

THE SAVED AND THE DAMNED: RACIALIZED MEDIA CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMALE DRUG OFFENDERS*

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In 2012, more arrests were made for drug offenses than for any other single offense category. Over 1.5 million drug arrests were made that year, and 211,020 of those ar-

* This research was supported by three grants provided by the University of Nebraska Omaha—a grant from the University Committee for Research and Creative Activity and two summer research stipends from the University’s School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Points of view or opinions stated in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the University of Nebraska Omaha or Kearney, the University of Hawaii at Manoa, or the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology in Washington, DC. Please address correspondence to Pauline K. Brennan, University of Nebraska Omaha, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, CPACS 218, 6001 Dodge Street, Omaha, NE 68182-0149, via e-mail pkbrennan@unomaha.edu, or by phone (402) 554-2205 or fax (402) 554-2326.

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rests were for female offenders (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] 2013a, 2013b). Of women in state prisons, more than 25 percent were incarcerated for a drug offense at yearend 2012 (Carson & Golinelli 2013, 10); several decades earlier (in 1979, for example), the proportion of women serving time for drug offenses stood at roughly 10 percent (Chesney-Lind & Pasko 2004), which suggests that the “drug war,” with its emphasis on street-level sweeps of those engaged in the drug trade and harsh mandatory sentencing policies, has taken a particular toll on women. A Report prepared by the Women’s Prison Project in 2006, for example, noted that the number of women serving sentences of more than a year grew by more than 700 percent between 1977 and 2004, which is twice the rate of growth in the male prison population over the same time period (Greene, Pranis, & Frost 2006). It is important to emphasize that female prison populations have risen more quickly than male populations in all 50 states (Greene et al., 2006).

But, the “war” has affected some women more than others. To elaborate, with U.S. Census data and data provided from 34 states that participated in the National Corrections Reporting Program in 2003, statisticians for the Human Rights Watch estimated that the national rate of imprisonment for black women convicted of drug offenses was 44 per 100,000 population, compared to a rate of less than 10 per 100,000 white women (Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2008, 19, Table 13). On average, across the country in 2003 black women were incarcerated for drug offenses at a rate that was 4.8 times higher than the rate for white women (HRW 2008, 19, Table 13).

We believe that media constructions of white and minority female drug offenders may contribute to the differential treatment experienced by women of color who enter the criminal justice system. A fair amount of research has

been conducted on media reports of crime, but the overwhelming majority of these studies has focused on accounts of male offenders. A general conclusion that seems to underlie such studies is that the typical offender in crime stories is a young, minority male (Barak 1994; Barlow 1998; Chermak 1994; Chiricos & Eschholz 2002; Graber 1980; Humphries 1981; Madriz 1997; Surette 1992). Because individuals come to “perceive things the way the media portray them” (Surette 1992, 76), most people are inclined to conclude that the typical offender is an African-American or Hispanic male (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone 2012). Therefore, “the media contribution [to assumptions about criminal activity] is one of both linking blacks to the issue of crime and, moreover, rendering stereotypes of blacks more negative” (Hurwitz & Peffley 1997, 376; see also Entman 1990, 1992, 1994, 1997).

Importantly, notions of who is likely to offend are often coupled with ideas about who is likely to be rehabilitated and, therefore, who may deserve more lenient treatment by the criminal justice system. Consistent with that notion, Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) noted that the dominant perception of crime as a minority phenomenon likely influenced “the dramatic escalation of punitiveness toward criminals in the past 20 years, with incarceration rates tripling despite stagnant... crime rates” (p.401). They further stated that the ways in which minorities are portrayed by the media reinforce the notion that these groups “constitute a ‘social threat’” that warrants a punitive response by the criminal justice system (Chiricos & Eschholz 2002, 416). In short, the extant literature indicates that news stories about crime are likely to provide descriptions of minority males who deserve harsh treatment.

But, women also commit crime and their stories also appear in the news. Despite this reality, few examinations of how female offenders are depicted in crime stories and

whether such portrayals vary for females of different races/ethnicities exist. To date, only five studies have examined how media portrayals differ for minority women relative to white women offenders (Bond-Maupin 1998; Brennan & Vandenberg 2009; Farr 1999, 2000; Huckerby 2003). In all five of these studies, depictions of minority women were more negative than depictions of white women. However, in none of the investigations did the researchers consider how crime narratives or overall story tones may have been influenced by the type of offense a woman was alleged to have committed. In short, no study has yet examined whether an offender's race/ethnicity affects how stories are constructed for females accused or alleged of having committed a drug offense. To address this void, we examined stories that appeared on the front pages of 17 nationally-available newspapers from different regions of the United States to determine whether narrative themes and overall story tones differed for white and minority women. We expected that stories about minority female drug offenders would be more negative than stories about their white counterparts, and that differences would be most evident in stories about illicit-drug crimes.

Our exploratory study began with a literature review, which contains a discussion of the black feminist perspective and Goffman's frame analysis; both of these theoretical perspectives guided our analyses of the stories we encountered. In addition, while reviewing stories, we also considered previous research on depictions of female offenders as well as Sykes and Matza's (1957) discussion of justifications of untoward behavior, but applied our own thinking with regard to the degree to which similar accounts materialized in stories about female drug offenders, whether other themes emerged, how the themes we encountered were differentially applied in stories about white and minority women, and whether overall story

tones differed depending on the race/ethnicity of the female drug offender. Our research methodology follows Altheide's (1996) approach to qualitative document analysis. In following this approach, we first examined basic descriptive statistics related to offender race/ethnicity and the drug focus of the stories we found. From there, we ascertained the extent to which various mitigating and exacerbating themes materialized, and determined whether a story's overall tone was favorable/neutral or unfavorable. We then examined differences by race/ethnicity, with attention paid to stories about women who committed illicit-drug offenses. We conclude our study with a discussion of the implications of our findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary theoretical perspective that guided this study is critical race feminism, sometimes called black feminist criminology (Potter 2008; Belknap 2014). Black feminist scholars direct our attention to racist ideologies that affect perceptions of minority women and how they are treated. Such scholars argue that the perceptions and experiences of white women are quite distinct from those for black or Hispanic women. Whereas white women may suffer primarily from the effects of sexism, minority women experience "double and multiple marginality" where "racism and sexism are combined with each other" to influence perceptions and treatment by others (Belknap 2014; Chesney-Lind & Morash 2011). More than sexual oppression is involved for minority women because color is an added stigma and a devaluating factor that makes them vulnerable to more intense forms of marginalized treatment (Higginbotham 1983).

Black, brown, yellow, and red people have to live within the boundaries defined by others because of their

color. Racism [...] operates to promote the tolerance of inequities on the part of members of society. Historically, and to this day, racism is institutionalized in the United States and has a daily impact on the lives of racial ethnic people. (Higginbotham 1983, 200-201)

Thus, when compared with white women, minority women can never be regarded as similarly oppressed or as equal to white women because they live under additional restrictions and pressures (Higginbotham 1983, 212; see also Healey 1997). In short, as black feminist theorists would argue, researchers must consider a person's race/ethnicity *and* gender (in tandem) in any attempt to understand how females may be treated (Collins 2000; Davis 1981; hooks 1981).

Indeed, some have found that criminal justice officials rely on gender and racial/ethnic stereotypes when attempting to categorize others (Steen, Engen, & Gainey 2005). In their most basic form, stereotypes are cognitive techniques that operate like "mental filing cabinets that allow the individual to group like objects together in the mind" (Entman 1997, 29). In this way, stereotypes provide useful mental shortcuts that allow one to make sense of information with relatively little cognitive effort (Entman 1997; Fairchild & Cozens 1981; Gladwell 2005; Hurwitz & Pefley 1997; Willemsen & van Schie 1989). Although racial and ethnic stereotypes are not inherently negative, individuals may develop prejudices toward members of other racial/ethnic groups when repeatedly exposed to information that fits into negative categories (Entman 1997).

