Television consumption, fear of crime, and racial beliefs: Understanding the relationship between crime television viewing, fear of crime, and perceptions of races.

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Abstract

The average American citizen has a myriad of fears, but the fear of death, especially through crime, tends to be at the forefront of many Americans’ minds. The prevalence of the media in today’s society has prompted many researchers to discover how much it influences the way we think. With the pervasive nature of both the fear of crime and the media, it is important to determine just how much sway television programs hold when it comes to viewers’ perceptions of races and fear of crime. The aim of this study was to identify how viewing crime shows contribute to people’s fear of crime and perception of different races. A nationwide sample of residents in the United States above age 18 was surveyed ($N = 1,573$). To identify fear of crime and perception of various races in connection with viewing certain television programs, correlational analyses were computed in order to determine whether there were any relationships. Results revealed a statistically significant positive relationship ($p<0.01$) between viewing crime shows and fear of crime. However, it was relatively weak ($r = .15$). There was no statistically significant relationship between viewing crime shows and perceptions of race. Consistent with prior research, viewing crime shows has a positive relationship with fear of crime. Contrary to prior research, there was surprisingly no relationship between viewing crime shows and perception of races.
Television consumption, fear of crime, and racial beliefs: Understanding the relationship between crime television viewing, fear of crime, and perceptions of races.

Fear is an emotion that tends to loom in the mind of the average American citizen. There are a myriad of fears but according to the National Institute of Mental Health (2014), approximately 68% of the American population is afraid of death. Within that percentage, 88% of citizens are worried the death would be crime-related (National Institute of Mental Health, 2014). This suggests that the fear of death, especially through crime, is at the forefront of many Americans’ minds. Could these fears have germinated from the media? How powerful can the media be?

**Literature Review**

It is important to understand the prevalence of media because of its impact on American viewers. The information presented in the programs, whether through news channels (e.g. Fox, CNN, MSNBC) or drama series (e.g. CSI, SVU, House of Cards), do not accurately portray real world statistics. According to Warr (2008) information from the media about crime is often very out of sync with reality. He found that social awareness of crime has steadily increased over the past three decades because “people are bombarded with information about crime from the media, which makes them believe the world is a much more dangerous place than it really is” (Warr, 2008, p. 2). According to the Center for Disease Control (2010), the first leading cause of death for the United States population under age 44 is unintentional injuries. Even though the public has an increasing fear of crime, the FBI’s uniform crime reports show a steady decrease in violent crime rates from 1991 to 2010. In fact, the violent crime rate in 2010 was a 40-year low (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010).
The pervasive fear of crime has led many scholars to hypothesize about the origins of this mindset. Many researchers have looked to the mass media as the driving force behind the increase in this fear. Liska and Baccaglini (1990) conducted a study looking at the relationship between newspaper crime coverage and the fear of crime, and found that fear was affected most by homicide stories when compared to any other kind of crime story. They also reported that while local homicide stories increased fear, non-local homicide stories decreased fear. Sotirovic (2001) conducted a study to examine the effect of media use patterns on crime-policy preferences with affective and cognitive processes as mediators. Consistent with Liska and Baccaglini’s (1990) findings, Sotirovic (2001) also discovered that people who watch the local news had an increased fear of crime. She also found connections between media use and fear of crime, and between fear of crime and support for punitive crime policies, which suggests that mass-mediated information influences personal-level judgments as well. These findings support the notion that people tend to absorb and internalize the information they are exposed to by the mass media. As the mass media, specifically television, increasingly infiltrates our lives, we need a clearer understanding of how much their messages influence us, and what implications these messages could have on our beliefs on different subject matters. The purpose of this study is to further explore these issues.

**The Effects of Media Framing**

There is plenty of evidence that the media has the ability to guide people’s thoughts. One of the first times the influential power of the media could be seen was when Orson Welles broadcasted his version of H.G Well’s book “The War of the Worlds” in 1938. Over six million people heard this national radio broadcast, and a million citizens actually perceived the fictitious story as reality (Lowry, Nio & Leitner, 2003). Are people too gullible when it comes to media
news coverage and crime television shows? According to Romer, Jamieson and Aday (2003), the public overestimates the actuality of crimes; crime statistics provided by law enforcement do not measure up to the amount of crime reported by the media – annual crime reports indicate that violent crimes have been decreasing steadily since the 1990’s.

