

**BLACK, WHITE, AND READ ALL OVER: EXPLORING RACIAL BIAS  
IN PRINT MEDIA COVERAGE OF SERIAL RAPE CASES**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The discussion of race and crime has been a long-standing interest of researchers, with statistics consistently showing an overrepresentation of non-white offenders compared to their white counterparts – specifically in relation to violent crimes such as murder and rape. Prior research has found that about 46 percent of serial rapists are black, a fact that correlates with other sensationalized violent crimes such as mass murder and serial murder. The news media are the primary sources of this kind of information for the general public, with previous studies acknowledging that the media primarily focus on discussing non-white offenders in their crime-based news stories. With the majority of Americans receiving their information about crime from the news media, it is important to increase our understanding of how their representations might influence the general public. The current study explores the print media representations of serial rapists, from 1940-2010, from five newspapers: The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Boston Globe, The Washington Post, and the Chicago Tribune. A content analysis was conducted on 524 articles covering 297 serial rape offenders from the data compiled by Wright, Vander Ven, and Fesmire (2016) in which race of the offender was known. Results show that newspaper articles tend to report about fear-related topics and anxiety surrounding offenders when the offenders are non-white. Results also indicate that while newspapers dehumanize both white and non-white offenders, white offenders tend to have their behavior neutralized using techniques to garner more sympathy.

**Keywords:** race, media, social construction, serial rape, bias, print media

*For Riley, Grammy, and Grampy*

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## CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION

News media, print, television, and electronic sources, offer millions of individuals around the world a glimpse into a world of which they might not otherwise be a part. Being able to read stories about horrific crimes that are happening in other places provides participants a break from their boring and mundane lives without having to leave the comfort of their own home - even more so when a crime is highly sensationalized and given exorbitant amounts of media attention. The news media, however, can greatly impact the perceptions their audience has on given topics. For example, even though school shootings are a relatively rare event, they receive some of the most media coverage of any crime – leading the general public to believe that school shootings happen frequently enough that they need to be fearful in their everyday lives. Fox, Levin, and Quinet (2012) point out that even though school shootings are highly publicized and attract a lot of attention from the media and within government policy – there is only a “1 in 2-million chance that a school aged-child will be murdered while at school” (p. 119). The mass media has the potential to disillusion millions of individuals because they are seen as an authority on that given topic and an important agent of socialization (Ehrlich, 2009; Hedges, 2009; Kraus and Auer, 2000).

One of the many ways that the media can influence the perceptions of those partaking in it – is by choosing what they report. Focusing on criminal activity and negative events will likely result in a negative world view, while news programming that focuses on positive, more uplifting content can inspire more positive feelings about the world. The same way that mass media can impact peoples’ perceptions about the world, can also potentially impact the ways in which individuals feel about the race of both offenders and victims of crimes. Research has found that media can strongly impact, and often negatively, the ways in which consumers feel about race

and ethnicity of groups that are dissimilar to themselves (Byfield, 2014; Ehrlich, 2009; Wilson, 2005). More specifically, Ehrlich (2009) argues that the media in dominant society, particularly in the United States, is focused on pleasing and perpetuating the “dominant white society” (p. 75). These depictions in the media can ultimately impact the feelings that out-group members have toward those different than themselves and influence racial prejudice and bias.

Some of the more sensationalized crimes discussed in the news media involve cases of serial murder, mass murder, and cases of rape and sexual assault. Interestingly, in contrast to the way the media and research has talked about race and crime, when it comes to sensationalized crimes such as serial and mass murder, the media places more emphasis on the perpetrator when they are white than when they may be a minority. According to Hickey (2013) nearly 56 percent of serial killers in the United States are black. Similarly, Huff-Corzine, McCutcheon, Corzine, Jarvis, Tetzlaff-Bemiller, Weller, & Landon (2014) found that the majority of mass killers in the United States were black males, representing 42 percent of the offender population. Wright, Vander Ven, and Fesmire (2016) had similar findings – though not homicide related, still a violent crime and sensationalized crime - serial rapists were comprised of 46 percent black offenders. All of these sensationalized, violent crimes are demonstrating the opposite of what the media is portraying in regards to racial representation in the media.

However, out of all of the violent crimes discussed in the media, serial rape is the most under researched and most in need of examination. This study aims to explore the ways in which news media discuss race and ethnicity in terms of serial rapists. Using the data set created by Wright, Vander Ven, and Fesmire (2016), this study will explore the over 2,000+ newspaper articles found with incidents of serial rape and conduct a content analysis aimed at understanding how the media talks about race and this particularly violent offense. Additionally, because the

coverage spans seven decades, this study will be able to make generalizations regarding racial coverage in the news over time using content analysis. Understanding these concepts in more intimate detail will provide a better understanding of how race and violent offending intermingle in two very important contexts that influence the perceptions of race and ethnicity on the general population, as well as news media coverage. Combined, the two can be a powerful force in influencing outgroup perceptions of different races and ethnicities.

## CHAPTER 2: A HISTORY OF RACE, CRIME, AND THE MEDIA

### Race and Crime

Race has been an important component for sociological and criminological researchers when trying to study criminal behavior and criminal victimization. One of the most important reasons that race is so crucial to understanding crime and vice versa, are the startling and disproportionate statistics. According to the FBI (2014), while the black population only represents about 13 percent of the total population, they represented over 50 percent of arrests for murder and robbery, nearly 30 percent for rape and burglary, and 33 percent for aggravated assault... Additionally, the racial makeup of victims is also cause for concern. The FBI (2014) states that about 50 percent of homicide victims were black, 45 percent white, and about 16 percent Hispanic/Latino. These large discrepancies and the disproportionate nature of these numbers has given researchers pause and a ground for conducting research on both offenders and victims and how their race ultimately plays into criminal activity of all types.

### Offenders

While violent crime is important and the focus of this proposal, it is important to understand how race impacts even lower level crimes. In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander takes on these disparities in the form of discussing the war on drugs and the extreme numbers associated with mass incarceration, especially for people of color. Alexander suggests that the war on drugs that began in the 1970s, was ultimately a war on race and ethnicity and the resulting backlash has persisted for the decades that followed. She argues that the numbers and statistics associated with drug



arrests for people of color do not make sense and instead follow a racist agenda that puts minorities and lower-class neighborhoods in the foreground. Alexander argues, that despite the knowledge that individuals in neighborhoods were more concerned about murder and other violent crimes than they were drug use, government policy focused on the drug war:

“participation in the drug war required a diversion of resources away from more serious crimes, such as murder, rape, grand theft, and violent assault – all of which were of far greater concern to most communities than illegal drug use” (p.73). This allocation of resources pointed the finger at poor minority groups as the root of most problems and subsequently incarcerated them. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2013) found that black males represented 37 percent of the state and federal inmate population, nearly triple the representation of the non-prison population, while Hispanics accounted for about 22 percent of incarcerated males in the United States while only having a total population representation of about 17 percent. Both minority groups are seen overrepresented in terms of incarceration. However, as stated previously, it is not necessarily because blacks or Hispanics are committing more crimes than whites – especially in terms of drug use, which has seen increased incarceration rates for this offense of over 1,000 percent (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003).

Mitchell and Caudy (2013) argue that this increased incarceration rate and the disparities between race and crime spill over into the criminal justice system and that the black offender populations are treated more harshly than the white offender populations, despite the fact that both Black and Hispanic populations were often times less likely to have a drug offense compared to whites. Leiber and Blowers (2003) examined misdemeanor crimes within the court system and how they relate to race and ultimately found that racial disparities existed there as well: “because African Americans are more likely to have their case classified as a priority and

not have a continuance, they have a greater probability than Whites to be convicted and incarcerated” (p. 477). Furthermore, sentencing disparities also exist for specific crimes that are targeted toward race. Alexander (2012) argues that while crack-cocaine and powder- cocaine are essentially the same substance and produce very similar harmful effects, they produce extraordinarily different sentences – and the reason involves race. Crack-cocaine is more commonly used by the lower classes, minority groups because it is cheaper and easy to make. Powder-cocaine is more commonly used by white, upper-class, higher status individuals because it is more pure and thus more expensive. Though both substances have the same detrimental values: “federal laws punish crack offenses one hundred times more severely than offenses involving powder cocaine” (Alexander, 112). The disparities between the races and they are handled both inside and outside of the justice system has been the target of much debate. Why is the black community overrepresented for violent crimes, but for crimes where whites commit offenses at similar rates, blacks are incarcerated more frequently?

Additionally, according to the 2014 Uniform Crime Report, those of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity represented 24 percent of all violent crime arrests while only representing about 17.4 percent of the total United States population (Pew Research Center, 2015). There is also research to suggest that Hispanic/Latino offenders are sentenced more harshly than their white counterparts – similar to the ways discussed occurring with black offenders. Petersilia (1985) found that “...blacks and Hispanics are less likely to be given probation, more likely to receive *prison* sentences, more likely to receive longer sentences, and more likely to serve a greater portion of their original time” (p.28). While not the stark contrast between blacks and whites, there still exists and overrepresentation among this minority population. Additionally, regarding language in discussion of crimes regarding whites and Hispanic/Latinos, Catalano and Waugh

(2013) found that certain words would be used to talk positively about crimes committed by white criminals but would be used negatively to talk about Hispanic/Latino criminals. Despite these findings, there is still little research in the area of Hispanic/Latino crime rates. This study will help examine the racial and ethnic differences between whites and non-white minorities from all racial and ethnic backgrounds to help fill the gap in the literature regarding the disparities between these groups

### Victims

While it is important to understand the characteristics of the offenders it is also necessary to understand the characteristics of victims. The relationship between victim and offender can provide both investigators and researchers crucial information in understanding the motivation behind a particular crime. While the news media tends to focus their attention on victim-offender relationships where the parties are strangers – research suggests that the majority of crime victims know their perpetrator on some level. Similarly, as the media may portray that black male offenders are constantly attacking white female victims, the research suggests that the majority of crime is intraracial, or between the same race.

According to Hough & McCorkle (2017) and Fox et. al (2012), the majority of violent crime victims are black males. This research is supported by the FBI. The 2014 Uniform Crime Report stated that nearly 51 percent of murder victims were black and 45 percent were white. With crimes like sexual assault, however, it is much more difficult to know the true racial makeup of the victims of this crime. Reporting rates for rape and sexual assault are incredibly low compared to other crimes with anywhere from 64% to 96% not reported to authorities. (Lisak & Miller, 2002; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Perkins & Klaus, 1996). Fisher, Cullen,

and Turner (2000) found that less than five percent of college-aged women who are sexually assaulted reported it to the police. However, because the majority of crimes are committed against a victim that is of the same race, it is possible that the majority of sexual assault victims are black.

As stated previously, the relationship between victim and offender can help provide crucial information into understanding the crimes committed. Fisher et. al (2000) found that 9 out of 10 women that experienced sexual assault in their sample knew their offender and according to the FBI (2014), only about 11.5% of homicides had a victim-offender relationship in which the participants did not know one another. The racial makeup of the victim-offender relationship can have a strong impact on the way cases are handled and dealt with within the criminal justice system.

Researchers suggest that the sentencing and punishment associated with rape and sexual assault may not be about the race of the offender, but instead may be about the race of the victim. Walsh (1987) found in their research that if a black offender committed intraracial rape, that is, rape against a person of their own race/ethnicity, the offender would receive a shorter sentence than if they committed a rape against a white victim. In a more recent study, Maxwell, Robinson, and Post (2003) found that minority individuals were less likely to be found guilty for rape and sexual assault than whites, and would also receive shorter sentences than white offenders. These findings are surprising and contradictory to the findings associated with others crimes. Maxwell et. al (2003) explain these findings by examining the role victims might play, citing that 9 out of 10 victims sexual assaults against black women were committed by black men, while Greenfield (1997) identified that the majority of black men that were incarcerated for sexual assault had white victims. Maxwell et. al (2003) argues that there is an injustice being served to the black

victims of sexual assault and that they are not valued at the same level as white victims. This discrepancy may display as racial differences in offenders, but is really more associated with the victims, as most violent crime is intraracial, with whites committing crimes against whites and blacks committing crimes against blacks (FBI, 2014). Caravelis, Chiricos, and Bales (2011) had similar findings regarding sentencing and minority offenders and argued victim race may be the reason. Research has found that offenders will receive a much harsher punishment if the victim is white (Lauritste, Heimer, & Lynch, 2009; Williams & Demuth, 2007; Spears & Spohns, 1996; Tonry, 1996). These findings suggest that society has deemed the race of the victim as more important than race of the offender.