Researchers acknowledge that minority women have consistently been stereotyped more negatively than white women (Brennan 2002, 2006; Castro 1998; Farr 2000; Healey 1997; Landrine 1985; Madriz 1997; Portillos 1999; Young 1986). Landrine (1985), for example, found that white women were more likely to be stereotyped as

“competent, dependent, emotional, intelligent, passive... and warm” (p.72), whereas black women were more likely to be stereotyped as “dirty, hostile, and superstitious” (p. 71-72). Furthermore, black women are often depicted as aggressive or dangerous (Brennan 2002, 2006; Irwin & Chesney-Lind 2008; Farr 1997; Madriz 1997, Young 1986). And, there is a tendency for minority females, in general, to be stereotyped as “hyper sexed” (Farr 2000, 55; see also Madriz 1997; Young 1986) and as “welfare queens” (Hurwitz & Peffley 1997, 393). In short, “[w]hite women fit more closely the gendered, racist, classist conception of ‘femininity’ [put forth by Klein (1973)]” (Madriz 1997, 343). Such notions of femininity affect how women are treated by the criminal justice system. Rafter (1990), for example, has documented the harsh treatment of women slaves in the United States and explained that such women were viewed as quite distinct from their white counterparts and, hence, not “worthy” of chivalrous treatment.

The above discussion is interesting when one considers that women are not expected to commit crime (Berrington & Honkatukia 2002; Willemsen & van Schie 1989). Willemsen and van Schie (1989) found that “stereotypes about criminal behavior were very pronounced and predominantly masculine” (p.635). They also noted that these “stereotypes influence[d] the interpretation of behavior” (Willemsen & van Schie 1989, 625). Therefore, when females commit crime, they have not only broken the law, but have also “transgressed the norms and expectations associated with appropriate feminine behaviour [sic]” (Berrington & Honkatukia 2002, 50). Because minority women are viewed more negatively than white women and are more likely to be stereotyped as “masculine,” one may expect that they would be more likely to be associated with criminal behavior and harsh treatment by the

criminal justice system than white women in news media outlets.

With regard to depictions of women in the news, Goffman's frame analysis (1974) provides a useful starting point for a discussion of the ways in which feminists might explore media narratives about female offenders. Goffman coined the term "frame" to describe the way individuals and collectivities construct borders around events and issues, situating them to make sense of their world. With regard to women, Goffman believed the corporate media, particularly through the use of advertisements, tended to distill the social world in a way that clearly disadvantaged women. In his work *Gender Advertisements*, Goffman (1979) explored notions of "gender display," and then explained how depictions of women in advertisements tended to ratify male power and privilege over women. We would expand this notion, though, and argue that media depictions of women may also enforce notions of good and bad femininity in ways that may align with the "whore/madonna" dichotomy (Chesney-Lind 1999). Such categorizations are particularly important in discussions about female offenders, as well as in discussions regarding the treatment of minority women.

Few researchers, however, have examined how female offenders are depicted in crime stories and whether such portrayals vary for females of different races/ethnicities. To date, only five studies have been published regarding differences in media portrayals of minority women versus white women, with attention largely focused on media accounts of atypical women who committed murder (Bond-Maupin 1998; Brennan & Vandenberg 2009; Farr 1997,

2000; Huckerby 2003).² Farr (1997), for example, analyzed stories for women on death row and found that such women could be classified as falling into one of five categories, depending on their personal characteristics and the circumstances surrounding their crimes. Women of color fell disproportionately into two categories—the “Explosive Avengers” and “Robber-Predators” (Farr 1997, 267, 268). The Explosive Avengers “often were described as manlike or lesbian” and, therefore, “poly-deviant,” with crimes that resembled those committed by men (Farr 1997, 268). In a later study, Farr (2000, 56) examined only lesbians on death row. She found that for 14 of the 35 cases in her sample, the “representations [of the women] were masculinized. [...] All but one of them were [about] women of color.”³

Bond-Maupin’s (1998) examination of depictions of female offenders on the television program *America’s Most Wanted* also revealed that a woman’s race/ethnicity influenced depictions of her femininity. Specifically, she observed that

Dominant notions of femininity are widely used....
One pervasive image associated with dominant inter-

² In another study, Chesney-Lind (1999) examined how female offenders, in general, were demonized by the media. She did not, however, examine differential racial/ethnic portrayals. In a later study, Chesney-Lind and Eliason (2006) examined media constructions of women of color and lesbian offenders, and found that girls of color were routinely masculinized in the coverage of the gang crisis and that lesbian women were disproportionately over-represented among the few women sentenced to death in the United States (e.g., Eileen Wurnos).

³ While it is expected that all of the women on death row would be depicted negatively, given the extreme nature of their offenses and their extreme punishment, Farr (1997, 2000) found that the severity of the negative depictions did vary by race/ethnicity.

pretations of femininity is sexuality. This television sexuality is manipulative and bestows power on women that men cannot resist. [...] Ethnicity makes manipulative sexuality exotic. It also establishes a social distance between White fugitives and women of color. Although viewers are warned that White fugitives are dangerous, the most ruthless [because of their exotic sexuality] are Russian or Asian. (Bond-Maupin 1998, 43)

Huckerby (2003) arrived at a similar conclusion upon examining the print media's portrayal of Khoua Her, a 24-year-old Hmong immigrant from Thailand convicted of killing her children. Overall, Huckerby found that Her's femininity was diminished because of her "outsider status" (2003, 153) and perceived sexual deviance, which suggested that "not all criminal mothers [were] subject to the same treatment by the criminal justice system or media" (2003, 152). Khoua Her was held accountable, in part, because of negative ethnic stereotypes.

More recently, Brennan and Vandenberg (2009) examined all calendar year 2006 front-page news stories about female offenders from the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*. The examined stories were about women who committed a wide array of offenses (e.g., violent, white-collar, drug, fraud, immigration, and other offenses). About an equal number of stories were found for white and minority women, but the stories about white women were more likely to contain excuses or justifications for their alleged or actual offenses. For example, a higher percentage of the stories about white women discussed how forces beyond the woman's control (e.g., mental illness, a weather-related disaster) excused her behavior. A higher percentage of the stories about white women also contained discussions of how a crime was committed for the benefit of others (e.g., for the sake of a corporation), why decisions to mount an investigation or file charges by au-

thorities were unfounded, and/or minimized the harm done. The presence of such narratives worked to slant crime stories in a favorable direction. Overall, Brennan and Vandenberg (2009) found that nearly three times as many stories about white women were favorable when compared to the stories about minority women.

Brennan and Vandenberg (2009) used Skyes and Matza's (1957) discussion of "Techniques of Neutralization" to guide their analyses because they believed that newspaper reporters were inclined to use similar rationalizations when writing stories about certain types of offenders. Unlike Brennan and Vandenberg, however, Skyes and Matza (1957) were not interested in newspaper accounts of offenders. Rather, they believed that most delinquents felt the need to rationalize or justify their behavior in order to minimize their feelings of shame and the likely negative reactions from others. Sykes and Matza (1957) identified and discussed five major types of rationalizations, which they termed "Techniques of Neutralization."