Truman (2005) suggests that a possible explanation for the public’s overestimation of crime rates is the dramatic fallacy, which refers to the phenomenon that even though smaller crimes such as robberies or burglaries are far more common, people are more scared of becoming a victim of a violent crime. However, many other researchers explain the public’s fear of crime by attributing it to the Agenda Setting Theory. This theory states that the media tells the public what to think, but not how to think about certain issues (Young, 2013). Numerous studies have found that the media reports a level of crime that is disproportionate to actual crime rates. Several studies have also found that news channels feature more crime stories than any other stories – News directors have accepted that as much as the news media is a business, fearful news is used frequently to attract viewers (Iyengar & Reeves, 1997). Violent crimes such as homicides, rapes, and extreme physical assaults seem to receive the most attention in the media – there is a sort of sensationalism that keeps the audience glued to the television. The brutal images portrayed on the television screen trigger fear in viewers of becoming a victim of crime (Altheide, 2003). The media inform individuals about crime while painting a vivid picture in the audience’s mind, which subconsciously affect them in their daily lives. Overall, it can be said that the media can be seen as accountable for the heightened fear of crime and can even create moral panic (Kohm, Waid-Lindberg, Weinrath, Shelley & Dobbs, 2012).

**Theoretical Framework**
Gerbner’s cultivation theory (1969) asserts that our perceptions of the world are shaped by the portrayal of reality on television. Further research led Gerbner to report that heavy-television viewers are more likely to have magnified perceptions of victimization, mistrust, and danger, as well as mistaken beliefs about crime and law enforcement than light-television viewers (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). As Gerbner’s theory is extremely popular among the mass communication community, many scholars have further developed his original theory, and recent findings have suggested that it is genre-specific viewing that affects viewers, as opposed to just general television viewing. The revised model of the cultivation theory is an extremely fitting theoretical framework for our study, as we are interested in seeing whether varying television programs will affect people’s perceptions of various races and fear of crime differently.

Due to the fact that the media, and television in general, are so omnipresent, many researchers have dedicated their time to studying how it might impact our lives. Cultivation theory has been applied to many different studies ranging from fears to body image to romantic ideals. A study conducted by Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2003) suggested that exposure to the television series *Six Feet Under* leads to a mild increase in viewers’ general fears of death. Another study found that crime drama viewing predicted higher perceived risk of sexual violence in women (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2012). Various studies have been carried out and while the findings fluctuated between analyses, all signs point to the fact that watching television does influence people’s perceptions of the world somehow.

**Variance across Television Programs**

Much research has been conducted to analyze the effects different television programs have on people’s fear of crime, but the results have varied. Kort-Butler and Hartshorn (2011) found that nonfictional crime shows were positively related to fear of crime while there were no
significant relationships between viewing crime dramas, news, and fear of crime. However, some researchers found significant relationships between fear of crime and those who watch the local news, crime dramas, and reality crime shows (Callanan, 2012; Eschholz, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2003; Romer, Jamison, & Aday, 2003). Unlike Kort-Butler and Hartshorn (2011), who found that total television viewing is unrelated to fear, Custers and Van Den Bulck (2011) found a significant relationship between general television viewing and dispositional fear of crime. Van Den Bulck (2004) conducted a study comparing three causal explanations for the relationship between television fiction and fear of crime and found support for the cultivation hypothesis, as well as results that suggested that television viewing is a better predictor of fear of crime than personal experience of crime. More research is needed to close the gap between these conflicting findings.