These notions fit alongside Christie's (1986) discussion of what it means to be an "ideal victim." An ideal victim is seen as someone who is weak, respectable, and often garner much sympathy in the eyes of the public – often young, white females (Eliasson-Nannini, Sommerlad-Rogers, Bradley, & Pearson-Nelson, 2010; Randall, 2010; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016). Additionally, there is research to suggest that victims of "real rape" are more likely to be believed and treated differently within the court system than victims of other types of rape. First discussed by Estrich (1987) in her own experience, Fisher et. al. (2009) explain "real rape" as "the perpetrator is a stranger; the act is committed in a public setting; the victim shows signs of resistance or being overpowered – torn clothes, a bloodied face, bodily bruises (p. 4). Following this line of thought, an ideal victim therefore, would be a victim attacked by a stranger.. However, despite some research regarding how rape cases are dealt with within the criminal justice system based on their perceived "realness" (Larcombe 2002), and the discrepancies associated with race of victim – there is not much known about what it means to be an "ideal victim" in the eyes of the media or the eyes of the law. Because this study has primarily strangers

as the victim-offender relationship, the majority of these cases would be considered “real rape” and thus might produce an “ideal victim” type .This study aims to help use the concept of what it means to be an “ideal victim” and determine whether or not the news media also portrays certain individuals as “ideal offenders” based upon their news coverage of different serial rape cases and the language and rhetoric used in the stories.

These racial biases that are associated with the criminal justice system and the notion of the ideal victim, can be tied to the mass media and the biases found in news reporting of different crimes and how they can impact society as a whole. Research suggests that much of the racial inequality involved within the criminal justice systems stems from a culture of fear and latent racism in our society – often demonstrated within the mainstream mass media.

### Race, Crime, and the Media

With all of the discrepancies and racial issues that exist within the criminal justice system, it is not surprising that the news outlets have turned to reporting these issues and the crimes associated with them. Crime is the most popular type of story to exist in news outlets and these stories often shape and influence how individuals feel about certain topics. Campbell (1995) determined that black individuals in the news are portrayed in one of three ways: celebrities, victims, and criminals. Because, as Ehrlich (2009) points out, the news focuses twice the amount of time on crime than any other topic, this indicates that the majority of black individuals on the television would be portrayed as criminals. Why does the media portray some of the most heinous criminals in the news media as white when for smaller, less harmful crimes, they overemphasize minority races? Ehrlich (2009) argues that the answer centers around the media’s desire to instill fear in the general public and appeal to more viewers. Collins (2014)

found that news media often tried to justify and humanize the violent and criminal behaviors of white offenders, but not offer these justifications when the offenders were from a minority group. It is possible that the media are ultimately using their power as an agent of socialization to form fear and mistrust within the general public – thus creating more viewers and more consumers. It uses in-group membership to solidify fear of the in-group, but uses out-group membership to solidify and create fear of the out-group as well.

Ehrlich (2009) points out that crime coverage in the media is discussed double the amount of any other topic. While it is rare for news media to cover racial and ethnic minorities in terms of the more sensationalized violent crimes, it is far more common for news outlets to report on lower-level crimes in regards to race and ethnicity. Chiricos and Escholz (2002) found that only “...1 in 20 Whites who appear on screen is a crime suspect. More than 1 in 8 blacks and more than 1 in 4 Hispanics...” (p. 416).

Byfield (2014) contends that there is a working relationship between outside institutions, such as the police force, that work alongside the media to create the stories that they wish to share with the general public. This is not entirely surprising, as the media relies heavily on statements from police officers and detectives regarding various different cases. Byfield believe that this relationship is twofold in that there is: “1) a relationship whereby the external institution serves as a major resource for the media institution, and 2) a feature of the external institution organized or designed specifically to promulgate institutional goals through the dissemination of symbolic information” (p. 104). To put it simply, the police departments investigating these criminal cases can disseminate whichever information they deem important to the news outlets that will be reporting on a case – they ultimately get to control which stories are seen by the general public. If the already biased criminal justice system is controlling and maintaining the

stories given to the popular media, then the biases and prejudice exist not only in each institution separately, but combined, as well.

In terms of print media, Collins (2012) found that the language used to discuss the offender in sexual assault cases, changed based upon race of both the offender and the victim. If both the offender and victim were white, the newspaper articles were far more likely to rationalize the crime than if the offender was non-white or the offender was white with a non-white victim. The study also found that if the offender was a minority, the language revolved around themes of poverty and low levels of education. When a crime was committed by a white offender, the language seemed to emphasize that it was not behavior that is typical of normal people, but no such language existed when discussing minority offenders. These findings indicate that the media tries to depict minority offenders as behaving normally for the group in which they are a part, but that white offenders are behaving in a way that is rare for the group to which they belong. Though not stated outright, these subtle hints and word usage has way of spreading into the larger community as a whole and impacting their views on the world and those around them. The police and detective agencies may be providing news stations with crucial information about current cases, but they do not ultimately get to choose the language used by these outlets – demonstrating that the racial bias exists on a much deeper level.

Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, and Behm-Morawitz (2009) discuss the issue of “priming” and how it relates to racial exposure in the media. Priming, as described by the authors is: “the process through which information activated by exposure to media guides subsequent judgments” (p. 616). In terms of racial bias and prejudice, exposure to media that is inherently racist or subtly biased against minorities may trigger already existing negative feelings within the viewers or may potentially influence negative stereotypes toward other races. This same study



more specifically examined attitudes in regards to race when individuals were exposed to news reports about rape and sexual assault. The researchers found that there were depending on who was watching the news reports determined what sort of reaction a participant had to the news story. Results found that gender of participant did not influence whether or not they believed an individual was guilty – but race did influence their decision, minority individuals receiving more determinations of guilt than their white offender counterparts.

Presently we've seen that large institutions within the United States play a major role in racial bias that may come along with criminal activity or deviant behavior. Mastro et. al (2009) used sexual assault in their study and found that racial bias existed in presumption of guilt, so it is crucial to take a closer look at race and sexual assault and how they relate to one another in order to gain a deeper understanding of serial rape and its relationship to race and ethnicity.

### *Race and Rape*

Statistically, men of color represent nearly 30 percent of known offenders regarding rape in the United States (FBI, 2014). These numbers are surprising, given that the black population in the United States only represents about 13 percent. As with any other crime, it is important to understand the different social aspect that may cause such a drastic change in representation regarding this type of violent crime.

Historically, when rape and sexual assault have been discussed in terms of race, it typically referred back to the old south and days of lynching. Black men would be accused of committing rape against a white woman and would often inspire vigilante justice among mobs of white men – often times with little to no evidence against the individuals accused (Byfield, 2014; Dorr, 2004; Sommerville, 2004). Not surprisingly, these events took place after the end of

slavery and into the civil rights era when racial tensions and prejudice were extremely prevalent – especially in the south.

Despite the high rates of lynching that occurred historically, there is little research on black offenders regarding rape and sexual assault in today's literature and the literature often has contradictory findings regarding the nature of offender race and how it plays into the crime of sexual assault, especially in terms of sentencing and punishment. Alexander (2012) mentioned that, at least for drug offenses, black individuals are being arrested and incarcerated at much higher rates than white individuals, despite their rates of use being very similar, if not white offenders using drugs more frequently. As discussed previously, race of the victim was an important component when examining sentence in regards to sexual assault cases. With black men who had white victims receiving harsher sentences than white men with victims and black men with black victims. Missing from all of this, is the discussion of Hispanic/Latino victims and how they play into the crime of sexual assault. This study will help bring a previously underresearched group more into focus by examining how they are represented within this crime.

When examining the relationship between race and rape and sexual assault, there are contradictory and sometimes inconclusive findings. More research involving the relationship between these two categories, especially when including victims, may provide researchers with a deeper understanding of the topic and how race ultimately plays into not only the criminal act, but the aftermath within the criminal justice system.

### Race and Serial Violence

As stated previously, there is a strong connection between race of offenders and serial violence – but one that is not often talked about in the media. The media tends to sensationalize

white serial and mass offenders to the general public, and while a good majority of offenders are white, black offenders are disproportionately represented compared to their population in the general public. It is difficult to garner exact numbers and percentages when dealing with serial offenders, as it involves a lot of guesswork and assuming, but research has found that anywhere between 31 and 51 percent of serial killers are black (Hickey, 2013, Fox, et. al 2012). Hickey (2013) argues that the reason that many black serial killers go unnoticed and are so little talked about in the media is due to the fact that they are killing victims that are also black. As discussed previously, the court system tends to show more leniency for offenders who rape minority victims vs white victims and the same concepts may apply to the way the media handles black serial offenders. Black offenders killing black victims, Hickey (2013) argues, does not sell news stories the way that white victims garner news stories. Fox et. al (2012) supports these claims and also argues that the percentage of black serial killers may actually be understated due to “linkage blindness,” or the inability of police or other institutions to link multiple homicides to one individual. The authors argue that because murder and other violent crimes are intraracial: “serial killings of black victims, especially those who are impoverished and marginalized politically, are less likely to be connected, prioritized for investigation, and subsequently solved” (p. 144). These findings support the claim that both the criminal justice system as well as the mass media, control and manipulate the news stories based on racial grounds.

Additionally, Wright, Vander Ven, and Fesmire (2016) examined serial rapists over a seven decade time span in the newsprint media, specifically five different newspapers spread out in different regions of the United States. Finding for this study mirrored those involving serial murder with the black population comprising of about 42 percent offenders. Initially thought to perhaps be a product of racially biased reporting, the authors did an extensive search of offenders

with missing races within sex offender registries and ancestry.com and came up with the same results. Thus, black men are overrepresented among men arrested for rape.

This overview of the literatures demonstrates that there is a disconnect in our society involving race and crime, specifically rape and sexual assault, and more importantly, in regards to the way the mass media discuss cases of sexual assault and rape. There is a distinct lack of literature regarding serial rapists in general, but also in regards to the offender population of this group. This study will aim to explore how race is discussed in newspapers articles in regards to cases of serial rape. Gaining these insights will be crucial to understanding this offender population and will help both researchers and law enforcement better handle these types of offenses in the future, as well as providing a deeper understanding of tactics used to reinforce racial and ethnic bias. Specifically, bias is found in the way that rape and sexual assault are discussed by the mass media.

## CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND THE MEDIA

### Symbolic Interaction and Social Constructionism

Symbolic Interactionism, first put forth by George Herbert Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1969) asserts that society, as well as the symbols, meanings, and interpretations that go along with it, are subjective and that the individuals within a given society simply work together to create the reality in which they live. A more modern discussion of Symbolic Interaction provided by Joel Charon (2001) asserts that there are five ideas that form the foundation of this theory: 1) Human beings are social and interaction between people produces behavior. 2) The human being must be seen as a thinking being. 3) Humans cannot objectively and directly measure their environment – they work together to define the situation that they are in. 4) Human behavior emerges in context – people work together to create a social reality. 5) Humans are active agents. This concept of human beings interacting with one another and creating a reality is the foundation for the theory of social construction.

Building upon symbolic interaction, but taking it a step further, the basic narrative around social constructionism involves the ideas that society and an individual's identity are constructed through these symbolically created social institutions and social interactions. Similar to Charon, Berger & Luckmann (1966) made bold statements about society by suggesting that there is no objective reality to study. Instead, humans, through various different social processes, construct themselves and construct a society that they believe is objective: "Reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always *embodied*, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality" (1996, p. 116). This process happens through ways such "habitualization" – limiting human action, or doing something over and over again

until it becomes routine or habit. It also occurs through “institutionalization” which is when habitualization gets repeated by certain actors in social groups, thus habits become institutionalized. When a behavior becomes institutionalized, it takes over, in a way, the larger society. Influential institutions such as the mass media and the criminal justice system, hold enormous power over society, referred to as “roles” to Berger & Luckmann (1966) as they are seen as authority figures on the information with which they present us. They are seen as having a very specific set of knowledge and information that other members of society do not have. When racist and prejudicial behavior existing within the criminal justice system is passed on to the mass media, this racist behavior then becomes institutionalized and becomes standard behavior to the general public, who now see criminal behavior associated with minorities as “normal” (Collins, 2012). This reality constructed by the interaction between law enforcement, the media, and the general public emerges from a system of interactions between the three groups. The media obtains their information about crimes from law enforcement and law enforcement can choose which information they feed to the media as well as how much information they which to provide. The media then takes the information and constructs a story to feed to the general public that will grab their attention – they determine which information goes into the story, how long the story will be, and where the story will go, if in a newspaper, or what time slot the story will be in if on a news television program. These decisions reflect back to the general public what these social institutions deem to be important and worthy of news reporting. These stories then construct the reality of the general public.