The first technique of neutralization identified by Sykes and Matza (1957) was the "denial or responsibility" (p. 667). If using this technique, a delinquent will explain that his behavior was due to forces beyond his control (e.g., unloving parents, bad companions, poor living conditions) (p.667). In other words, the offender portrays himself as "more acted upon than acting" (p.667). Delinquents may also deny or downplay the harm they caused. Instead, and for example, they may define auto theft as temporarily "borrowing" a vehicle and vandalism as a simple act of mischief that a homeowner may easily address (p.667). Third, delinquents may deny that anyone was victimized. "The injury, it may be claimed, is not really an injury; rather, it is a form of rightful retaliation or punishment" (Sykes and Matza 1957, 668). For example, a delinquent may explain that a "crooked" store owner deserved to

have items stolen from his store (p.668). A fourth technique, which Skyes and Matza label “condemnation of the condemners,” may be used by delinquents to shift attention away from themselves to those pointing the blame. In other words, those who blame the delinquent may be construed as “hypocrites, deviants in disguise, or impelled by personal spite” (p.668). Such constructions serve to minimize or neutralize any wrongdoing on the part of the offender. The final technique of neutralization identified by Sykes and Matza (1957) was an “appeal to higher loyalties” (p.669). When using such a technique, a delinquent may state that she violated the law for the benefit of another person (e.g., a brother or a sister) or group (e.g., a friendship clique). The delinquent may, for example, state “I didn’t do it for myself” (Sykes and Matza 1957, 669). In short, techniques of neutralization are situational narratives that serve to excuse or justify criminal behavior. These techniques are not used solely by those who come into contact with the criminal justice system; such justifications are used by individuals throughout society to explain an array of untoward behaviors (Sykes and Matza 1957, 669).

We believe that crime story narratives are likely to contain similar justifications for some offenders. While this is our expectation, we also believe that other excuses and justifications will materialize in the stories about female drug offenders. Moreover, we predict that media accounts will be more favorable for white women than for minority women; white women will be more likely to have their drug offenses excused or justified in some manner.

METHODOLOGY

ALTHEIDE'S (1996) QUALITATIVE DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Our research method follows Altheide's (1996) approach to qualitative document analysis. According to Altheide (1996), qualitative document analysis "follows a recursive and reflective movement" between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, analysis, an interpretation (p.16). As with quantitative content analysis, qualitative document analysis begins with the coding of certain variables identified by past researchers as important. But, unlike a quantitative content analysis, which tests specific hypotheses with predefined variables, qualitative document analysis emphasizes the importance of having researchers add new, emergent themes to a coding scheme (or data file) over time. "The aim is to be systematic and analytical, but not rigid; categories of variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study" (Altheide 1996, 16). This means that researchers engage in a process of constant discovery and constant comparison of documents. And, in the process, basic numeric findings (i.e., as they relate to pre-identified and emergent concepts) are important and so too are narrative descriptions of specific cases. In short, researchers who engage in qualitative document analysis extensively read, sort, and search through materials, make comparisons within categories, code, identify and code new concepts, and then write mini-sum-

maries about what they discover (Altheide 1996, 41).⁴ When presenting findings from a qualitative document analysis, a researcher will first provide a numeric summary of their findings and then explain these findings with a discussion that includes specific illustrative examples.

Following Altheide (1996) articulated approach, we coded whether the crime story narratives we encountered provided justifications or excuses similar to those identified by Sykes and Matza (1957) as typical among delinquents: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeals to a higher loyalty.⁵ But, we did not limit our study solely to the coding of these neutralizing themes. Instead, our coding and evaluation of crime story narratives was a continuous process, which meant that we evaluated and reevaluated the contents of a crime story several times throughout the data-coding process and added the additional themes we uncovered.

When conducting our analysis, it became clear that journalists constructed crime narratives in ways that resembled the “neutralizers” identified by Sykes and Matza (1957) in their research on the ways in which juvenile offenders justified or excused their delinquent behavior. We found that journalists tended to rely on similar justifica-

⁴ It is important to add that a qualitative document analysis differs in emphasis and approach from grounded theory. Altheide (1996) explains that “grounded theory stresses more the systematic coding of field notes,” whereas qualitative document analysis “is more oriented to concept development, data collection, ... reflection, and protocol refinement” (p. 17).

⁵ To be clear, we do not intend to test the perspective put forth by Sykes and Matza (1957). Rather, we have simply borrowed their terminology and concepts to examine potential ways journalists may create favorable or unfavorable impressions of female offenders.

tions when writing about certain female offenders. At the same time, however, we also encountered at least two themes that appeared to be more gendered and raced: “hope of reformation” (for further discussion, see Brennan & Vandenberg 2009) and “character praise.” These themes, in particular, tended to mitigate the effects of the woman’s drug use, which would normally classify her as a bad or flawed woman.

We also considered whether a story had negative elements or qualities. In other words, our qualitative document analysis also considered whether any exacerbating factors were present. Such factors serve to paint an unfavorable depiction of the offender. Stories with negative thematic elements either ascribed guilt to the offender, mentioned real injury to a real victim, praised accusers, indicated a self-interested motivation on the part of the offender, suggested that the offender could not be reformed, and/or attacked the offender’s character. By considering the emphasis that a particular story gave to elements that either neutralized or exacerbated the offender’s alleged or actual drug offense, we were able to assess each story’s overall tone. Our assessment produced an overall story tone (OST) variable that rated our impressions of the female offenders after considering “what was portrayed, reported, suggested, or implied in the context” of the stories about women who violated the law (Grabe 1999, 38; see also Pollak & Kurbin 2007, 66).⁶

⁶ Inter-rater reliability for the variable that measured overall story tone (OST) was approximately 94% among three coders. In cases of discrepancy, coders discussed their rationales until at least two coders were in agreement. According to Altheide (1996), “the best way to achieve investigator agreement is to work together to not only record the same documents but also to discuss meanings and interpretations of categories and codes” (p. 41).

SELECTION OF NEWSPAPER STORIES

Given the exploratory nature of this study, it was difficult for us to anticipate the types of stories we would encounter at the start of our research. Therefore, we followed Altheide's (1996, 33) approach to qualitative document analysis and assembled a purposive sample of news stories.⁷ Our research explores the narrative content of front-page newspaper articles that featured female drug offenders. The newspapers that were analyzed included 17 widely available U.S. newspapers from the 2006 calendar year, and included the *Arizona Republic*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Denver Post*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Miami Herald*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Omaha World Herald*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Seattle Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. These newspapers were selected because they provide a geographically diverse sample of news reporting in the United States. In addition, all were based in cities with large (or relatively large) minority populations and were among the top 100 most widely-circulated newspapers in the United States in 2006, as ranked by a nationally reputable media monitoring service (BurrellesLuce 2006).⁸ These last two purposive aspects were important because they assured the wide-readership of news stories, and therefore the dissemination of the messages contained within the stories.

⁷ Quantitative content analysis, in contrast, relies on random or stratified samples (Altheide, 1996, p. 15).

⁸ Although we would have preferred to examine the top 17 most widely distributed newspapers in our study, this was impossible to do while still maintaining a geographically purposive sample. Therefore, we selected the highest-ranked newspaper within each geographic region of interest.

We scanned through reels of microfilm in order to find stories about female offenders that appeared on the front pages of the 17 selected newspapers. We used microfilm because it provided access to photographic images that would not have been available had we searched for articles via Lexis-Nexis or other similar databases. We focused specifically on front-page stories because previous scholars have determined that newspaper editors place stories on the front page when they deem them important and/or when they desire to attract the greatest number of readers (Buckler & Travis 2005; Budd 1964; Chermak 1998; Chermak & Chapman 2007; Lundman 2003; Mawby & Brown 1984). In addition, even if individuals do not subscribe to a newspaper service, they will likely see front-page articles, at least in passing, during their daily routines. In other words, those passing by or skimming the front page are likely to be exposed to its content on some level.