Television Portrayals of Race and Crime

The correlation between race and crime first became a prevalent topic in the 1900’s and has since become a widely popular area of study. Media portrayals and representations, especially in the news, cultivate what some scholars label the “racialization of crime.” This mindset characterizes and stereotypes minorities, especially Blacks, as criminal figures (Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz, 2004; Gilliam, Valentino, & Beckmann, 2002; Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002; Skogan, 1998). Several scholars have noted that the racialization of crime further escalated during the Civil Rights Movement around mid 1950s to 1960s (Barlow, 1998) and took greater shape in the years to come. According to Chiricos and Eschholz (2002), media portrayals linking race and criminality (1) frame crime as a Black phenomenon (2) stereotype African Americans, especially men, as the main source and root of
criminal behavior. In this perspective, they term the linkage between race and crime in the media “the racial typification of crime” and “the criminal typification of race,” respectively.

The extended history of racialization of crime in the media can be regarded as a significant factor in how Americans perceive crime in their surroundings. It proposes the question: how do crime news reports, crime dramas, crime reality shows, and other media outlets targeting crime and criminal behavior affect our perceptions of race and crime? Researchers have found that Americans’ perceptions of crime and race significantly correspond with how crime and race are portrayed in the media. In one study, researchers found that Americans felt a greater threat or risk of crime when physically near individuals of racial minorities (St. John & Heald-Moore, 1996). Another study found that when white and black individuals were asked to replicate exact behaviors, the black individuals were viewed as more of a threat than their counterparts (Duncan, 1976; Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009; Sagar & Schofield, 1980). Several scholars have found that the racialization of crime in American media has led to a large majority of Whites’ feelings of prejudice or fear towards Blacks (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997; Quillian & Pager, 2001), which debuted a popular theoretical perspective called the racial threat theory (Blalock, 1967; Liska, 1992).

The Current Study

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that television does influence viewers’ fear of crime in some capacity, but there is not a collective agreement on what programs exert the most influential power. According to the Parent Television Council (2014), more than 98% of U.S. homes have at least one television set in 2007. Nielsen (2014) reports that Americans continue to watch more than five hours of traditional television per day. As television continues to expand and thrive, it is increasingly important to continue studying its impact on our thoughts
and behaviors. Even though there is no shortage of research when it comes to analyzing the relationships between television viewing, perceptions of race, and fear of crime, the findings have produced varying results.

Also, the topics of media content and the process for how they are being expressed has changed over the past five years alone. According to Jurkowitz et al. (2013), the content topics in the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in journalism can change rapidly within the course of a few years, as can the structure and process for what content is expressed. New and various happenings are visually and verbally communicated in popular culture talk shows, news shows, cooking shows, and crime shows. These different types of shows have shaped and changed Americans’ perspectives on different racial groups regarding crime, therefore harvesting different direct and indirect reactions. The media content has shifted from edited and pre-recorded factual content to that of opinion, debate, and live coverage (Jurkowitz et al., 2013).

Because there are several factors that have either created recent change, or leave certain questions unanswered, we propose a need for further research regarding media’s relationship to crime, fear, and race. We need to gather a more accurate, specific understanding of the media’s affect on people and their perception of crime and different racial groups. We want to focus on television, as it is a medium that changes in content constantly, and needs to therefore be further studied. Our current study aims to gain further insight into these relationships, seeking to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the relationships among watching crime shows and perceptions of various races?

RQ2: What are the relationships among watching crime shows and fear of crime?
Methods

Participants

The data from this survey come from a nationwide probability sample conducted in April 2014. 1,573 non-institutionalized general population adults (18+ year olds) residing in the United States were surveyed by the GfK Group on behalf of Chapman University. The GfK Group who administered the survey had their own consent and confidentiality data that were not readily available to us. The project is housed at the Earl Babbie Research Center located at Chapman University. The study was conducted on KnowledgePanel, a probability-based web panel designed to be representative of the United States. Randomly aged eligible adults were selected, received an email invitation to complete the survey, and were asked to do so at their earliest convenience. As a standard, email reminders to non-responders were sent on the third day of the field period.