Theorists Holstein and Gubrium (2000) discuss social constructionism in the way of narratives and communication between individuals. Though Berger and Luckmann (1966) first initially introduce the topic of conversation as being an important aspect of maintaining reality,

Holstein and Gubrium (2000) take this notion a step further. The authors cite what they call “discourses-in-practice” which are the conditions that guide the ways in which you interact with different people. Narratives told by individuals involve many different aspects, including knowing when to tell a story, acknowledging that your story is being heard and understood, knowing what types of language and discourse are appropriate for a given situation. These discourses-in-practice can be used by both the criminal justice system and the mass media. When the criminal justice system, such as law enforcement and public relations officers, control the content they give to the media, they are thusly controlling the discourse given to the general public – whether that narrative be about race, class, or gender. That narrative constructed by one system is then handed over to the mass media where they consider their target audience – typically white individuals. The stories and narratives they use will ultimately be the reality that is created for their consumers. Eliasson-Nannini, Sommerlad-Rogers, Bradley, & Pearson-Nelson (2010) conducted a study in which they also examined newspaper articles and the ways in which they portrayed victims of serial murder. The authors found that men received more unsympathetic coverage than women. In regards to age, victims between the ages of 18 to 30 were the most likely to receive sympathetic coverage, while those over the age of 50 were the least likely to receive it. The findings from this study help demonstrate how the media can portray stories and victims as being “worthy” or “unworthy” depending on certain demographics. In terms of race and sexual assault victims, prior research that suggests black women victims are not as valued in our society as white women who are victims – thus deeming them “unworthy” and creating that narrative within the general public.

The current study would highly benefit from a content analysis of newspaper coverage of serial rape cases. Understanding the language and narratives constructed and associated with

both offenders and victims of different races would help fill the gap in the literature that holds contradictory findings regarding race and crime in the news media. Social constructionism can also be used to help understand the ways in which the criminal justice system handles offenders of different races, as well as offenders who have minority victims vs white victims. With prior research suggesting that blacks generally receive lesser sentences or similar sentences than whites, unless they have white victims (Caravelis, et. al 2011; Maxwell, et. al. 2003; Walsh, 1987), the analyses conducted will be able to help determine the length of time taken to catch an offender, as well as whether or not the offender was convicted. Newspaper articles will also be able to help determine sentence length in some cases. Results could potentially help determine how law enforcement construct their reality and who they deem to be considered worthy victims and dangerous offenders and thus determining who the media portray as worthy victims and dangerous offenders.

Additionally, the newspaper articles will help determine the conditions for interaction regarding the individuals involved. I hypothesize that the initial interaction between the offender and the victim will be the driving force in determining the rest of the interactions with both the media and law enforcement. This study aims to explore how the race of the offender and the race of the victim impact both the criminal justice system's handling of the crime, as well as the media's portrayal of the crime in the newspapers and thus ultimately impact the public's perception of said victims and offenders based upon their race. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, many of the theoretical aspects behind the data will not emerge until the results are examined. Social Constructionism will help guide the methodology of the research project while other theories may emerge during the process.



This study will examine several research questions to examine the relationship between race, rape, the criminal justice system, and the mass media.

#### Research Questions

- 1) How does the rhetoric and language in newspaper articles differ depending on race of the offender?
- 2) How does the rhetoric and language in newspaper articles differ depending on the decade?
- 3) How does the rhetoric and language in newspaper articles work to create racial stereotypes or reinforce already existing racial stereotypes?

## CHAPTER 4: DATA AND METHODS

### Data

Data for this study will consist of secondary data taken from the data set initially created by Wright, Vander Ven, & Fesmire (2016). For their initial study, the researchers created a formal definition of serial rape and then searched newspapers articles for instances of serial rape that fit the definition. Newspapers spanned five different regions within the United States (Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, and New York Times) as well as seven decades (1940-2010) to ensure the most coverage. The final sample size consists of 1,037 offenders. Newspaper coverage is especially important for the current study, as it is examining the ways in which the mass media covers instances of serial rape and the language used to talk about the crime, the victims, and the offenders. The definition for serial rape used for this study and created by the founding researchers, states:

Three or more separate events of attempted or executed sexual coercion (with or without penetration) that occur over a period greater than 72 hours. Offenders appear to be actively seeking, hunting, or luring victims to accomplish sexual assault as their principal goal. Attacks are linked together (by police, media, or both) by some set of offense characteristics that may include the offender's physical characteristics, a common style of attack, or characteristics of the victim (Wright, Vander Ven, & Fesmire, 2016, p. 13).

The qualitative nature of this study leaves many variables and themes to be explored, however there are a few static variables that can be achieved through the qualitative analyses

*Source Date:* This variable identifies the year associated with each newspaper article written.

Understanding the source date will assist in understanding chosen rhetoric for each story, as well as allow for comparisons across decades.

*Race/Ethnicity of Offender:* This variable is defined as race or ethnicity of the offender as stated in the article. If race was not stated in the article, but a police sketch was present, perceived race or ethnicity was used. There were ultimately 297 cases in which the race of the offender is known.

*Race/Ethnicity of Victim:* This variable is defined at the stated race/ethnicity of victims given in the newspaper article.

### Methods

This study is comprised of an extensive content analysis. While many content analyses are based around the concept of grounded theory, this particular study uses deductive research to answer the given hypotheses. Deductive research uses theory, social constructionism in this case, to guide the research process and answer the research questions asked. Social constructionism operates under the ideal that reality is subjective and created through social processes. This study uses these concepts to guide the methodology.

To conduct the content analysis, I navigated nearly 524 newspaper articles searching for common themes and rhetoric used in the articles. A coding scheme was developed to keep track of the themes and ideas discovered while examining each individual newspaper article. Themes involving race and ethnicity were recorded; as were the words used to describe the crime, victim, and offender; and the length and placement of the story within the newspaper.

The units of analysis used when examining these articles were words and phrases, as both were used prominently within the rhetoric. In newspaper stories regarding sexual assault, there are often quotes and phrases given by police or victims and it was important to note the phrases used by these individuals, as well as to examine the word choices chosen by the newspaper reporters themselves. Words and phrases were coded as either positive or negative based upon the content surrounding the word or phrase and the definition of the words used as found in Webster's Dictionary.

The newspaper used, the year the article was written, and the race of the offender and victim were also coded.

The content analysis conducted will ultimately help determine the relationship between race and the mass media regarding how it can be influenced by authority figures and the criminal justice system – helping to decipher who and what characteristics are portrayed in news articles about ideal victims and offenders.

### Analytic Strategy

During the course of this study, I hand-coded each newspaper article associated with each offender using a method called “systematic thematic coding” guided by the process used by Dr. Tom Vander Ven in the book Getting Wasted: Why College Students Drink Too Much and Party So Hard. Using Social Constructionism as a guiding theory, I aimed to systematically look for words and phrases that would be associated with how a crime or criminal would be depicted to the general public. The process of this centered around multiple readings of each newspaper article, five times for each of 297 total offenders, with some offenders associated with multiple newspaper articles. During the initial reading of each individual article, I hand-coded words and

phrases that were used to describe the crime: “heinous,” “brutal,” “dastardly.” Additionally, words were identified to describe the actions of the offenders... words such as: “prowl,” “hunt,” and “lure” and words that described the offenders: “demonic,” “attractive,” “cunning.” Using these words as guiding techniques, I then examined all of the coded words and phrases and color-coded them based on theme. The themes that emerged represented the different categories explored in the study. Each theme and category were color-coded based upon which theme(s) they fit into, (i.e. dehumanization, fear-based reactions) as well as cross-coded with the quotes or words that were identified to match. Both were placed in spreadsheet files for easy access. Each article was read an additional four more times to ensure that each was covered thoroughly and that words and phrases were coded to their thematically appropriate match. As with any qualitative study, the findings and themes created are subjective and are thus open to the interpretation of the researcher, however, validity checks were conducted along the way to ensure the least amount of bias possible. These validity checks consisted of sending the words and phrases to a qualified individual outside of the study. This individual then coded the words in phrases into categories that they felt were exemplified in the data. Overall, there were only two instances in which the researcher and the outside-coder did not agree, for an interrater reliability of about 98%.

## CHAPTER 5: COMMUNITY-LEVEL FEAR

One of the major themes discovered throughout the coding process were the newspapers accounting for how the community in which these rapes occurred reacted and processed the crimes. This theme, however, was not present, or had a limited number of examples during the earlier decades. The 1940s and 1950s revealed no discussion of community or how a neighborhood reacted to a sexual predator existing in their presence. The 1960s and 1970s displayed some mentions of community, two and three total mentions respectively. It is not until the 1980s, is there a spike in mentions of community reactions to serial rapists, with eleven total mentions. This rise may be attributed to the rise in number of serial rapists over time, as the 1990s has the highest number of mentions of community with 25. However, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, serial rapists drop to levels similar to those in the 1970s, but newspaper coverage of community reactions remained higher than in the 1970s, with total mentions reaching 19. However, the percentage of mentioning community in articles steadily increased from the 1980s through the 2000s. The 1980s saw 15 percent of articles mentioning community, 40 percent with the 1990s, and 49 percent of articles in the 2000s mentioned community level responses to serial sexual offenders. Additionally, the same phenomenon occurred when referencing total number of mentions of community, including multiple mentions in one article.

The main theme discovered in the area of community was that surrounding the concept of fear and anxiety

- **Statements of Fear:** These words and phrases are defined as words used either by the writer of the article themselves, or in quotes given by individuals who may have been interviewed. Words such as: fear, shock,

panic, uproar, and on edge, were used to describe the generalized feelings of community residents over the crimes.

Using this identified theme, this study then aimed to examine how they were associated along racial lines. In what ways did the newspaper stories discuss community responses to these crimes based upon race of the offender? Knowing this type of information is pertinent to understanding the perceptions the general public will have toward out-group and in-group members. The ways in which these stories establish community responses toward offenders could potentially influence how people react toward different offenders based upon their race.

One of the main ways that community appears to be used in these articles is to demonstrate that at the community level, residents in neighborhoods in which there is a black offender, appear to be less tolerant of the activity and more anxious to remove that individual from their town than in the case of white offenders. However, not all of the findings on the community level demonstrated this aspect. Total, out of the 93 white serial rape offenders, only ten articles mentioned community, while 40 articles of the 180 black serial rape offenders mentioned community level responses, resulting in 10 percent and 22 percent respectively. While there are significantly more black offenders than white offenders, it is possible that the over representations were due to an increase in sample size, however, percentage differences were accounted for and resulted in the following findings.

### Statements of Fear

#### Fear Amongst Authority

Early on, one of the main themes regarding community fear, demonstrated itself by way of authority figures commenting on the crimes and the offenders. Newspapers would often

release statements made by judges, mayors, and police officers to gather their opinion on the crimes that were occurring. These authority figures would then take it upon themselves to serve as a type of spokesperson for the community. One such example, found in the 1950s in an article from the New York Times had a quote from a judge presiding over a case involving a black serial rapist with at least six victims attached to his crime spree: “If this be true, there is no doubt that today the whole community is shocked at this dastardly and brutal act” (P. 9). Additionally an article referencing another black rapist in the Chicago Tribune in the 1950’s used a quote from the assistant state attorney, stating: “A one man crime wave...had the neighborhood in an uproar” (P. 13). These quotes demonstrate one of the main ways in which the newspapers articles articulate the feelings of a community. Using someone in a position of power to generalize and speak for residents about what they must be feeling.

This type of speculation began in the 1950s, but continued throughout several decades.