A total of 95 crime stories about female drug offenders were found in the 17 newspapers from across the country⁹; 64 of these included indications of the offender's race/ethnicity. The types of drug offenses varied across the stories. Some of the stories were about women who had engaged

⁹ We determined that articles were crime stories when the narrative mentioned a woman's actual or alleged criminality. Actual criminality meant the reporter noted the woman's formal contact with the criminal justice system (e.g., an arrest, charges filed, a sentence). Stories with alleged criminality either indicated that a female was under investigation by criminal justice authorities, although no formal contact with the system had yet occurred, or were written in such a way as to insinuate that the woman's actions had an underlying criminal component. Drug stories were considered to be any crime story in which references to street drugs, alcohol, and/or prescription drugs were included in descriptions of the woman's actual or alleged offense (e.g., possession, drug use, sale, distribution, trafficking).

in illicit-drug offenses (e.g., possession, use, or sale). Other stories were about alcohol-related offenses (e.g., driving while impaired, underage drinking) or offenses related to pharmaceuticals (e.g., forged/altered prescriptions, illegal distribution of medications).

Our analysis begins with a presentation of descriptive statistics that provide information on the number of drug stories for white and for minority women and the number of stories about illicit drugs (street) and non-street drugs. From there, our analyses zero-in on newspaper accounts of white and minority women alleged or accused of having committed illicit-drug crimes, given that the “war on drugs” has emphasized street-level drug sweeps. Our findings below show how story themes and overall tones differed in the stories about white when compared to the stories about minority women. As we will show and explain with narrative descriptions of specific cases, these differences were largely the product of the emphasis that news reporters placed on a given offender’s degree of guilt, harm to another person, and reform potential.

FINDINGS

OFFENDER RACE/ETHNICITY AND TYPE OF DRUG

Table 1 denotes how many of the stories were about white versus minority women. The table presents a dichotomous measure that classified offenders as either “white” or “minority,” which is the measure we used in the analyses that follow. As Table 1 indicates, the number of stories gathered for both groups was nearly equal; 48.4 percent of stories were about a white female offender and 51.6 percent featured a minority female offender. Of the stories for minority women, stories about black women were the most common.

TABLE 1. OFFENDER RACE/ETHNICITY and TYPE of DRUG (N=64)^a

| Variable | N | % |
|--|----|------|
| Race/ethnicity | | |
| <i>White</i> | 31 | 48.4 |
| <i>Combined Minority Group^b</i> | 33 | 51.6 |
| Black | 25 | 39.1 |
| Latina | 3 | 4.7 |
| Native American | 3 | 4.7 |
| Multiple Minority ^c | 2 | 3.1 |
| Type of Drug | | |
| <i>Illicit ("street") Drug^d</i> | 31 | 58.5 |
| <i>Non-Street Drug</i> | 22 | 41.5 |
| Alcohol | 10 | 18.9 |
| Pharmaceuticals ^e | 12 | 22.6 |

^a The type of drug was not specified in 11 newspaper stories.

^b All minority women were grouped together. This grouping includes stories about black, Latina, and Native-American women. It also includes stories with multiple female offenders of different racial/ethnic backgrounds who were given equal coverage in a given article.

^c Two stories included multiple female offenders of different racial/ethnic minority backgrounds. The race/ethnicity of the women in these stories, therefore, was coded as "multiple."

^d Illicit (or "street") drugs include marijuana, crack, cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, PCP, and khat.

^e Pharmaceuticals include steroids, Oxycontin, Oxycodone, Xanax, Percocet, Vicodin, Erythropoietin, and other prescription medications.

Table 1 further shows variation in the type of drug mentioned in these stories. About 60 percent of the stories were about illicit-drug offenses. The other stories focused on either alcohol-related offenses (18.9%) or offenses involving pharmaceuticals (22.6%). If a story noted both street and non-street drugs, only the street drug was coded because such an offense generally carries a more severe penalty (e.g., punishments for cocaine possession are typically more serious than penalties for driving while intoxicated or forging a prescription). About two-thirds (64%) of the stories for minority women were about illicit drugs; by comparison, street-drug offenses were featured in slightly more than half (53.6%) of the stories for white women (table not shown). Given the racial/ethnic disparities that exist in the media coverage of female offenders, generally, and in the incarceration rates for female drug offenders, specifically (HRW 2008, 19, Table 13), one might expect to find that newspaper accounts of white women who commit street-drug offenses may differ from portrayals of similarly-situated minority women. We examine this possibility in later sections of this paper.

NARRATIVE ELEMENTS OF CRIME STORIES AND OVERALL STORY TONES

Some stories depicted the female offender in a positive light. In these stories, the offender's negative behavior was excused or justified and/or her positive characteristics were emphasized. In order to determine whether a female offender was portrayed favorably, we considered seven different neutralizing themes that we encountered throughout the course of our study—denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of the condemners, appeals to a higher loyalty, hope of reformation, and character praise. These themes appeared to varying

degrees (e.g., were emphasized as opposed to being merely mentioned) in the stories we read.¹⁰

**TABLE 2. OVERALL STORY TONE and
NEUTRALIZING THEMES (N=64)**

| Variable | % |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| Overall Favorable or Neutral Tone | 51.6 |
| Denial of Responsibility (DR) | 48.4 |
| Denial of Injury (DI) | 1.6 |
| Denial of Victim (DV) | 1.6 |
| Appeal to Higher Loyalty (AL) | 7.8 |
| Condemnation of the Condemners (CC) | 25.0 |
| Hope of Reformation (HR) | 28.1 |
| Character Praise (CP) | 34.4 |

First, as indicated by Table 2, 48.4 percent of the stories minimized the female offender's culpability for her drug offense. A fair percentage (25.0%) of the accounts also criticized law enforcement or other social agency tactics, a technique that Sykes and Matza (1957) referred to as "condemnation of the condemners." In addition to this known technique of neutralization, we also found that some reporters described how certain female offenders

¹⁰ It is important to note that the neutralizing (or mitigating) and the exacerbating (or aggravating) themes are not mutually exclusive. Thus, a reporter could work a number of neutralizing and exacerbating narratives into the same story. Therefore, the percentages presented in this paper only refer to the presence or absence of a particular narrative theme in a story. Furthermore, the overall story tone (OST) is based on the relative weight given to neutralizing and/or exacerbating narratives in the story, as a whole; OST cannot be determined from merely the presence or absence of a specific narrative theme.

successfully completed or were likely to complete drug rehabilitation, thereby reforming their lives; close to 30 percent of the stories contained such an element. Finally, about a third of the stories (34.4%) mentioned praise for the offender's character. Some of these accounts included references to a woman's compliance to traditional aspects of femininity and described the offenders as good wives, good mothers, attractive, and so on (for further discussions, see Armstrong 1999; Chesney-Lind 1999; Madriz 1997).

While the aforementioned neutralizing elements appeared in a fair number of the stories we encountered, only 7.8 percent of the stories explained that the female offender committed her crime for the benefit of others (i.e., an "appeal to a higher loyalty"). Furthermore, very few of the stories denied that injury occurred or insinuated that no one was harmed. When these neutralizing aspects were assessed for their overall emphasis in each crime story, we concluded that 51.6 percent of all the stories had overall neutral or positive tones.¹¹

By comparison, Table 3 indicates that 48.4 percent of the stories conveyed an overall negative message because of their overwhelming focus on one or more exacerbating (or aggravating) elements. Negative narrative elements appeared to varying degrees in the stories we analyzed.

¹¹ Approximately 31.3 percent (n=20) of the stories had an overall favorable tone. Twenty percent (20.3%) of stories (n=13) had an overall neutral tone; neutral stories were balanced in terms of the extent to which various neutralizing and exacerbating narrative themes were used.