A total of 1,573 completed surveys were collected; the response rate was 62.9 percent. The mean age for all participants was 46.86 (SD=17.25). We computed the descriptive statistics for age, education, race/ethnicity, and region. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the final sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>48.4</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30-44</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>25.7</td>
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Measures

People’s perceptions of different events and experiences that may be associated with fear were measured with a survey developed specifically for the Chapman Survey of American Fears (Chapman University, 2014). It contained 39 questions measuring people’s personal beliefs and thoughts on religion, supernatural activity, politics, worries, fears, the environment, etc. For the
purposes of this study, we narrowed the questionnaire down to sections solely concerned with perceptions of various races, fear of crime, and television programs. We computed new variables for perceptions of race, fear of crime, and crime shows.

**Dependent variable: Perceptions of various races.** Respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of various races were on a 100-point feeling thermometer: 0 -50 (not favorable), 50 degrees (neutral), and 50- 100 degree (favorable, particularly warm) ratings. This particular variable is comprised of four items: Asians, Blacks, Caucasians/Whites, and Hispanics, with a reliability coefficient of .88.

**Dependent variable: Fear of crime.** Fear of crime was measured by asking respondents to rate their level of fear of being victimized on a four-point scale (very afraid, afraid, somewhat afraid, and not afraid at all). The variable is comprised of seven items: being mugged, identity theft/ credit card fraud, being stalked, murder, police brutality, sexual assault, and racial/ hate crime, with a reliability coefficient of .91.

**Independent variable: Television programs.** The respondents were asked how often they watch the following television programs on a five-point scale (very often, often, sometimes, rarely, and never): shows about actual crimes – such as Dateline NBC, 48 Hours, and America’s Most Wanted, and shows about fictional crimes – such as Castle, CSI, and Law and Order: SVU. These two items produced a reliability coefficient of .61.

**Results**

This study was guided by two questions: (1) What are the relationships among watching crime shows and perceptions of various races? (2) What are the relationships among watching crime shows and fear of crime?
The first research question examines if viewing crime shows influences people’s perceptions of various races. We began by computing the variable for viewing crime shows from the questionnaire items asking how often viewers watched shows about actual crimes, and shows about fictional crimes. We also computed the variable for perceptions of various races from the questionnaire items asking viewers to rate their views toward ‘Asians’, ‘Blacks’, ‘Caucasians/Whites’, and ‘Hispanics’ on a 100-point feeling thermometer. We then conducted a correlational analysis and calculated a correlation coefficient between both variables. The findings proved to be statistically insignificant (p > .01), resulting in a lack of relationship between viewing crime shows and perception of various races.

The second research question examines if viewing crime shows influences people’s fear of crime. We used the same variable for viewing crime shows. Fear of crime was measured with these seven items: being mugged, identity theft/credit card fraud, being stalked, murder, police brutality, sexual assault, and racial/hate crime. We then conducted a correlational analysis and calculated a correlation coefficient between both variables. The results produced a statistically significant positive relationship between watching crime shows and fear of crime. However, it is relatively weak. (r = .15, p < .01). Table 2 displays the correlation matrix between our variables.

Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fear of Crime</th>
<th>Perception of Race</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.148**</td>
<td>-.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1532</td>
<td>1525</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion
The primary purpose of this study was to distinguish the relationship between (1) viewing crime shows and perceptions of different races and (2) viewing crime shows and fear and crime.

**Interpretations**

Surprisingly, the results of the current study are inconsistent with the research found in previous studies regarding the relationship between viewing crime shows and perceptions of races. The results indicate a lack of an overall relationship between viewing crime shows and perception of various races. One possibility for this finding is the social desirability bias, in which respondents may have answered in a manner they felt would be viewed favorably by researchers. Another potential explanation could be that recent television shows have begun attempting to portray racial equality, utilizing different races for both upstanding and criminal characters. It may be, then, that viewers are not subjected to as much racialization of crime as the participants in past studies.

The results of this study are consistent with the research found in previous studies regarding the relationship between viewing crime shows and fear of crime. The results indicate that exposure to crime shows is related to viewers’ fear of crime, but the relationship is not as strong as previous studies suggested. Aday, Jamison, and Romer (2003), Callanan (2012), and Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz (2003) all found significant relationships between fear of crime and those who watch the local news, crime dramas, and reality crime shows. A possibility for the weak relationship found in our study is that the measure of viewing crime shows may have been flawed. Participants were asked how often they watched shows about actual crimes and shows about fictional crimes, but there were no questions accounting for viewers’ exposure to the news. Previous studies have placed more emphasis on the relationship between news
watching and fear of crime, and have found substantial evidence of a positive relationship between the two variables.