Regarding non-white serial rapists in the 1980s

- Prosecutor: “the man...”a terrorist to our community” (New York Times, P. B8).
- Police Sargent: “obviously, they are concerned” (Los Angeles Times, P. OC\_A22).
- Police Department: “It has the neighborhood very scared...” (Washington Post, P. D07),
- Police Department: “...intended to profit from the fear he created in the community” (Washington Post, P. A1)
- Assistant State Attorney: “This is every woman’s worst nightmare, to have somebody attack them in their bed” (Chicago Tribune, Kridel).



These examples have shown, with no exceptions, that over the years, until the most recent decade, newspaper articles relied on authoritative figures to explain to readers the severity of the situation. The offenders that garnered this type of attention were exclusively non-white, even in decades that saw a higher number of white offenders as opposed to black. Using quotes about fear, panic, and terror among community residents from police sergeants, attorney generals, and magistrates, allows the reader to make a connection that black offenders are worse than white offenders – they cause these powerful figureheads to speak out against them and what they have done. And when those same newspapers and articles fail to represent the same level of seriousness for white offenders, it reaffirms that there is something innately better about white offenders than black offenders. Perhaps that black offenders are more dangerous and should be feared on another level than white offenders.

Theoretically, social constructionism works to explain this phenomenon by discussing the ways in which the media socializes and reinforces the negative stereotypes associated with non-white society. Authority figures such as police, magistrates, and district attorneys hold a certain position in a society that deems them more reliable than non-authority figures. When newspaper articles continuously use these authority figures to exemplify fear felt in the community, as well as make general sweeping statements about the offender, it will resonate with readers. And when the authority figures are only talking about black offenders and the fear and panic they create within a community, the “dominant white society” discussed by Ehrlich (2009) has any previous prejudices about out-group members confirmed. Discussed previously, the concept of priming, (Mastro, et. al., 2009) is stated as: “the process through which information activated by exposure to media guides subsequent judgments” (p. 616). Individuals who partake in reading news or watching the news on television are being exposed to these statements, thus potentially

reinforcing already existing negative stereotypes and prejudices they may hold, or creating new ones that did not previously exist. These positions of authority, police officers, judges, and district attorneys, are all given power and authority symbolically, by individuals within a society. Social constructionism dictates that the reality created by those in a society, a reality that individuals believe is objective, is done so through processes referred to as habitualization and institutionalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Habitualization occurs when an act is done repeatedly until it becomes a routine or habit. When newspapers repeatedly report on authority figures describing the fear and panic created by minority offenders, it will eventually become habitualized and thus seen as a reality for those consuming the media – that black offenders are discussed more by those in power, and therefore are reinforcing negative stereotypes.

It is possible, as well, that the reason the newspapers are only reporting the statements on minority offenders from authority figures could be due to the fact that those in positions of power making these statements about minority offenders more frequently cover stories regarding minority offenders over white offenders. This concept falls into the term of institutionalization discussed by Berger & Luckmann (1966) to describe how when habitualization is repeated by powerful actors in certain social groups, the behaviors that were habitualized, then become part of the larger institutions and begin to reflect themselves in the larger society. Berger & Luckmann (1966) continue to discuss how these institutionalized behaviors are made even more powerful when they are perpetuated by those in society who hold certain “roles,” or positions given to individuals in a society in which they are seen as an authority figure. If those individuals that hold these positions of power, or “roles” are consistently making comments and statements about fear regarding minority offenders and not white offenders, then their position in society is being used to habitualize and institutionalize

racist and prejudicial behavior that is thusly even more so institutionalized when picked up by the mass news outlets that continue to report the statements made by these figures. The decision by the newspaper outlets to report on these statements demonstrates to the general public what is deemed important in our society and aids in constructing a reality that is rife with racial stereotypes and continues to reinforce negative stigma associated with black offenders that does not exist with white offenders.

In the most current decade, there were no authoritative figures referencing community fear – instead the shift in focus seemed to change to the residents themselves discussing what they were thinking, feeling, and doing as a result of the crimes occurring where they live. Though not seen as authority figures on the topic, it is important to determine if the habitualized and institutionalized behaviors have permeated the public as a whole and what that ultimately means for understanding media reporting bias.

### Fear\_Amongst the Community

As stated previously, the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s saw few mentions of community. The 1970s only demonstrated three mentions of community, but produced, for the first time, quotes from residents in the affected communities about how they were feeling in terms of the crimes being committed. The Boston Globe, reporting on a white, male offender, quoted a 14-year old girl: “I’m scared. Really scared all the time now...I never walk anywhere now, after dark. I always call my parents” (Larkin, p. 55). The Chicago Tribune, reporting on a black offender, quoted a victim who managed to escape from the rapist in saying: “...everybody I know has been in a state of constant panic...several of my friends haven’t been able to sleep at

night and they're even terrified to go home after work unless they have an escort" (Coates, p. A14).

The 1980s saw an increase in rapists, mentions of community, and additionally, mentions of fear and anxiety via quotes from residents. In the case of a white offender, the Washington Post quoted a female resident as saying: "I have the lights on all the time and I'm going to get the bushes in my front yard cut. We're pretty much living like prisoners, with the windows nailed and doors double-bolted..." (Engel & Whitaker, p. C1). The Washington Post again quoted a 47 year old woman in regards to a white offender, stating: "I'm not a person who frightens easily, but now I'm a hell of a lot more aware when I go out" (Gregg & Vobejda, p. C3).

The 1990s percentage of community mentions continued to increase. The New York Times has several people quoted in various different articles regarding black offenders.

- "I'm very concerned, especially being female. I don't want to be raped at 68" (Blair, p. 23)
- "You try to steel yourself to the possibility that danger is around you...but things like this make you feel that you can't ever full protect yourself" and called the situation "frightening" (Daniels, p. 21).
- "I was aware of the rapes and yes there was great concern here...everyone I spoke to was quite anxious and I told my daughter when she was coming home at night to take the bus from the station" (James, B3)
- "We're very careful getting on and off trains," "I don't dally. I come straight home from work and I always look to see who's around me" (Daniels, B3).

But the New York Times is not the only newspaper in the 90s to quote community residents in regards to black offenders. The Chicago Tribune included this quote from a community mother: “It’s just not safe. I have a bat in my hand when I walk them to school. I’m not playing” (Zeleny) as well as from another article “My 7-year-old daughter is afraid to go to school” and “This is something I think about all the time now...we have to keep constantly watching behind us when we go anywhere” (Blau & Kendall). The Los Angeles Times reported on a white offender with residents saying things such as “This is going to create hysteria among the citizens of San Clemente...it’s going to be so much panic” as well as “The girls are pretty scared around here” (Gomez & Paulson).

As stated previously, the 2000s decade did not have newspaper articles quoting individuals in positions of authority regarding fear and panic within a community, but they did, however, quote several community members in their pieces. All in regards to non-white offenders

- “I have to work. I always look over my shoulder, and sometimes I get the creeps and start running” (Washington Post, Jackman, B3).
- “For eight years, we have been victims of a rapist, forced to take alternative routes because we don’t feel safe in our community” (Los Angeles Times, Cardenas),
- “The attack in this normally quiet town known more for its golf courses and horse farms has alarmed residents. ‘I’m scared,’ said [a resident], who lives...near the victim’s home” (Boston Globe, Paige, B3).

- “I think it’s scary. It’s real scary...to have someone following you and just take away your innocence like that – that’s crazy” (Boston Globe, Ellement, B1).
- “I take a different route at night. To think things like this happen in your own backyard is very disturbing” (New York Times, Lueck, B4).

All of these quotes regarding community members and the fear they feel regarding a serial rapist being present in their neighborhood, are from cases in which the offender is a non-white male. There are no mentions of fear or concern amongst community residents when white offenders were present.

These examples of community level responses represented in the news media demonstrate that the habitualization and institutionalization that has occurred within those of authority against non-white offenders has become a permanent part of the general public. The newspapers have consistently reported on community responses, both authoritative and community-level, in regards to non-white offenders, but has not reported these responses in nearly the same capacity with white offenders. While there are fewer white serial rapists, the percentages represented in community-level responses are below that of black offenders with 5 percent and 7 percent respectively. While the percentages overall are low, the representation matters. Individuals who are reading these articles are now being saturated from both the institutional level and the community level in their reactions to non-white offenders over white offenders. This saturation plays even more into the concept of priming discussed previously. Individuals who may have had underlying negative stereotypes associated with out-group members are having their opinions and feelings confirmed and validated via the constant media attention and the rhetoric of fear and panic surrounding non-white offenders. This social

construction created by the mass media of the non-white offender as inherently more harmful and scary than the white offender has created in the mind of the consumer, a reality that there is more to fear regarding non-white offenders – that there is a level of danger that exists on a higher level, despite the nature of the crime being inherently the same. Over time, we see the decrease from authoritarian discussion of the inherently fearful nature of non-white offenders into the sector of community-level individuals speaking out about the fear in their community, about not wanting to walk alone at night, double-bolting doors and windows, and taking different routes home from work or school. While there were a couple instances of community-level fear with white offenders, the overwhelming responses were towards non-white individuals. Reasons for this shift in focus could be attributed to a number of different factors – including changes in privacy laws, changes to how newspapers access individuals to interview, and the ease with which writers can obtain an interview with increased technology. Reporters are no longer scrambling to record on a tape that they have to rewind and listen to continuously – they can now, with ease, record sound bites on their phones. Additionally, with the increase of public spread of news media, authority figures may be less inclined nowadays to comment for fear of saying something that might be perceived as controversial by the general public. Whatever the reason for the shift, the reality that has been symbolically constructed over time by authority figures and community-level individuals, and disseminated to the general public using the mass media, the repercussions are real and contributing to the ever-present problem of racist and stereotypical thinking among the dominant society.

This line of thinking ultimately leads to the question of whether or not our society has an “ideal offender.” In other words, who is the person that garners the most fear, the person who

people think about when they hear the term “serial rapist” and how do the newspapers describe these individuals and their acts to the general public?



## **CHAPTER 6: MONSTERS AMONG US: THE DEHUMANIZATION AND HUMANIZATION OF OFFENDERS**

As I coded the data available in the newspaper articles, a theme emerged centering around the ways that the offenders were described in the newspapers. Often, when discussing the traits of an offender, newspapers would sometimes quote officials or community members about various traits regarding the offender themselves, as well as use their own descriptive terms involving the crimes they had committed. Articles were coded by identifying any terms used to describe the offender or their act. What emerged was a dichotomous description of the offenders and their acts that dehumanized some and humanized others. Dehumanization terms were identified as words that are usually used to describe life-forms or actions that are typically associated with an animal or the non-human world, while humanization terms were identified as words or actions that could be used to make an offender seem more human or relatable to the general public. The identification of these terms were guided using two main research frames. Collins (2014) examined the language in newspaper articles to determine if there is a racial bias associated with crime victims and offenders. The variable for dehumanization defined by Collins is as follows:

This sub-theme coded references to crime as a brutal or animalistic act (e.g. using words such as ‘savage’, or ‘wild’) or as mechanistic (e.g. references to a calculating killer). Both of these uses of language have a similar effect on the connotation of the crime. That is, this language portrays the crime as behavior that is outside the repertoire of ‘normal’ human beings. Crimes described as such are then crimes that are morally or ethically bankrupt. Example: ‘barbarism’; ‘savage’; ‘pure evil’ (Collins, p. 85).

Using this framework, along with the support of Crothers (2007) who argues that in the media, whites are seen as “the best educated, most effective, most law-abiding members of society” while blacks are seen as “out-of-control, sexually aggressive predator(s)” (p. 103-4), the current study aimed to find similar words and phrasing to describe both the crime and the offender. Additionally, this study is framed around Loseke’s (1993) discussion of people types and the ways that society constructs people to be negative or positive. Loseke argues that society works together to construct individuals as having “sympathy-worthiness” or “condemnation-worthiness” (p. 122). What constitutes an individual as being worthy of sympathy or condemnation depends on the language used and the claims-makers who ultimately use this language to interact with the general public. In this context, the claims-makers are the newspaper articles covering these crimes. The language and rhetoric used by the media is disseminated across the general public and will ultimately dictate which types of individuals the public sees as worthy of sympathy or worthy of condemnation. Loseke also argues that within these claims-making arenas, there are also “counterrhetorical strategies” (p. 124) used to redefine a situation or an individual as needing more sympathy or condemnation. This study aims to look at the language used to describe these individuals and acts as something that is decidedly non-human and ultimately worthy of condemnation. However, using Loseke’s discussion of counterrhetorical strategies, their study also wants to look at how newspaper articles talk in sympathy-worthy ways regarding the offenders they deem immoral or condemnation-worthy and whether that differs based upon the race of these offenders. In other words, when a newspaper article discusses an offender as a brutal creature committing violent, brutal acts – is there a counter-discussion about what this type of person is like that may present them as more relatable

and sympathy-worthy to the general public – humanizing those individuals to neutralize the fear of the general public?