**TABLE 3. OVERALL STORY TONE and
EXACERBATING THEMES (N=64)**

| Variable | % |
|------------------------------------|------|
| Overall Unfavorable or Tone | 48.4 |
| Attribution of Responsibility (AR) | 95.3 |
| Real Injury (RI) | 20.3 |
| Real Victim (RV) | 20.3 |
| Self Interest (SI) | 42.2 |
| Praise for the Condemners (PC) | 31.3 |
| Beyond Reformation (BR) | 40.6 |
| Character Assassination (CA) | 45.3 |

Over 95 percent of the stories attributed some level of guilt to the accused woman. Twenty percent of the stories discussed the extent of injury that occurred, and the same percentage of stories included remarks about a specific victim or victims. A motive of self-interest was present in 42.2 percent of the stories, and police or other agency work was praised in 31.3 percent of the stories. Table 3 also indicates that about 40 percent of the stories depicted the female offender as beyond reformation. For example, such stories mentioned repeated relapses, failed treatment, and/or that the female offender had “returned to her old ways.” Furthermore, 45.3 percent included attacks on the female offender’s character. For example, some stories described female offenders as unfit mothers, filthy, unattractive, and sexually promiscuous.

OVERALL STORY TONES AND THEMES FOR WHITE AND MINORITY FEMALES

The black feminist perspective provided an overall framework for our study, and a central purpose of this paper was to determine the extent to which media portrayals of white female drug offenders differed from portrayals of their minority counterparts. In this section we present the results of our exploratory analysis based on a relatively small sample of crime stories. Although there is not enough statistical power in our sample for us to report levels of statistical significance, nor would such reports be warranted in an exploratory study, our results are important because they are the first of their kind.

We were first interested in determining whether overall story tones differed for white and for minority female drug offenders, in general. We found that a similar percentage of stories for white and minority women had overall negative tones (51.6 % of the stories for white women and 51.5% of the stories for minority women). We then considered whether the type of drug impacted story tones for white and for minority women.

When we focused solely on stories about women who committed illicit- (or street-) drug offenses (who are arguably the focus of the “war on drug” efforts), we found that two-thirds of the stories about white women who engaged in illicit- (or street-) drug crimes had neutral or positive overall tones, compared with one-third of the stories about minority women who engaged in illicit-drug offenses. Given these differences in overall story tones, we decided to more closely examine differences in the degree to which neutralizing (or mitigating) and exacerbating (or

aggravating) thematic elements were present in the stories we read.

Figure 1 (on page 70) presents a visual summary of the differences in the presence of neutralizing/mitigating story elements for white and minority females alleged or accused of having committed offenses involving illicit (or street) drugs. Figure 2, which follows, presents a visual summary of the differences in the presence of exacerbating/aggravating story elements by race/ethnicity. These figures are best examined in tandem as their elements should be simultaneously considered in order for one to determine a story's overall tone.

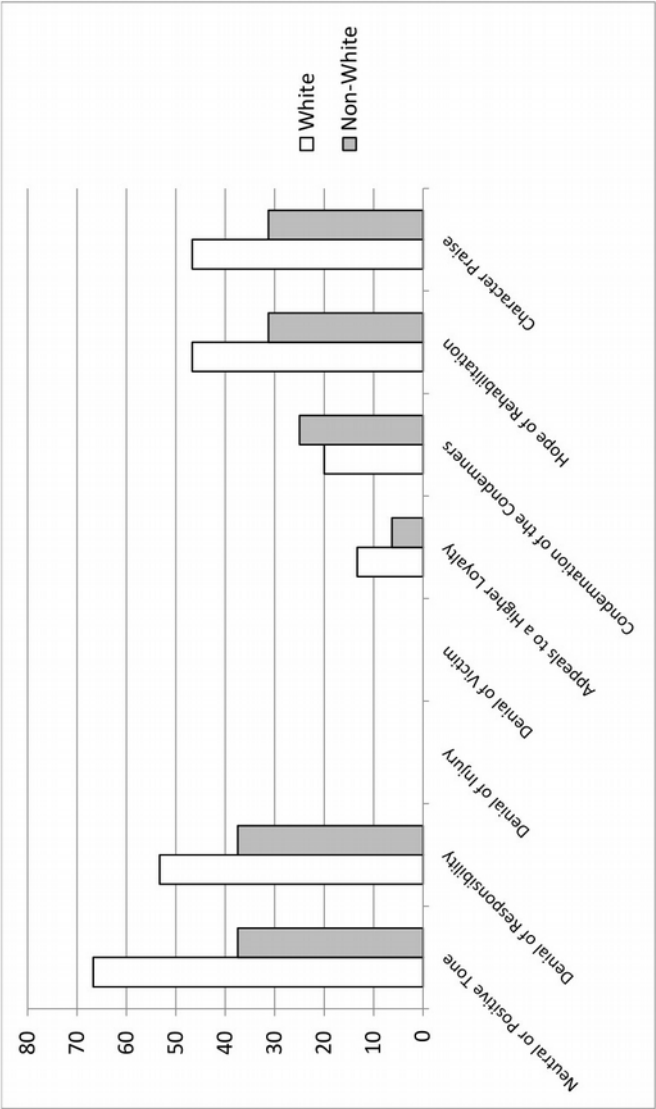
Among the illicit-drug stories we examined, all women, regardless of their race/ethnicity, had some level of guilt attributed to them for the street-level drug offenses they committed (see Figure 2). While that was true, Figure 1 shows that the stories about white women were more likely to contain elements that served to minimize their culpability. Both figures further suggest that a discussion of victims was not common. This was expected, given that most drug offenses are considered to be "victimless crimes" (i.e., they involve only the offender and no other party is directly affected). Nonetheless, a higher percentage of the stories about minority women discussed victims who had suffered injury as a result of the offender's actions (Figure 2).

We could find no clear racial/ethnic pattern with regard to the offender's motivation for the crime. While Figure 1 suggested that white women may have been more inclined to commit a drug offense for someone else's benefit (e.g., at a boyfriend's request), Figure 2 indicated that a higher percentage of the stories about white women provided nar-

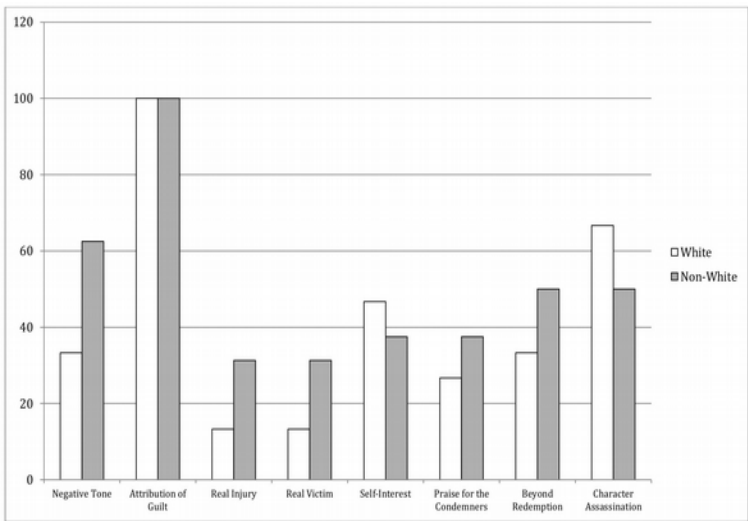
ratives of self-interested motives (e.g., would do anything to get high, wanted to earn fast money). The figures also showed that both praise for, and condemnation of, law enforcement tactics were more likely to be found in the stories about minority women, which meant that there was no clear pattern in the use of these opposing narratives by race/ethnicity. It was also interesting to discover that a higher percentage of the stories about white women offered both positive (Figure 1) and negative (Figure 2) character narratives than the stories about minority women. In other words, both character praise and character attacks were more common in the stories about white women.

