuals rioting.

Conversely, there was also one photo of a large group of White individuals protesting climate change in the Financial District in New York. The individuals in this photo appeared very aggressive, physically pushing against one another and shouting in a police officer's face. Despite the presence of many protestors, the officer was not wearing any protective gear and did not appear to be using any weapons to hold the protestors at bay. As such, although the White protestors appeared to be much more aggressive than the African Americans, the officer resisting the White individuals seemed far less concerned with his safety (see Figure 2).

There were three non-suspect photos of the perpetrator's family in the sample. These individuals were often shown "in action," leaving court ($n = 2$) in which the perpetrator was likely on trial or being sentenced or at a press conference speaking from a podium to a group of people ($n = 1$). There seemed to be a message communicating that these families were victims of the repercussions of the perpetrator's actions, because their lives were being negatively affected by the perpetrator's actions and choices. As such, these family members may also be stigmatized by the public due to their associations with the alleged offenders.

Finally, there were victim photos: two featuring White women, one photo of a non-White woman, and two photos of non-White males. All of these photos, which were individual headshots of the victims, were accompanied by another photo in the article. For instance, there was a crime story about a husband and his wife murdering his ex-wife. In the story, there was a photo of the deceased victim, who was shown smiling, and also a picture of the gun used to kill her. In all of the photos showing the deceased victim, the individual was smiling, which further conveys the tragedy of the situation, especially for the one featuring a child victim.

Text Analysis

Regarding messages about race and ethnicity, there were three articles that made explicit reference that the suspects and victims were of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. For example, one article covered a story where a woman crashed her car into a parked vehicle and when she went to a nearby home looking for help, the male resident shot her, claiming self-defense. The article stated, "The case had raised questions nationwide about whether race played a role. Mr. Wafer (suspect) is White and Ms. McBride (victim) was African American" (Dolan, 2014). As such, the author implied that perhaps racism or a presumption of criminality based on inaccurate racial stereotypes may have been related to the death of the victim. In another article, a South Carolina trooper shot and wounded an unarmed driver who was reaching into his car for his license and registration as the officer had requested; the difference in race between the shooter and victim was also highlighted (Zucchino, 2014).

Discussion

Several studies have examined how media messages and depictions exacerbate and perpetuate racial stereotypes (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Dowler, 2004; Holt, 2013; Sadler,

Correll, Park, & Judd, 2012) and their consequences for non-Whites (Abraham & Appiah, 2006). The present study extends this body of literature by exploring how racial and ethnic minorities are being portrayed in print media photographs as compared to their White counterparts. This study is an important contribution in the literature, due to the dearth of research on pictorial representations of crime in general and the public interest in these discrepancies (Siede, 2015). A total of 112 photos accompanying crime newspaper stories were analyzed for this project. Although there are more Whites arrested for criminal offenses (FBI, 2014), consistent with previous research (Entman, 1992), there were more non-White than White individuals displayed in photos accompanying crime stories. Furthermore, and perhaps more damaging, our qualitative analysis of the photos revealed that minority individuals were shown with more mugshot photos than White individuals were. These negative images may be especially harmful to minority alleged offenders as it may have a detrimental impact on the court of public opinion and the criminal justice process.

Our analysis of the photographs accompanying newspaper crime stories revealed nuanced differences in the types and qualities of pictures by race and ethnicity. Because non-Whites are the minority group in power relations (Duster, 1970), it is possible that non-Whites portrayed in mugshots have more difficulty deflecting a criminal stereotype being applied to their identity (Schur, 1971), especially since they are more likely to be characterized as criminal (Oliver, 2003; Sadler et al., 2012). As such, this deviant identity and stigma allows for the continued perpetuation of criminal stereotypes. Media under- or misrepresentation continues despite policy directives aimed to promote more accurate portrayals of minorities in their stories (Yu, 2017). Our findings contribute to this body of literature by providing tangible evidence that this has continued to occur. This research may also have implications for the media consumers: failing to question the media's motivations for publishing damaging and stereotypical photos of minority alleged offenders may negatively impact their views on crime and justice in society. Therefore, readers are encouraged to be critical consumers of these materials. Future research should explore how much readers rely on the accuracy of newspaper accounts of criminal events and how this impacts their viewpoints on crime and race-related issues.