Humanization was examined using Loseke (1993) as a guiding force, finding variables that would make a person relatable, citing many of the social institutions at work (family, peers, education, religion, employment), as well as discussions of appearance and intelligence (i.e. whether the offender was described as attractive, smart, cunning). These humanization tactics could work in two different ways. The first way it interacts with readers might be to demonstrate less victim-blaming. A cunning, smart offender means that the crime could have happened to anybody – that the offender was just too good to avoid. Additionally, this tactic could be used to create a more positive outlook on the offender, suggesting that they are not quite as bad as they might first appear.

### Dehumanization by Decade

#### 1940s

The 1940s saw many instances of dehumanization for both white and black offenders.

*White:* “There is no place to put this boy outside of sending him to the penitentiary, and taking him out of society for the protection of our women” (Chicago Tribune, p. A4).

“Early yesterday morning a prowler was frightened from the second floor of a boarding house” (Boston Globe, p. 1).

“Secreting the bicycle, Steffey would lie in wait and approach the victim as she reached the car he had selected” (Chicago Tribune, p. 12).

*Black:* “Dangerous and loathsome creature” (New York Times, p. 52).

“Wright told police, they said, that he would prowl thru alleys at night seeking screened windows which were unlocked” (Chicago Tribune, p. 1).

“Oplatka asserted Forston preyed on women war workers returning home between midnight and 6 a.m.” (Chicago Tribune, p. 20).

“The engineer chased the prowler into the dining room” (Chicago Tribune, p. 20).

While both groups show examples of dehumanization with words such as “prowler” and “loathsome creature,” as well phrases often associated with animals such as: “lie in wait” and “preyed on women,” only the white offenders had additional comments made alongside the dehumanization comments that could be seen as humanizing them and creating a different image than the non-human lifeforms initially used.

One of the white offenders was a juvenile and the article mentioned several times where he went to school – an important agent of socialization that most of the general public can relate to. Creating a sense of youthfulness for this particular offender could be important in allowing him to be seen as sympathy-worthy. Another white offender was described using several positive terms: “pretty blonde boy;” “handsome;” “pleasant;” and “disarming.” These words are actively being used to describe a sexual offender, a rapist who has committed crimes against multiple victims – and while his actions were described in a non-human way, “lying in wait”, these positive descriptions of his physical appearance and demeanor could potentially have a counterrhetoric effect that would allow readers of these articles to see him as sympathy-worthy, someone who may not have committed a crime, or may not be all that bad, falling into the discussion by Crothers (2007) depicting white as good.

1950s

While the 1950s saw both white and black offenders, only one white offender was referenced in terms of dehumanization, stating: “The man, police said, is a sexual degenerate who has been hunted since last spring” (The Chicago Tribune, p. 2). This quote not only refers to the white offender as a degenerate, which, by definition, means for someone to fall below normal standards, but they also referencing hunting this individual – an action typically left for animals.

*Black:* “A man on a crime rampage with utter disregard of the laws of God and man” (Chicago Tribune, p. 6).

“Accused as the rapist-robber who preyed on couples in parked cars” (Chicago Tribune, p. A4).

“An ex-convict accused as the rapist-robber who preyed on couples in parked cars” (Chicago Tribune, p. 11).

“Police yesterday intensified their search for a Negro rapist who has been preying on women on south side railroad platforms” (Chicago Tribune, p. 44)

These quotes regarding black serial offenders in the 1950s are primarily about their actions – their preying on their victims the way that animals prey on their potential meals. One quote even depicts the offender as purposefully disobeying the laws of mankind. But, unlike the 1940s, there is no evidence of humanization techniques at play in any of these articles.

## 1960s

With the 1960s we still see about the same number of dehumanization techniques at play:

*White:* “You’re a brute and a beast” (Los Angeles Times, p. 3).

“A masked rapist who prowls the Maryland suburbs...” (Washington Post, p. A1.)

*Black:* “Hooded prowler chased from woman’s home” (Los Angeles Times, p.

A1).

“The lowest form of human life” (Los Angeles Times, p. A1).

“The phantom-like rapist was thwarted in his latest attack” (Los Angeles Times, p. B16).

“An animal who preyed on children” (New York Times, p. 25).

In these examples we see that the white offenders had only two mentions of dehumanization, one referring to the offender as a beast, the other referencing the act itself, while the black offenders were all described as being, themselves, nonhuman (the lowest form of human life, phantom-like, an animal). All of these descriptions are working to create a sense of condemnation around the black offenders themselves.

The humanization technique only appears twice in these articles, one for a white offender, in which they discuss the offender’s job as a jewelry polisher, while one of the black offenders was an individual who was still in college and his education information was properly referenced. Unlike the offender from the 1940s, who was white and in high school, this offender is black and in college.

#### 1970s

The 1970s, while still consisting of a small number of offenders, still produced interesting and important findings regarding dehumanization and their humanizing counterparts.

*White*: “A young man with a remarkable ability to alter his appearance and to prowls unnoticed at night” (Los Angeles Times, p. SG7).

*Non-White*: “We’re not living in a rapist’s jungle” (Chicago Tribune, p. 1).

“He always strikes when the women are home alone” (Los Angeles Times, p. CS1).

“Neighbors failed to report seeing a prowler on a fire escape” (New York

Times, p. 25).

These examples are off-set by some of the more interesting humanizing aspects that accompany them in the article. The white offender, in the same sentence used to dehumanize him, is, directly before the comment, called remarkable. While the newspaper may have been using this word to describe the offender's ability to commit his crimes without being caught, the connotation of the word "remarkable" still holds a certain linguistic place, a positive light being shone on a negative situation. Only one of the non-white offenders had any positive, humanizing aspects attached to his article. This particular article mentioned that the black offender had white victims, but that he was also seen as "personable," "articulate," and "clean cut." (Ruhlow, p. CS1). For the first time since the 1940s, positive and encouraging words were used to describe a non-white sexual offender. But also of interest is the mention of victims of the offender being white women. Bishop (2006) states: "It is in the interest of the media to highlight violent crime, especially violence committed by young black males, because this is the kind of crime that the public fears most" (p. 145). Additionally, Perry & Sutton (2006) found that when crime is interracial, the coverage in the news media is more extreme. These findings suggest that while it appears that there are humanizing aspects associated with this non-white offender, the mention of white victims may generate more fear within the general public. The purpose of referring to the offender as "personable" and "clean cut" serves as a tool to demonstrate that this offender is atypical from what is usually seen, therefore remaining even more dangerous, as they are unexpected and victims may be more vulnerable to their tricks. Due to the socialization that has occurred across time, the general public, from all racial and ethnic groups, automatically associate white with good and non-white with bad.

1980s

With an increase in offenders, the 1980s saw a decade that also increased its discussion of dehumanization for both white and non-white offenders. The white offenders saw much of the non-human rhetoric centered around the actions themselves, oftentimes using words such as “preying, hunting, stalking.”

*White:* “He strikes in Montgomery one night, and Fairfax the next” (Brown, p. C1).

“He strikes between dusk and midnight” (Whitaker, p. A1).

“All 10 were hunted” (Washington Post, p. A2).

“The man preys on women between the ages of 20 and 50 living alone in ground-floor apartments” (Klein, p. V\_A8).

“The attacker stalked some of his victims and returned later to rape them”

“Hunting women constantly”

“He is like the devil; he is poison” (Hicks, p. OC1).

While the non-white offenders saw much of the rhetoric surrounding their actions, there was also a decent amount of rhetoric surrounding the very nature of the individuals themselves, often using words such as “nightmare”, “proowler” “truly evil.”

*Non-White:* “A series of unsigned notes that warn of a knife-wielding rapist prowling the east side of Santa Monica have appeared” (Los Angeles Times, WS\_A6).

“A rapist who preys on women alone at home has attacked his fourth victim in the last six weeks”

“A terrorist to our community who stalked his 10 victims and attacked them”

“But Keith Young was the living nightmare of these 10 women” (Buder, B8).

“Police hunt rapist in Maywood who preys on elderly” (Wood, p. W10).

“Police responded to a routine call about a prowler” (Cawley, p. 4).

“Nevertheless, she said, she realized that she could not open her door with



this threatening presence nearby” (Smith, p. A1).

“A truly evil person” (Chicago Tribune, p. B3).

There is a noted difference in the rhetoric surrounding these two groups – one focuses on dehumanizing the actions while the other focuses on dehumanizing the individuals themselves. While each group experienced similar rates of dehumanizing in these newspaper articles, the rates of humanization that occurred for both groups are drastically different. In regards to the white offenders, one was called “articulate” and “seemingly well-educated” while another was said to have “an exceptional mind” similarly, the white offender referred to as the devil and called “poison” was mentioned as being a “good looking guy” with references to his employment as a businessman. Another white offender was said to be “very good at what he does” in regards to his commission of rape and thus far remaining unsuccessfully captured by law enforcement.

Two of the non-white offenders, however, did have instances of humanization tied to them. The first, as with the offender discussed during the 1970s, was mentioned as having white victims and was referred to as “soft-spoken.” The other non-white offender was discussed as being a doctor, a “highly-respected physician” and being a “devoted father of two.” This last offender discussed was seen as an important member of the community in which he lived, was very unassuming, and his arrest for the said crimes was surprising to those that knew him. Along with one other instance in the 1990s, this is the only other humanizing of a non-white offender that appears to mirror how the white offenders were humanized within the same decade.

1990s

With the shift into the decade of the 1990s, we still saw high rates of dehumanization among offenders, particularly non-white offenders, but the instances of also working to humanize these individuals, both white and non-white, continued to drop.

*White:* “Our fear is that the more success that he enjoys, the more he endeavors to feed his appetite” (Rippe).

“He apparently has stalked his victims and attacked them when he was certain they were alone” (Christian)

“A serial rapist who has been stalking young women for the past six months struck again late Tuesday night”

“Spurred by the fear that a rapist is roaming the streets uncaught”

“The assailant often stalked women who were alone in ground-floor apartments” (Thomas & Davis, p. D1).

“Police say the assailant stalks his victims to make sure they are alone before he enters through unlocked ground-level windows” (Washington Post, p. DC7).

While the 1980s saw a discrepancy in the ways in which newspapers dehumanized white and non-white offenders, the 1990s appears to focus away from dehumanizing the individual non-white offenders, and instead tended to focus on dehumanizing their actions the way the newspapers tend to do for white offenders.

*Non-White:* “In all four cases, police said the assailant preyed on Korean or other Asian women” (Valentine, p. B08).

“There is evidence that a serial rapist is stalking victims in a Brooklyn neighborhood” (New York Times, p. B6).

“An animal, that’s what he is” (New York Times, p. B8).

“The attacker preyed on tourists in a region whose economy depends upon them” (Chicago Tribune).

“New caution exercised as hunt continues for suspected serial rapist”

“Police believe that the man is preying upon girls on their morning walk to school”

“A rapist has been preying on high school girls walking to school”

“It was in early 1990 that police noticed a serial rapist was preying on lone Latinas as they walked to bus stops early in the morning”

“First the assailant stalked the victims, determining the location of their vehicle”

“Nervous residents were on the lookout for a vehicle that authorities say may be linked to a rapist who has been stalking teenage males”

Two instances of humanization occurred with white offenders, with an article calling the man “soft-spoken” and “apologetic in demeanor” while another article referenced that the offender was married. Both of these humanization techniques work to establish either a sense of normalcy (the wife) or demonstrate that the offender was not nearly as scary as he was made out to be, he is an individual who was apologetic about what he had done. The only instance of a non-white offender in this decade experiencing humanization was a Hispanic man described as “a religious man who loves his family.” This quote humanizes the offender using two different major agents of socialization: religion and family. Despite there being more non-white offenders, the white offenders are still seeing, on average, more humanization techniques occur. But the upcoming decade has findings that are even more polarized.