While some of the aforementioned findings are inconclusive with regard to racial and ethnic disparities (i.e., those related to offense motivation, law enforcement tactics, and statements about the offender's character), an examination of Figure 1 and Figure 2 produced a consistent conclusion about the manner in which "Hope of Reformation" and "Beyond Reformation" appeared in the narratives of stories about street-drug offenders. To elaborate, a higher percentage of the stories about white women (46.7%) documented their successful drug treatment (compared with 31.3% of the stories for minority women). The opposite occurred in the stories about minority women: a higher percentage of these stories (50%) provided accounts of their failed drug treatment (compared with 33.3% of the stories for white women).

**FIGURE 1. DIFFERENCES in the USE of
NEUTRALIZING/MITIGATING THEMES by
OFFENDER RACE/ETHNICITY**



**FIGURE 2. DIFFERENCES in the USE of
EXACERBATING/AGGRAVATING THEMES
by OFFENDER RACE/ETHNICITY**



The discussion that follows more fully explains how newspaper story tones differed for female offenders of varying races/ethnicities due to the emphasis placed on an offender’s degree of guilt, harm to another person, and potential for reform. While a story’s emphasis on culpability or harm influenced its overall tone, discussions of the capacity to be saved or reformed seemed to differ most markedly for white women versus minority women. As such, much of the discussion that follows will focus on the differential use of two opposing themes—“Hope of Reformation” versus “Beyond Reformation.”

DENIAL OF RESPONSIBILITY VERSUS ATTRIBUTION OF GUILT

Some of the stories indicated that an accused woman was not fully responsible for her actions due to some external circumstance or force beyond her control; stories with this element were coded for “denial of responsibility”. This measure is consistent with previous references to “mad” or “sad” women (see, for example, Armstrong 1999; Chesney-Lind 1999). Our exploratory analysis of the stories about females who committed offenses that involved illicit (or street) drugs suggested that culpability was minimized in 53.3 percent of stories about white women and in 37.5 percent of stories about minority women (Figure 1). One example of the use of this neutralizing or mitigating theme comes from a story that appeared in the *Omaha World Herald* about Kathleen E. Adey, a 20-year-old white woman from Omaha arrested for possession of crack cocaine.

The story focused on Adey’s much older boyfriend, John E. Hubbard, 61. Hubbard was depicted as a corrupt and deceptive ex-attorney who manipulated Adey. He was described as very rich and influential; he lived in a “6,000-square-foot stucco home, designed to suggest a 16th-century Mediterranean villa” and was the lead attorney in several high-profile lawsuits (Dejka, 2006, p. 2). Adey, in contrast, was depicted as a young woman in danger of being led to a life of immorality by Hubbard.

The reporter further suggested that Adey needed protection, not punishment. The “hero” of the story was Adey’s father who “took drastic action to keep his 20-year-old daughter away from the wrong man” (Dejka 2006, 1). Jefferey Adey, who worried that his daughter had been led astray by Hubbard, tracked the couple to a motel room. He then forced his way in and “held Hubbard until deputies arrived” (Dejka 2006, 2). Although the police ar-

rested both Hubbard and the young Adey after finding crack cocaine and two crack pipes, Kathleen Adey was not portrayed as an equal participant in the crime. Indeed, the headline for the story was “Dad’s worries lead to lawyer’s arrest.” Guilt was firmly attributed to Hubbard, thus minimizing Adey’s culpability. Readers were left with the impression that Adey was a manipulated young woman, in need of her father’s protection.

Stories that attributed guilt to a female offender, in contrast, indicated that the crime was committed freely with no extraneous causes. Our assessments of attributions of guilt are consistent with references to “bad” women made by previous scholars (see, for example, Wilczynski 1991). As an example, a *Washington Post* story, “Somalia Drug Trade,” attributed guilt to Somalian women who sold the narcotic, khat (Wax 2006, A11). The reporter specifically focused on Maryann Ali, an ex-school teacher and mother of ten. According to the reporter, khat is a drug habitually ingested by many Somalian men, and that “opponents [of the drug] call the habit a national epidemic and say men who use the drug neglect their families by spending huge amounts of cash and time on it [the narcotic]” (Wax 2006, p. A11). Ali did not deny selling khat or the negative consequences of the drug. Instead, Ali emphasized that she, and other female dealers like her, “took ‘any job we could find, and khat was it. And it seemed better than becoming a fighter or taking food handouts. I was an educated woman; I couldn’t do that’” (Wax 2006, A13). In short, Ali was depicted as a woman who rationally decided to sell narcotics, without concern for addicted users. Such an account led to the conclusion that Ali was fully culpable for her criminal actions.

REAL INJURY, REAL VICTIM

Reporters may also emphasize the amount of harm done to a specific victim (or victims). Recall that 31.3 percent of the stories about minority women included such exacerbating/aggravating themes (see Figure 2). In comparison, only 13.3 percent of the stories about white women mentioned either the degree of harm done or a specific victim (see Figure 2).

A story in the *USA Today* highlighted how a female drug offender's actions resulted in real injury to real victims. In this story, the reporter profiled a corrupt Chicago police officer who assisted a local gang in "distributing a potent form of heroin that...killed more than 130 people in recent weeks" (Leinwand 2006, 2A). Readers learned that police officer Tashika Sledge, a black woman, befriended one of the leaders of the Mickey Cobras gang. She subsequently offered her personal vehicle to gang's leader so that he could "deliver 2 pounds of marijuana to a customer in Gary, Indiana" and used her position of authority to "[tip] him off to police surveillance" (Leinwand 2006, 2A). Moreover, she helped the gang sell and traffic heroin laced with the drug, fentanyl: a combination whose strength was often unknown to users. As a result, this narcotic was noted to be "particularly potent and deadly" (Leinwand 2006, 2A) and individuals were likely to overdose when they used it. In fact, "police and health officials... said the potent heroin was one of the most dangerous drug combinations to hit the streets in years" (Leinwand 2006, 2A).

While the reporter of this story did not focus on any specific victim, she did place a great deal of emphasis on the overall impact of the drug that Sledge helped traffic. The drug was distributed over a very large geographical area. Specifically, it affected communities in Chicago,

“Detroit, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Harrisburg, Pa., Camden, N.J., and Wilmington, Delaware” (Leinwand 2006, 2A). Moreover, this heroin-fentanyl cocktail “was linked to 53 deaths and 362 non-fatal overdoses in Chicago from April 13 to May 16. At least 54 deaths in Detroit and 31 in Philadelphia have been linked” to the drug, as well (Leinwand, 2006, p. 2A). Aside from the drug users who were affected, innocent residents in these areas were also victimized. These residents stated that their “lives have been made more dangerous by drug dealing at the [Dearborn Homes public housing] complex” and that “the gang has been linked to several shootings” there (Leinwand 2006, 2A). When these residents learned that Sledge and 29 other people connected to the Mickey Cobras gang had been taken off the street, they expressed relief.

To summarize, this article portrayed Sledge as a dangerous individual. She posed a lethal threat to residents of her own community, as well as to others from areas beyond her jurisdiction. Her actions are antithetical to the oath she took to “protect and serve” her community. Instead of helping law-abiding citizens, she aided and abetted members of a notorious gang in trafficking deadly narcotics. In doing so, she destroyed the lives of many.

HOPE OF REFORMATION VERSUS BEYOND REFORMATION

As mentioned earlier, the neutralizing/mitigating themes we identified served to produce more neutral or favorable overall story tones. “Hope of Reformation” appeared when reporters discussed a female offender’s rehabilitative progress, which suggested that sympathy was warranted and that the female was not likely to pose a continued threat to society.