**Strengths**

The Chapman Survey of American Fears is the first comprehensive nationwide study conducted on what strikes fear in Americans. The results support the argument that television is far-reaching in its influential power. This study is the first of what will be an annual evaluation of what people fear, leaving room for the study to improve and grow, as well as to capture changes in people’s fears and attitudes with each passing year.

**Limitations**

There were a few limitations with this current study. One of the important limitations is the lack of measure on other types of media prevalent in American culture today. In future studies, the researchers could gain a more comprehensive understanding by analyzing other forms of media, including social media, film, news, print, and the internet. Another limitation is that the measure used to assess respondents’ perceptions of races was relatively generic and limited. An updated survey should be expanded in future studies to develop a more accurate evaluation of people’s perceptions. Future measures could include Likert scales determining how much respondents agree with different statements about varying racial groups, as well as the perceived likelihood of different races committing crimes, based on our existing 7-item scale measuring fear of crime.

**Implications**

The findings of this project reveal a few implications. Our results indicate that viewing crime shows does have some influence over viewers’ fear of crime. Thus, studio heads and showrunners should be more diligent about what they produce, as they have the ability to shape
people’s perceptions and views of the world. Future studies should also focus on and develop stronger measurements for people’s perceptions of various races. Although there was a lack of a relationship between viewing crime shows and perceptions of race, the positive relationship between viewing crime shows and fear of crime suggest that people’s beliefs and attitudes are somewhat influenced by viewing television. Racism is an important issue in today’s society, especially in light of the recent cases of unarmed Black men being shot to death by uniformed men. The media encourages the exposure of racially charged crime stories (Balkaran, 1999), as there is day-to-day coverage of racial events. The perceptions of racial groups, due to the media coverage, are therefore very negative (Balkaran, 1999). Whether television simply reflects certain perceptions or encourages them, the media is clearly a very prominent facet of our lives that cannot be ignored. Our perception of the world around us is shaped by personal experiences, as well as the mass-mediated information we are exposed to.

Real World Solutions

We propose a number of real-world solutions to target the issues raised by this study. People can create a website, much like Jezebel, focused specifically on subjects/media content involving crime, media, and race. This blog should aim to educate people on different racial and criminal issues, as well as the validity of the media and their content. This website could involve articles that look at current events – examining both news coverage and popular culture topics such as celebrity/entertainment news, music, art, and even crime shows. This would reach out to the ever-growing population of individuals who look to the Internet as their main source of information. Another real-world solution could be to hold group panel discussions at different colleges and universities on the subject of racism, Americans’ false perception of crime rates, and the media’s impact on these perceptions. Different corporate companies (e.g. Starbucks,
ESPN, etc…) could also partner up with different groups that promote anti-racism and start different social media campaigns to tackle the issue. Most importantly, we need to understand the history of racism and educate ourselves on how we can progress. It begins with individuals and then we can look to institutions – schools, churches, businesses, non-profit organizations, etc. to create a culture of equality and diversity. Researchers should focus on promoting racial equality in schools – the foundation of learning and an important institution in the United States. School is where many thoughts and beliefs begin to form, and education can truly progress the change that we seek.

**Future Directions**

Future research should work to better incorporate different forms of media, more extensive measures for perception of race, and include some measures concerning people’s trust in the media. In regards to this specific survey instrument, more in-depth questions regarding the media content, specifically, crime shows, should be included. Potential additions to the study would be questions that focus more on the news and include questions pertaining to both local and national news. If there were questions that addressed the news and people’s assessment of how accurate their information is, that would potentially alter the correlations between each variable. With the advent of new media and its increasing significance in our lives, it is of vital importance to study their potential impacts on viewers and their perceptions of the world.
References


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