### 2000s

Over the past three decades, the data has shown a shift in an increased dehumanization rate for non-white offenders, while white offenders have seen a relatively constant level over the past few decades. Humanization rates, however, have continued to decline and this current decade is no exception – exhibiting zero instances of humanization for any offender. A big

change that did occur, however, is that the 2000s saw no instances of dehumanization regarding white offenders.

*Non-White:* “The man would prowl the area at night, searching for victims, learning their movements” (Los Angeles Times)

“The Belmont Shore predator was known for jimmying his way into women’s homes through windows and backdoors” (LeDuff, p. A16).

“Sexual predator is stalking Los Feliz-Area Schoolgirls” (Los Angeles Times)

“A serial rapist stalking women in the western suburbs apparently struck again yesterday despite an intensive manhunt for him” (Chicago Tribune)

“He lies in wait, and he will conceal himself somewhere in the parking or courtyard areas” (Los Angeles Times)

All of these non-white offenders are shown as being animalistic in their behaviors – stalking, prowling, lying in wait, but two also being referred to as predators. The only other decade that did not have any white cases of dehumanization was the 1950s. Even in the 1960s, when there were more white serial rapists present than non-white, we still saw more cases of dehumanization for black offenders.

### Dehumanization Explained

Across the seven-decade time span, the results of this study have consistently found that non-white serial rape offenders have higher rates of dehumanization associated with them – additionally, white serial rape offenders have higher rates of humanization techniques used in conjunction with the articles that are ultimately dehumanizing them. While there were instances of non-white offenders experiencing the neutralization that comes along with humanizing an offender – more often than not, this did not occur. In fact, of the 24 instances of dehumanization

that occurred for white offenders, there was a total of 10 humanizing techniques to counteract that, while there were 43 non-white dehumanization examples, there were only five examples of humanizing neutralization techniques used.

These findings suggest that the newspaper reporting on non-white serial rape offenders is biased toward representing these individuals as non-human, individuals who should be feared and locked away. The findings also suggest, that while white serial rape offenders are also seen as non-human, these discussions are then neutralized by making them more relatable to the public, offering up examples of being attractive or charming, occasionally intelligent or having a family. These reporting techniques used by newspapers are constructing a reality for the general public that black offenders should be feared more than white offenders, that they cannot control the primal, animalistic side of our human lineage. The discourses-in-practice, first discussed by Holstein and Gubrium (2000) suggest that when a story is told, in this case a newspaper article, the tellers of that story control the content and the way the story is told based upon who they perceive to be their primary audience. The story that is told then becomes the constructed reality for their consumers. In this case, the discourse is set around defining two different groups in two separate ways. The whites are defined as being non-human, but redeemable non-humans, in that they aren't always bad and could potentially have a good side to them. The non-white population are defined as being non-human, but with almost no redeemable human qualities to their existence, as though this is just who they are and it cannot be helped. This is congruent with the findings of Collins (2014) who found that newspaper articles often tried to justify or humanize white offenders but that those justifications disappeared when referencing non-white offenders.

When examining the discussion of Loseke's (1993) people types and how society begins to define certain victims and offenders as sympathy-worthy or condemnation-worthy, we see that

these findings suggest that the newspaper articles are framing white offenders as deserving more sympathy from readers and the general public. The inherent non-use of humanization techniques associated with non-white offenders while simultaneously representing them as non-human entities and creatures of their more basic instincts, they are being seen as condemnation-worthy – individuals who are to be feared and dealt with appropriately. The construction of these groups in the newspapers work together to reinforce already existing negative stereotypes associated with minority groups, while also reaffirming with their target, mostly white-dominated consumers, that white offenders, while having committed a heinous crime, are inherently good people with the potential for being and doing good. Their behavior was bad, but the overall person themselves, was not. These findings are also supported by Russell-Brown (2006) who found that, despite the statistics stating otherwise, most individuals, from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, believe they will be criminally victimized by a black man.

## **CHAPTER 7: THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAIL: THE PUBLICATION OF OFFENSE DETAILS**

Another major theme found throughout the study was the discussion of the crimes that were committed. Throughout the seven-decade time span, the newspaper reporting on these crimes varied from no information at all, to full-out descriptions of the events that occurred. It is understandable to think that these descriptions would vary by decade, as privacy laws have changed considerably since the 1940s, but I aimed to examine whether or not there were differences in these descriptions of the crimes based on race or ethnicity of the offender. Falling in line with the social construction theoretical framework used previously – the differences in description, if based on race, could ultimately impact the ways that the general public views members of certain racial and ethnic groups. Fields & Jerin (1999) found that most of the respondents in their research believe that what is presented in the media regarding crime is accurate. Chermak (1994) discusses facts that lead to a story becoming important enough to report: 1) the nature of the offense; 2) demographic factors of victims and offenders; 3) uniqueness of the event; 4) event salience; and 5) characteristics of the media agency. In other words, there are several reasons why a news story could be deemed reportable. With the majority of Americans receiving their information about crime from the news (Tunnell, 1992), it is important to understand the ways that these media outlets could be potentially impacting their consumers with the ways they reveal information about serial rape crimes. Robinson (2014) argues that because the media focuses so heavily on crime and so many individuals receive their knowledge about crime from the media – the media are involved in constructing what the public sees as “the typical view of crime” (p. 95). Also, as Jenkins (1998) discusses, the general consuming audience, because of how frequently they see the information, is more likely to

believe that what is being shown is representative of what is fact, that is, what is actually happening, when, in fact, that may or may not be the case.

In total, when examining news articles that provided details of the crime that had occurred, 35 of the 93 articles, or about 38 percent, on white offenders had added details of the crime while 80 of the 180 non-white offender articles, or 44 percent, had details provided about crimes. When examined by decade, there were three decades that saw higher rates of white articles discussing crime details – the 1940s, 1950s, and the 1990s. Quotes from the 1940s reveal that the white offenders were discussed in terms of having been caught by police:

Iverson... was captured Dec 4<sup>th</sup> after he had beaten Mrs. Agnes Brennan, 44, a widow, of 1404 w. 81<sup>st</sup> st., with an iron bar near her home, injuring her so severely that she spent 15 days in a hospital” “Subsequently, Iverson confessed that he had seized a nurse near 89<sup>th</sup> st. and Justine av. about Nov 1, and dragged her across the street into a vacant lot. Another victim was a 21 year old dancing teacher, whom he threatened with a knife at 87<sup>th</sup> st. and Hermitage av. He bound her hands with a babushka, blindfolded her with her brassiere, and attempted to attack her. (Chicago Tribune, p. A4).

In contrast, the black offender was discussed in terms of his crimes and how he would choose his potential victims:

On July 30, after attempting to rape one woman in a double-decker bed while her 6 year old twin sons were asleep in the upper bunk, Wright is said to have stolen \$8 from a dresser drawer and fled as his intended victim screamed. Wright told police, they said, that he would prowl thru alleys at night seeking screened windows which were unlocked (Chicago Tribune, p. 1).



The 1950s also saw primary discussion of white offenders surrounding their capture by police or being positively identified by victims:

He was identified positively by an 8 year old girl whom he struck in the face after exposing himself to her in a hallway at 6 S. Homan av. at 10:30 a.m. on July 6. He had lured her to the hallway after meeting her in front of 4030 Madison st. and promising her a doll. Maureen Brady, 8, of 4258 Jackson blvd., identified Schermerhorn was the man who promised her a walking doll in a ten cent store...Then, she said, he too her to Garfield park, where he struck her on the head three times with a fragment of cement. The girl told police that a man whom she met at St. Louis av. and Jackson blvd. took her to Central Park av. and 5<sup>th</sup> av. in Garfield park, placed a cloth over her face, gagged her, and molested her. He then struck her in the face and fled. She also was promised a walking doll.

(Chicago Tribune, p. 2)

A husky 32 year old mechanic, who was identified by a 39 year old housewife as the man who invaded her bedroom yesterday while she was sleeping and threatened her with a long bladed hunting knife. He confirmed her story that he awoke her and held the knife at her throat as he announced his intention of raping her. She said she pleaded she had 'just gotten over the flu' and that he replied: 'O.K. I'll leave you alone if you behave yourself ad don't say anything. Where's your money?' (Chicago Tribune, p. 14).

While at least during the 1950s, the non-white offenders were primarily discussed as at-large and unidentified:

The seventh attempted rape here in the past three weeks occurred today when an unidentified Negro slipped into the hospital room of a 55-year-old woman patient. A nurse who ran to the room after hearing the screams of the patient, suffered a broken nose when the man punched her in the face and fled. 'The woman patient...said she was lying awake in her darkened room when the assailant entered. She said she thought at first he was a hospital orderly. The patient was quoted by police as saying the man jammed his hand over her mouth and attempted to force her back on the bed (Washington Post, p. M3)

The two women told police they were waiting for a train...when the armed rapist appeared. He forced them...off the platform onto the roof of the Ostberg Seed company. There he bound and gagged both before attacking the dental assistant. After the attack the rapist took \$24 from his victim and \$6 from the purse of her companion. Untying them, he followed the women back to the platform and then disappeared (Chicago Tribune, p. 44)

A 19-year-old waitress on her way to work was approached...about 5:45 a.m., police said. The man pressed a knife against her throat, forced her to walk to a parking lot a half-block away, took \$5 from her purse and then assaulted her. The attractive 20-year-old girl...said she had returned home with her boyfriend shortly before midnight. A few minutes after he left, she said, a stranger lured her out on

the pretext her boyfriend's car had crashed around the corner. (Washington Post, p. 1).

The decade of the 1990s, however, saw a bit of a shift in the rhetoric surrounding white and non-white offenders. Many of the white offenders were being discussed in terms of being at-large, or not yet having been caught by police and their crimes are described in ways that non-white offenders were talked about in the 1940s and 1950s, such as choosing their victim or eluding police capture.

He followed a young woman walking to a shopping center...where he grabbed her and pinned her to the wall of an abandoned bank building. He then sexually assaulted her” “A week later...the teen followed and attacked a jogger running at night...when the woman tried to run away, he sped up on his bike and rammed into her (Wilson)

The first three victims...were abducted at knifepoint and raped in isolated locations...the fourth person attacked, a 10-year-old girl who was walking to her home with groceries for her family, was threatened with a stun gun... (Mrozek)

In the eight or more times he has struck in the past 11 months, he has waited for his victim in the dimly lit parking lots of apartment complexes. Brandishing a knife, screwdriver or gun, he approaches a woman getting out of her car and shoves her back in. He drives the woman a short distances before attacking. When he's done, he kicks the woman out of her car and then abandons it (Holt)

Last Tuesday night the man struck for the fifth time since October, raping a woman in her...home. He apparently has stalked his victims and attacked them when he was certain they were alone. Victims have been blindfolded, bound and gagged (Christian)

In each case, a ski-masked assailant forced his way into the woman's apartment, tied her hands, blindfolded her, raped her and robbed her. In three of the five cases, a young child was present in the apartment during the assault (Cerven)

In the latest incident, two sisters were awakened in their upstairs bedroom by a man who was not wearing pants. He carried one of the girls, 12, from her bed and told her he had a knife and would hurt her if she made any noise...he put a sock in her mouth to keep her quiet before taking her downstairs and assaulting her (Koziol)

A 40-year-old woman who lives alone in a first-floor apartment said she awoke to find a masked, gloved man sitting on her back with his hand over her mouth. The intruder told the woman he wanted to have sexual intercourse with her (Wilgoren, p. C05)

While the non-white offenders were also discussed in this way, there appeared to be more emphasis on the type of victims that the offender chose to attack:

The victim, a 28-year-old woman, had just entered her apartment...when the masked gunman grabbed her from behind and sexually assaulted her after a struggle. Two women...took out their garbage, and when they returned to their town house, they were confronted by an armed man in a black ski mask (Jackman, p. B07)

A 21-year-old woman was accosted shortly before 1:30 p.m. while walking...She was approached from the rear by a subject who told her he was wanted by the police...He said he was being watched by the police, he was hiding from the police, and wanted to walk with the young lady for cover. During that walk and that conversation, he indicated he had a gun. ...The assailant calmly led the woman to an isolated area behind a building where he raped her. (Duggan, p. C1).