While not all women had their criminal behavior minimized in this manner, it is important to note that a higher percentage of stories about white females who were alleged or accused of having committed an illicit drug offense contained this neutralizer (see Figure 1). This neutralizer, for example, appeared in a *Chicago Tribune* story, “Court gives meth addicts way out” (Casillas 2006, 1). This story focused on Janice Sidwell, a 39-year-old white woman and mother of two. Sidwell had a history of selling and using methamphetamine. The reporter described how Sidwell and Rick Cantwell, the father of her children, were fortunate enough to have been sent to the drug court, rather than to prison. The reporter detailed how the “[drug] court offers a chance to avoid prison time and provides a much fuller safety net, directing addicts to drug counseling, mental health treatment, even parenting classes” (Casillas 2006, 16). Sidwell’s success and determination to stay clean were highlighted throughout the story. The reporter pointed out that “Sidwell entered drug court in 2004 and has been clean since” (Casillas 2006, 16). Sidwell’s resolve to strengthen her family was another theme throughout the article. The reporter noted that Sidwell recently regained custody of her son and daughter, and was determined to make up for lost time. Additionally, Sidwell and Cantwell made plans to get married, and Sidwell was quoted as saying “Drug court saved our family” (Casillas 2006, 16). The strong focus on Sidwell’s success in drug court left the reader with the impression that she will now lead a law-abiding life, thanks to the intervention.

Another example of hope of reformation comes from a story in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*: “A Past Officially Forgiven” (Blake 2006, 1). In this story, the *Star* reporter described the impressive transformation of Karen Edmonson, a white woman, who was depicted smiling in a photograph on the front page of the paper. The reporter began

the story by noting that Edmonson started abusing drugs at age 11, dropped out of high school by 10th grade, and was convicted and sentenced for dealing methamphetamine at age 21. “Twenty years later, Edmonson, 49, ... has a master’s degree, a successful business, and her health—a phenomenal life... especially considering that even when drug abusers get clean, they often lead marginal lives” (Blake 2006, 1). The reader soon learned that there is nothing marginal about Edmonson’s current life.

She has been clean for 20 years, ... is a licensed psychologist, social worker, and alcohol and drug counselor. She ran a program at the University of Minnesota focused on people with multiple addictions in the late 1980s and 1990s and has traveled around the country giving speeches and selling drug treatment manuals. (Blake, 2006, p. A14).

Moreover, she and her husband run a business that helps others get required certifications so that they may offer medical and mental health classes. In other words, for the past 20 years, Edmonson has worked to helped others in their recovery from addiction.

Given her successful rehabilitation and positive contributions to society, “President Bush tacked on one more achievement [by] granting Edmonson a pardon and officially forgiving her crime 28 years ago” (Blake 2006, 1). The article ended with a narrative from Edmonson’s husband who said the pardon was appropriately given to a “remarkable person” and that it is ““truly recognition of how she’s been living her life”” (Blake 2006, A14).

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* also featured a story about a white woman who overcame her addition to drugs. A paragraph in the story recounted how Ashley Smith became addicted to crystal methamphetamine after she tried it for the first time. She then gave up custody of her daughter, quickly dropped to 90 pounds, and began hear-

ing voices (Rockwell 2006, A12). Despite the presence of this negative information, the story focused on Smith's testimony before the U.S. Congress about the dangers of methamphetamine. Therefore, this article placed the most emphasis on Smith's mental resolve and her ability to overcome addiction.

This front-page story also included a photograph of Smith, who appeared happy and focused. Readers learned that her unlikely road to recovery began after she was held hostage in her apartment by an individual who was on the run after shooting a judge, a federal agent, and two others in the Fulton County [Atlanta] Courthouse (Rockwell 2006, A12). During her captivity, Smith persuaded her captor to leave, then called the police. For her actions, she received a \$70,000 reward, and the ordeal provided the impetus for Smith to "kick the habit" (Rockwell 2006, A12). Smith later published a book entitled "Unlikely Angel: The Untold Story of the Atlanta Hostage Hero" (Rockwell 2006, A12).

When appearing before Congress, the "soft-spoken Smith" was "calm and poised" (Rockwell 2006, A12). She explained how she came to the realization that she had to stop using methamphetamine and prevent others from ever using the drug. During her testimony, Smith urged lawmakers to support television campaigns that depicted the negative effects of methamphetamine, because she never would have used the drug had she known of its dangers.

While some of the stories we reviewed indicated that women are capable of turning their lives around, other stories profiled women who were beyond reformation. As noted, this technique of exacerbation was applied in a racially disparate manner (see Figure 2). Whereas a third of the stories about white female street-drug offenders described them as unlikely to change, 50 percent of the sto-

ries about their minority counterparts noted their inability to reform.

With regard to minority women, a *New York Times* story about Debra Harris and a *Los Angeles Times* story about Bertha Cuestas both provided explanations of how reformation was not likely or possible. What is interesting about these two stories is that the format was exactly the same, despite the fact that the articles were written about two completely different women, in two different newspapers, and at two different times of the year.

The *Los Angeles Times* story about Cuestas, a Latina offender, described how she had repeatedly been arrested for drug offenses and prostitution; she “had been arrested 21 times” and “knew the drill” (Garvey & Leonard 2006, A1). Police officers added that she had been arrested “too many times” (Garvey & Leonard 2006, A1). Other law enforcement officials were quoted as saying that laws “give longtime chronic offenders like Cuestas too many chances to reoffend with little consequences” (Garvey & Leonard 2006, A22).

The story from the *New York Times* described how Harris, an African-American female, was recently arrested because she provided a dirty urine sample during a final visit with her parole officer. Before this parole violation, “she had been imprisoned three times over the years” (Eckholm 2006, A12). After acquainting the reader with Cuestas and Harris, reporters from both papers then discussed minority males who had also been arrested for drug offenses. These men, like Cuestas and Harris, were no strangers to the criminal justice system. After drawing a parallel between the men and women, the reporters ended with ominous predictions of each woman’s future criminality. The *New York Times* article concluded with the following quote from Harris: “In some ways, I feel like I’m back in the same old spot. [House arrest] keeps my life structured for

now. It's crazy out there'" (Eckholm 2006, A12). The implication is that without oversight from the criminal justice system, she will be unable to resist the temptations of crime. The ending of the story from the *Los Angeles Times* was more dramatic because it contained the following: "Postscript: [by the time this article was finished and ready for the press] Cuestas was rearrested for failing to appear in court" (Garvey & Leonard 2006, A22).

Another story about an offender's inability to reform and consequent demise was about a black woman named Hazel Brewer. This article, which appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, explained how Brewer died of a drug overdose. Brewer was described by *Tribune* reporters as a chronic drug offender who willfully bought and used the drugs that killed her only hours after she left a detox program. Brewer's extensive history of drug use was detailed in the story. Her brother explained how she progressed from using cigarettes and marijuana as a teen to using crack and heroin as an adult. The reporter explained that although Brewer often promised her family that she would "get clean," she was rarely sober (Rozas 2006, 22). Brewer's brother further explained that his sister would often binge on drugs, "check in to treatment programs, and then go back to drugs again" (Rozas 2006, 22). Brewer's extensive history of drug use and disregard for the help offered by many drug treatment providers left the reader believing that Brewer would have continued to use heroin had she lived; reformation was not possible for her.