Much like priming theory, simply reading a crime story can illicit an image of the perpetrator, who is more often thought of to be a non-White individual (Johnson, Adams, Hall, & Ashburn, 1997). Our findings support this notion as more minority individuals are being shown as the perpetrator of a crime, perhaps causing readers to conclude they should be labeled as such, especially when pictured in photos with menacing expressions or accompanied by text that refers to them as inhuman creatures (e.g., African American men being referred to as "demons"; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2005). These results may also contribute to the current political and social climate as we have been bombarded with stories of officer-related crime involving minority individuals, consequently creating a divide and mutual mistrust between citizens and police officers. These discrimination experiences impact the accused and those within their social network as they may experience negative effects associated with these pictorials (Goffman, 1963; Winnick & Bodkin, 2009). Moreover, the negative media

representation may have broader implications when considering juror perceptions and in the related importance of fairness in perceptions by jurors in the courts (Hagan & Albonetti, 1982; Myers, 1996).

In considering the possible effects of this, none are positive or constructive. Consistent with previous research on crime television reports (Dowler, 2004), the majority of those who had menacing expressions in their mugshots were non-White, which could influence viewers' judgments about these alleged offenders. These menacing expressions could be tied with guilt of the suspect shown in the photo and convey anger. Although our research did not include viewer's perceptions of the crime story photos, our results align with previous literature in noting that the media plays a major part in casting individuals as suspects or perpetrators in a crime story, which research has consistently shown is damaging to the alleged offender (Goffman, 1963; Winnick & Bodkin, 2009), especially if the person is a minority (Schur, 1971).

There are limitations to this research study. The first is a small sample size. Collecting data from additional newspapers with different political and regional perspectives and including a longer sampling timeframe could extend the representative nature of the research. There was also a limitation in definitively distinguishing race when viewing the crime stories through a microfilm reader. Although collaborative data conferencing was used by the authors regarding the coding of pictorials, there is potential for error and bias in accurately determining the race of the subject. Grainy images and photographic negatives produced low-quality pictorials; however, extra caution was taken to differentiate race between mugshots through the constant comparison of grounded theory and confirmation made within the article through any racialized text. As aforementioned, when deemed necessary, an online search was conducted to verify the race of the subject; however, this was very limited. Future studies should explore other media outlets, including Internet and television, that provide clearer images to extend the current analyses.

Furthermore, it could also be telling if non-Whites and Whites are portrayed differently depending on the crime (violent or nonviolent) for which they were arrested. This differential media exposure may disproportionately impact non-White subgroups, perpetuating negative stereotypes. This allows for privileged majority groups to continue to hold these incorrect representations about marginalized individuals because there is not enough in the media that dispels the attributed criminal labels and as a result, these individuals have a harder time resisting their criminal label. As such, scholars should investigate whether the criminal charges impact the photo selection of alleged offenders.

In sum, race still matters. Because a majority of the public's knowledge about crime and justice is formed through media consumption, it is imperative that we understand ways in which media may influence public attitudes. Possibly without intention, print media companies may be contributing to messages of guilt and/or fear by publishing more damaging images of non-White male alleged offenders compared to their White counterparts. The implications from this study provide a necessary start for future research to further explore the difference in media portrayals of mugshots between races, which may shape both individual and societal perspectives. The

disproportionate showing of non-White mugshots means that media companies are not providing unbiased representations of criminality.

Note

1. Certain cases, such as those involving defendants who had previously gone to trial and were being sentenced, were omitted from this research as the current focus is on active prosecutions.

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