The longest ordeal took place last July 11, when the man abducted a 13-year-old as she was taking out the trash at her apartment complex...During the next 10 hours, he drove her throughout Northern Virginia, stopping several times to sexually assault and rape her (Miller, p. a01).

In an incident...a 13-year-old girl was waiting for a bus when the man appeared, drew a handgun and forced her into an alley” “one week later, a 12-year-old girl who had gotten off a bus was similarly confronted and raped in an alley (Ferris)

The first rape occurred shortly before 10 A.M... A 19-year old woman was waiting for an M train...when the man walked up, showed a handgun, pushed her to the end of the platform and raped her (Roane, p. 51).

Due to the nature and extent of these crimes, it is not surprising that newspapers are sensationalizing the ways that they discuss what happened – especially when the offenders are unknown. Information breeds fear and with crimes that sell, such as serial killing, mass shootings, and, now, serial rapists, news outlets look to sell as much of a story as they can. The construction of these crimes as exceedingly dangerous and scary by describing, in detail, the events that happened to many of these victims, demonstrates to the public that there is a reason to be afraid – look at what happened to these victims, this could happen to you, or your children, or your wife. It provides details, informing the public about how the offenders gained access to the victims – walking alone at night, unlocked doors, being tricked in some way along with a message informing readers that it could happen to them.

The other four decades, the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 2000s, consisted of instances where there were higher percentages of articles regarding non-white offenders and details of crimes.

## **1960s**

The white offenders in the 1960s saw a variety of discussion regarding the details and intricacies of the crimes that were committed:

The suspect has used a knife to accost eight San Fernando Valley women in the last several months police said. He takes his victims, accosted mostly in parking

lots, to isolated alleys ‘completes the crime and returns them to the location of the kidnapping’ according to police” (Fradkin, A1)

Kidnapping, beating and raping a 5-year-old girl in Big Tujunga Canyon.

Kidnapping a 6-year-old girl from her La Canada house and engaging in sex perversion. Robbing a 25-year old woman after forcing her car off the road.

Hiding in the cars of a 15-year old girl and a 20-year old girl in shopping centers, then surprising them at knifepoint, robbing and raping them (Grant, SF\_A1)

In each case, the victim, driving in her car, was motioned to stop by another motorist who said one of the car’s wheels was loose, according to police records. She was then forced at knifepoint to drive to a secluded area where she was criminally assaulted and robbed (Los Angeles Times, SF8).

The daylight attack was the fourth since March 19, when a girl, 16, en route to school, was accosted in Oriole Park by a man with a gun and led down an alley to an open garage where she was raped and robbed. A woman, 34, told police she was confronted by a man wielding an ice pick after pulling into her garage with her 17-month-old son...she said the man robbed her of \$20 and intended to rape her but fled after she told him she was pregnant. A woman, 23, and also pregnant, said she was approached by a man with a gun as she walked home from a grocery (The Chicago Tribune, B24)

The method Novick used in all the robberies was the same, police said. The assailant, posing as a possible renter, attacked the building manager in her apartment after starting to fill out an application. He tied each victim with twine and dumped jewelry and other valuables into a shopping bag he carried. (The Chicago Tribune, N14)

The non-white offenders were discussed as follows:

The police said she was attacked when she returned to her sixth-floor apartment...after putting garbage in an incinerator; she had been gone about two minutes and had left her door unlocked. After a struggle during which the assailant's knife was broken, the police said the woman was beaten and raped. The rapist took her purse when he fled (The New York Times, 32)

Police said the rapist awakened the couple in the bedroom of their 10 room home, terrorized them with a gun, threatened their lives, and then bound the banker with a Venetian blind cord and his belt. The assailant beat the woman with his fists and gun when she resisted, then he raped her. Before fleeing, he ransacked the house and took 170 and several articles (The Chicago Tribune, D9).

But their screams weren't heard beyond the four walls of their mother's bedroom. Police said the pretty brunet had gone to bed around 10:15 p.m. Sunday, 10 minutes after her husband left to go downtown. Her children were in bed, too, but a 10-year-old daughter heard a noise outside her window. She peered outside and cried out: 'Mommy, there's a man with a hood on out here.' Seconds later, police



said, the man broke through the rear door, ran into the woman's room, and threw her onto the bed. Unlike the three previous episodes, he did not brandish a weapon but warned his victim: 'Shut up. Be quiet or I'll kill you.' (Los Angeles Times, A2).

The victim told police she was walking to a relative's house when a man seized her from behind, brandished a knife and forced her into the basement of a nearby apartment building. After the rape, her attacker fled when he heard a door open in the building... (The Washington Post, A3)

The latest, however, was last night in the sixth-floor apartment of a 38-year-old widow. She left her door unlocked while taking out the garbage. When she returned she saw the legs of a man, hiding behind the drapes of her bedroom window. Holding a carving knife in a gloved hand, he warned her: 'Don't scream or I'll kill you.' She grabbed the blade and it snapped in her hand. He dropped the broken knife, beat her down with his fists and raped her. Then he fled with money from her purse (The Washington Post, A3)

In examining the differences in quotes from the 1960s, we can see that the discourse used for the white offenders and non-white offenders is slightly different. With the white offenders there appears to mostly be statements of facts regarding what happened against whom this act was committed. The articles discussing non-white offenders use discourse that gives the allusion of

telling a story. This difference is key to understanding the social construction of white and non-white offenders in the media.

## **1970s**

The decade of the 1970s saw a slight shift in length regarding the discussions – in that the newspaper articles were not nearly as lengthy and descriptive as they might have been previously – possibly due to privacy laws and changes in reader population. Similar to the 1960s, the white offenders received mainly a telling of facts regarding the offense details:

The man fit the description of an attacker who, on Nov 26, collared a young girl as she walked down the street after attending church not far from the shopping center. She was gagged, dragged to nearby railroad tracks, bound and raped.

(Larkin, 33)

Wednesday morning's attack occurred as the waitress, returning home from her late night job, got into an elevator in her apartment building and was joined by the robber. Sturgill quoted her as saying that the man hit her on the head with brass knuckles and took \$50 from her after threatening her with death. (Smith, N7).

The four widows, all in the seventies, had been assaulted between noon and 3 p.m. while visiting graves of their husbands or relatives. He said the women were either dragged into bushes or lured into secluded spots by their assailant who had gained their attention by asking directions. (Morang & Elsener, 1)

While remaining shorter overall, the description of the attacks for the non-white offenders were longer and more detailed than the descriptions for the white offenders. Though the story-telling aspect appears to exist in some places, the presence has diminished during the 1970s:

The rapist accosted his victim as she fumbled for her apartment key while carrying an armload of groceries. He forced her inside her apartment, raped her and stole \$80 from her purse, police said. A man matching the same description raped another 19-year-old girl last Saturday in a nearby apartment after binding two young men who were visiting her. He also stole \$400 from the three. (Coates, N\_A20).

A 25-year-old waitress was on her way home from work when she was forced into her assailant's car...she was taken to her apartment, raped repeatedly, and forced to perform deviate sexual acts in a two-hour ordeal in her apartment. A Northwestern coed was forced into her assailant's car at knifepoint...driven to the parking lot of a restaurant...forced to disrobe in the back seat, and then assaulted. An 18-year-old woman was abducted as she walked to her car after swimming class...She was taken to the same restaurant parking lot...and raped repeatedly and forced to perform deviate sex acts in the backseat of her assailant's car (Thompson, 2).

The first incident occurred...when an Albany Park woman reported being raped in her home. She told police a man knocked at her door and told her that her husband had been injured so she would open the door and let him in. A week

later, a man of the same description asked to use the phone in the home of a...woman, saying her husband had been involved in an auto accident nearby. After gaining entrance, the man allegedly attempted to rape the woman and beat her before she fled and called police (Chicago Tribune, N\_C12).

In all but one case, the man raped or assaulted the women in their homes. He usually enters the house through an unlocked door early in the morning, grabs the woman, forces her into the bedroom, and begins beating her with his fists. Then he removes his clothes and hers, and forces her to participate in sexual acts. If she screams or resists, he usually ties her hands with a bra or scarf, or stuffs her mouth with clothing (Tofani, B3).

The presentation of the crime descriptions for non-white offenders is decidedly lengthier than their white counterparts. This allows the readers to read more in-depth about the atrocities committed by non-white offenders, thus creating a more ingrained culture of fear surrounding the minority offenders that reaffirms already existing stereotypes.

The 1980s, again, saw a drop-off in the amount reported about these crimes, but non-white offenders still saw higher percentages of reporting compared to whites. White offenders only saw about 21 percent reporting, while non-white offenders saw 35 percent reporting. White offenders:

Shortly before 9 o'clock one night late last month, a man wearing a hood forced open a living-room window of a house in the normally quiet Silver Spring neighborhood and grabbed an 18-year-old woman, forcing her into her dining

room where he raped her... Three nights later...about a mile away...a 13-year-old girl was attacked as she lay on a recreation room sofa watching television about 11:15. She also was raped, apparently by the same man... (Whitaker, p. A1)

The little girl was kidnapped while walking...at about 7:30 a.m. A man stopped his van, reached out and grabbed the child... The man threatened the child with two knives, raped her, 'then ordered her to get out of the van' Billiter, p. OC\_A1).

A masked gunman believed responsible for at least seven recent rapes...broke into another motel early Sunday and raped a 34-year-old woman and her 16-year-old daughter after locking the father and three younger children in a bathroom. The assailant terrorized the family for more than three hours before escaping through the window of their ground-floor room just before dawn (Weisenhaus & Cawley, p. 1)

(The victim) didn't hear the guy enter. She was lying on her stomach with her back to the door...the guy grabbed a sculpting knife and a sweater that were on her dresser...all she saw was his hand before he threw the sweater over her head. He put the knife to her throat and warned her not to scream. He tied her hands with shoelaces and gagged her. Then he began ripping off her clothes...The attack lasted 30 minutes...before leaving, the man threatened the girl with the knife again. He told her to count to 60 and fled down the hallway (Emmerman & Unger, p. 3)

...she left her boyfriend's apartment on foot about 1:15 a.m....because of an argument and was walking to a nearby convenience store to make a telephone call when the attack occurred. A man walked up behind her, grabbed her and slapped her twice...and then he put a knife to her throat...the attacker forced the woman into a wooded area just off the frontage road... (McNeil, p. NW\_A1).

While non-white offenders were represented as such:

The most recent attack took place on Dec. 1 when a single woman, aged 42, got off a Metro bus...in the early evening. The woman was dragged at knifepoint behind two construction trailers where the assailant attacked her, slashed her across the face with a butcher knife and stole her purse (Dougherty, p. VA5).

The woman was walking in the vicinity of the Peach Orchard Apartments...about 2 a.m....on her way home from work, when she was assaulted and dragged at knifepoint into an adjacent open field....the assailant then bound the woman with rope and tape, gagged her with a cloth and stole her money before removing her clothes and raping her... (Feeney, p. C5)

In the latest incident, police said the assailant approached the victim from behind and threatened her with a knife before forcing her into a wooded area and raping her (Ifill, p.B1).

Suspect knocked on the door in the early morning hours of May 2, asked victim, a woman in her 20s, for help in finding a friend's address. Suspect forced entry through the partly open door, attacked victim and pushed her into her bedroom. Victim was threatened with death unless she stopped screaming. Suspect closed bedroom door as he left (Lindgren, p. CS1).

The 20-year-old woman was taken to an orange grove in Irvine near where the other attacks occurred, and was repeatedly raped and sodomized..." "At that time, a 14-year-old Santa Ana girl was in her church parking lot when four men approached her in a car, asking for directions. When she attempted to flee, three of the men picked her up and threw her in the car... They demanded \$100, threatened her with a knife and a gun, and drove her to the orange grove... where she was attacked (Morrison, p. OC\_A1).

In August, a little girl was taken from (near) a Catholic church. The suspect told the little girl, 'The priest wants you to help me get some books'... Then a month earlier, at a school, a guy used the same technique to get the girl to go with him, only he told her 'The principal wants you to help me get some books.' Some of the victims, all girls between 8 and 13 years of age, were 'slapped around' by their attacker... one had fingerprint bruises on her neck and one had been kicked in the chest (Townsend, p. C1).