DISCUSSION

Few scholars have examined the impact that a female offender's race/ethnicity has on a news story written about her crime. To date, only five studies have systematically examined how media portrayals differ for minority wom-

en relative to white women offenders (Bond-Maupin 1998; Brennan & Vandenberg 2009; Farr 1999, 2000; Huckerby 2003). In all of these studies, researchers concluded that stories written about the crimes committed by minority women were more negative in tone than the stories written about white women. While this conclusion was consistent across the five studies, in none of the investigations did the researchers consider how crime narratives or overall story tones may have been influenced by the type of offense a woman was alleged to have committed. Furthermore, almost all previous studies focused exclusively on women who committed violent crimes (Berrington & Honkatukia 2002; Bond-Maupin 1998; Farr 1997, 2000).

We conducted the current study because we believe that examinations of female criminality should move beyond an exclusive focus on violent women. In particular, we were interested in media depictions of female drug offenders, given the significance of current policies for such offenses in the United States. In 2012, more individuals were arrested for drug offenses than for any other crime, and women accounted for over 200,000 of these arrests (FBI 2013a, 2013b). With regard to changes in correctional populations, 25 percent of women incarcerated in state prisons are held for drug offenses (Carson & Golinelli 2013, 10), but the rate of incarceration for black female drug offenders is substantially higher than the rate for white women (HRW 2008, 19, Table 13). We believe that differences in media constructions of white and minority female drug offenders may provide a possible explanation for the differential treatment experienced by women of color who enter the criminal justice system. Indeed, researchers find that ideas about crime and criminals are based, in large part, on the stories that individuals learn about from the media

(Autunes & Hurley 1977; Chermak 1994; Chiricos & Eschholz 2002; Fishman & Weimann 1985; Garofalo 1981; Gilliam & Iyengar 2000; Surette 1992).

When we placed our focus solely on the stories about illicit- (or street-) drug offenders (who are arguably the focus of the “war on drugs” efforts), we found that a greater proportion of the stories about white women had neutral or positive overall tones because more of their narrative focus contained neutralizing (or mitigating) thematic elements. Specifically, two-thirds of the stories about white women who engaged in street-drug offenses had neutral or favorable overall tones, but this was true for only one-third of the stories about minority women accused or alleged to have committed illicit-drug offenses. These findings are consistent with the black feminist perspective, which maintains that minority women are perceived and, therefore, treated more negatively than white women.

The overall tones of newspaper stories differed for females of varying races/ethnicities due to differences in the emphasis placed on an offender’s degree of guilt, the harm she caused to another person, and her potential for reform. A higher percentage of the stories about white women contained narrative elements that served to minimize their culpability and/or provided presentations of successful drug treatment or some other indication that their lives were now moving in a positive direction. Our findings are consistent with the contention that beliefs about the culpability of offenders are rooted largely in negative racial and ethnic stereotypes (Barlow 1998; Chiricos & Eschholz 2002; Entman 1990, 1992, 1994, 1997; Gilliam & Iyengar 2000; Lundman 2003; Lundman, Douglass, & Hanson 2004; Peffley, Shields, & Williams 1996; Welch 2007), and that the media play a prominent role in the maintenance of these stereotypes (Welch, Fenwick, & Roberts 1998).

Within the criminal sentencing literature, focal concerns theorists argue that offenders who are viewed as culpable for their actions and/or incapable of reform receive more punitive sanctions (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer 1998). Consistent with this notion, Hurwitz and Peffley (1997) argued that negative depictions of black drug users influenced public support for the harsh punishment of offenders, rather than rehabilitation. In the current study, discussions of reform potential differed markedly for white women versus minority women. A higher percentage of the stories about white women documented their successful drug treatment, whereas a higher percentage of the stories about minority women provided accounts of their failed drug treatment, relapse, and/or re-arrest.

Negative portrayals influence not only the opinions of the general public, but also the opinions of actors in the criminal justice system including police, prosecutors, judges, juries, probation officers, and prison administrators. Legal decision making is “complex, repetitive, and often constrained by information, time, and resources in ways that may produce considerable ambiguity or uncertainty for arriving at a ‘satisfactory decision’” (Demuth 2003, 880). Criminal justice agents, therefore, use “perceptual shorthand” (Steffensmeier et al. 1998; see also Bridges & Steen 1998; Demuth 2003) based on stereotypes to efficiently make decisions. The use of cognitive shortcuts, however, may lead judges to:

project behavioral expectations about such things as offenders’ risk of recidivism or danger to the community. Once in place and continuously reinforced, such patterned thinking and acting are resistant to change and may result in the inclusion of racial and ethnic biases in criminal case processing. (Demuth 2003, 880-881)

The results presented in this paper, then, are important because they point to media frames of the crime problem and

criminals that might well provide an explanation for the dramatic and persistent racial/ethnic disparities that pervade our criminal justice system.

While the results of this study are consistent with the black feminist perspective and are in-line with discussions about negative stereotypes that pervade our society and the disproportionate confinement of minority women in U.S. prisons, there are some limitations that must be noted. First, our sample size is small. This limited our ability to conduct a more in-depth investigation. Researchers who gather a greater number of stories, for example, may be able to examine whether differences emerge in stories *among* minority female criminals. To elaborate, these scholars may be able to determine how portrayals of African-American female offenders differ from the depictions of Latinas and/or Native American women. Similarly, due to our study's relatively small sample size, our analyses were limited to comparisons of narratives for broadly-defined drug categories (i.e., illicit-drug offenses versus alcohol-related and pharmaceutical offenses). With more stories, future researchers may be able to conduct more in-depth examinations of how race/ethnicity impacts the presentation of stories about specific types of street-drug offenses (e.g., stories about crack cocaine or methamphetamine). Moreover, it may also be possible that a woman's social class may be an important determinant of the overall tone of a story and the thematic elements that are contained within a story. However, the concept of social class is a very difficult one to measure based on the types of information generally available within newspaper crime stories. To be clear, we attempted to measure a woman's social class based on indications of her occupation, level of educational attainment, income, and place of residence or living conditions (e.g., whether she was noted to live in an affluent area or in poverty). We found that

more than half of the crime stories provided no indication of a woman's social class. And, in the stories that contained some indication of social class, the vast majority of the stories were about lower class women. Thus, data were either missing for the social class variable or suggested that there was little variation in social class for the stories we encountered.

Aside from these limitations, the results gleaned from our exploratory study are important because they have direct implications for how people may develop stereotypes about criminal events and offenders—and ones that would sustain harsh treatment, even of women, if the person in question were African American, Latina, Native American, Pacific Islander, or some other person of color. It has long been established that minority offenders are overrepresented at every stage of criminal justice processing (for a detailed discussion see Walker et al. 2012). What is less clear, however, is why this happens. A number of scholars have posited that this phenomenon is related to negative racial/ethnic stereotypes that are prevalent in American society (Chiricos & Eschholz 2002; Gilliam & Iyengar 2000). Moreover, many have argued that the media play a key role in perpetuating stereotypes, including notions about who is likely to be guilty and, thus, who deserves harsh punishment (Chiricos & Eschholz 2002; Entman 1990, 1992, 1994, 1997; Madriz 1997). Because everyone is exposed to messages from the news media, it is unlikely that anyone will be immune from its influence. Furthermore, public support for harsh responses to criminal behavior, particularly for members of minority groups, gives politicians and policy makers a license to continue to pursue incarceration rather than drug treatment in response to the problem of drug addiction, despite the fact that the former is arguably far more costly and less effective.

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1. Pauline K. Brennan received her Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from the University at Albany, SUNY, and is an Associate Professor and the Doctoral Program Chair for the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Her areas of research include inequity in court processing, corrections policy, and issues related to adult-female offenders and victims. She has published papers on the combined effects of race/ethnicity and sex on court processing outcomes, media depictions of offenders, correctional policies for male and female offenders, and the challenges of service delivery for immigrant victims of domestic violence.

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