In all 12 attacks...the suspect approached his victims from the rear, put a gun to their head and forced them to go with him, usually to a courtyard or alleyway. The first of yesterday's attacks occurred at 2 a.m. The 40-year-old victim told police that she had been followed...to outside her apartment building, where she was accosted. The gunman forced her into the building and raped her in the elevator (Buder, p. B4).

In the most recent case, a 28-year-old woman was forced from the M train shortly after 7 P.M....when the train stopped in the tunnel beneath City Hall. The woman, whose screams were heard by other passengers as she was led out of the train, was forced on a half-hour walk through the tracks of abandoned 19<sup>th</sup> century transit system. Far off on a spur track, she was forced to strip naked, to kneel behind a train stopping block and was sodomized (Marriott, P. B1).

The 1980s appears to demonstrate a tipping-point for the ways in which newspapers discuss white and non-white offenders. This decade demonstrates that no matter what the race or ethnicity of the offender, newspapers tended to represent their crimes in relatively equal manner – including length, material included, and ways the crime are discussed.

The 2000s, however, found only three instances in which white offenders were discussed in detail:

A 17-year-old student leaving school...was accosted from behind by a man who tried to force her into a van” “Two 13-year-old girls walking across a railroad bridge...were followed by a man who pushed one of them off the bridge, then



tried to sexually assault the other” “A 16-year-old girl was walking along an asphalt path between two...schools when a man approached her and tried to start a conversation. When she indicated she was deaf, he pushed her down and sexually assaulted her (Ball, D05).

The man sexually assaulted a woman as she parked inside the garage at her...condominium complex” “In the latest incident...the man wielded what appeared to be either a toy or plastic handgun...confronted after reaching for her belongings on the passenger side (Crane, B4).

The victim, a 58-year-old woman, was ironing clothes in her living room about 7 a.m. when an intruder struck her in the head, either with his fist or with a blunt object (Pfeifer).

However the non-white offenders had 19 in-depth descriptions about the crimes they have committed against their victims.

A neighbor picked her up from a bus stop and gave her a ride home because it was raining...The driver saw her enter her home safely and left. When the girl went inside, she saw a closet door ajar. As she went to close it, a man inside attacked her. The man tied the girl’s hands behind her back, engaged in variety of sex acts and then raped her. After repeating the sex acts in an upstairs bathroom, the man fled... (Fulvio, B03).

A 22-year-old woman was dragged into the woods from one of the paths and raped the night of Sept 21...On Oct 7, a woman walking on another footpath about 9:40 p.m. was grabbed and knocked down, but her attacker ran when she screamed. Later that evening, a woman walking on a path was grabbed, forced into a secluded area and raped (Wilgoren, B02).

A man in a white Honda Accord approached a 14-year-old...student walking to school...She was allegedly offered a ride by a man identified by the victim...The girl refused, prompting her assailant to drive farther up the block. He parked his car and again approached the girl and then used a knife or simulated a gun to force her into the car. The assault occurred in an alley about two blocks away (Blankstein).

In the Skokie assault, the suspect rang the doorbell of the victim's home at 8:30 a.m., flashed a badge and said he was a police officer. He pushed his way inside, pistol-whipped and then handcuffed the victim...He ripped the telephone from the wall, tied up a female housekeeper with the cord and put the women in separate rooms while he ransacked the house. He attempted to sexually assault the homeowner. The 38-year-old victim found a man standing in her kitchen shortly after 8 a.m. when she returned from walking her son to a school bus stop (Cox).

The most recent rape victim said she was walking...just after sunrise, taking the same route she has taken to school every day for four years. Seeing a shadow

behind her, she turned around and saw a man jogging toward her. He grabbed her and asked for money. She gave him \$5. ‘I told him “Please let me go”’ she said. ‘Then he took me down the hill’ He put a beanie over her face. ‘I screamed...he said “If you scream one more time, I will break your neck” so I tried to calm myself and him down. I told him “You don’t know what you are doing to me. You’re going to hurt me for life” he said “No, I’m not” and I knew then things would change forever’ (Hayasaki & Landsberg).

Copeland allegedly approached a woman as she walked to her boyfriend’s home and offered her a ride. Once inside the car...Copeland took her a short distance before he shut off the lights, turned the car off, and pulled a pair of handcuffs from inside the glove compartment. He told her she would have to perform oral sex or she would get arrested. When she still refused...Mr. Copeland grabbed her by the back of the neck, forced her onto him and made her perform oral sex (Latour, B.2).

The most recent decade has demonstrated a shift, again, into the story-telling narrative that was associated with the non-white offenders in earlier time periods. The descriptions are length and detailed, offering up more information than the white offenders of not only this decade but several of the decades prior. These findings demonstrate that while there are patterns regarding white and non-white offenders, those patterns appear to change from decade-to-decade, possibly as a result of the social and political climates of the times. Despite the persistent use of crime-specific details associated with these offenders, it’s possible that the pattern lies elsewhere – whether in reporting styles, reporting details, or even information released by the police

departments. There does not appear to be one distinct pattern that exists throughout the entire seven decades.

## CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

The social construction of race and ethnicity in the news media has been a widely-researched phenomenon that has offered mixed findings. Earlier work from Campbell (1995) found that the media tends to focus on minority individuals as either celebrities, criminals, or victims. Chiricos and Escholz (2002) similarly found that minority offenders were often more frequently represented as offenders in the news than their white counterparts. Collins (2014) discovered that, of the criminal portrayals of race in the media, the news tended to rationalize and justify the behavior of white offenders, but did not offer the same justifications for non-white offenders. This prejudicial behavior was one of the previous studies guiding the current research project. This study aimed to examine whether the biases that existed in Collins (2014) study were present in regards to talking about serial rapists, about whom data was available in my 1940-2010 data set.

This study was guided by the notion that there already exists a bias on an institutional level regarding minority offenders within the criminal justice system and aimed to explore whether there were biases that exist on another institutional level that would possibly contribute to the already present racial and ethnic biases that are associated with minority groups. Priming, described by Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, and Behm-Morawitz (2009) is “the process through which information activated by exposure to media guides subsequent judgments” (p. 616). When the general public is constantly bombarded with crime-related media, especially when that media has been shown to produce bias reporting, it is no surprise that priming is going to take place. The current study used the theory of social constructionism to argue that the ways in which the news media report on serial rape cases is contributing to the concept of priming and ultimately

guiding the socially constructed reality of the general public that consumes these news reports on a daily basis.

Social construction argues that there is no one, true reality. Reality is constructed over time using shared symbols and meanings that important groups and institutions constantly recreate and replicate over extended periods of time. The concept of habitualization, in which individuals or groups consistently do something until it becomes routine, or habit. This habitualization, when conducted by powerful social groups, then becomes institutionalized, meaning it then has a more powerful influence over society, and members of that society see the behavior as normal and legitimate, because it comes from a higher institution than themselves. The mass media, due to the sheer number of individuals it can reach at any given time, and because of the number of individuals who receive their information about crime from the news, 96 percent (Tunnell, 1992), is considered to be one of the major institutions that impact the socially constructed realities of the general public, especially regarding crime. The news media, along with the criminal justice system as a whole, is seen as an authority figure, whose reporting is an accurate representation of what is actually occurring in the world.

Due to their position as an authority figure, the media's role in how they discuss and represent offenders based upon their race and ethnicity is extremely important in understanding the social construction of a racially biased society. Prior research on the topic has demonstrated that the majority of serial rapists are black, at 46 percent of known race cases (Wright, Vander Ven, & Fesmire, 2016), and due to their overrepresentation as offenders, this study wanted to explore whether or not the ways in which these offenders were represented differed based upon their race or ethnicity. This study ultimately found that, despite the seven-decade time span, there were two main ways in which the newspapers marginalized their non-white offenders – thus

potentially contributing to the priming effect that occurs with media exposure, and contributing to a socially-constructed reality in which non-white offenders are deemed more dangerous and more harmful than their white counterparts.

One of the findings that supports this notion is the way in which newspapers discuss fear and alarm in regards to the crime of serial rape and its impacts on a community. This study first examined the ways in which authority figures ultimately speak for the communities themselves and how they are feeling in regards to a particular crime. This finding is of particular importance, because it demonstrates that the racial and ethnic bias against minority offenders exists on an institutional level. When judges, police officers, mayors, and the like, consistently report on the danger and seriousness of these crimes and how they're negatively impacting a community, the general public are going to construct a reality based upon the representation that occurs with these statements. The findings for this section reveal that authority figures, by and large, only discuss the impacts on community and the seriousness of the crimes when the offender was non-white. There were no examples of authority figures referencing the community or levels of fear when white offenders were involved. This type of behavior and institutionalization that occurred within the data, has the ability to create a reality for the general public that says that non-white offenders are the types of individuals of which the public should be afraid. When the consuming public sees newspaper stories reporting on authority figures commenting on these terrifying, non-white offenders, with no similar comments on the white serial rape offenders, even during decades where white offenders existed in higher numbers, the public will then work to construct a reality where the non-white offender is inherently more dangerous to them – thus contributing to already existing negative social stigma surrounding non-white offenders. It's important to note that authority figures making statements about offenders all but disappeared during the decade of

the 2000s. As the internet and social media began and continued to flourish, it is possible that these figures were concerned about the negative reactions or repercussions that might come along with widespread access to the news. In prior decades, the newspapers and quotes from individuals were often limited to those individuals who read the newspaper or lived in a nearby community. However, with the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the internet and the number of people that can be reached grew – possibly prompting less extreme statements from individuals who might not want to receive widespread public scrutiny.

As social construction dictates, when a behavior, such as racial bias, becomes institutionalized the way that it has in regards to reporting fear and concern over non-white serial rapists, that behavior begins to permeate the general public and further constructs the reality that non-white serial rapists are inherently more dangerous than their white counterparts. When examining the ways in which newspapers reported quotes from those living in the communities that were impacted, a similar pattern started to emerge that the communities were inherently more fearful of non-white offenders. The content analysis showed that newspapers more frequently quote from community members regarding fear and anxiety surrounding non-white offenders than they did with white offenders. In fact, the 2000s, a decade which saw a decline in the authority figures reporting on community fear, saw no instances of newspaper reporting of community members expressing fear or concern regarding white offenders. There were, however, several cases of newspapers reporting on these feelings in reference to non-white offenders. These findings demonstrate, that even as the number of serial rapists declines, newspapers still rely on the community to sell their story. Quotes discussing staying in the house and about panic being instilled, are pervasive throughout the decades starting in the 1970s. As the focus shifted away from authority figures and onto community members themselves, the



impact of institutionalized racial bias shines through. As Russell-Brown (2006) found, most racial and ethnic groups, including minority groups, believe that they are more likely to be a victim of a crime committed by a black offender. Additionally, Bishop (2006) found that the general public tends to fear violent crime at the hands of black men more than other types. This construction of the non-white serial rapist as more dangerous than the white offender, contributes to these already primed behaviors. It confirms and reaffirms already existing racial bias that might exist – suggesting that the general public should continue to fear non-white offenders more so than anyone else.

Another major finding from this study examines, again, the ways in which these newspapers discuss offenders in terms of seeing them as non-human entities vs individuals that are human and relatable to the general public. Guided by Loseke's (1993) discussion of people types and the social construction of individuals as being "sympathy-worthy" or "condemnation-worthy", this study found that newspapers have, consistently over time, described white and non-white offenders differently.

Due to the nature of the crime itself, it was not unusual that the newspapers sensationalized these crimes and discussed them in wholly negative terms. The crimes themselves are considered condemnation-worthy by their very nature, but many of the offenders, both white and non-white were discussed in terms of condemnation, referred to in ways that would be considered non-human (i.e. beast, the devil, creature), as were their crimes (i.e. prowling, hunting, lying in wait). However, despite both groups being described in this way – the non-white portion of offenders were described as non-human more frequently than white offenders. The process of dehumanizing offenders works as follows. Dehumanizing offenders and their acts ultimately constructs a reality for readers that the individuals committing these

crimes are not morally aware individuals like the regular public, but instead are creatures that are succumbing to their most basic instincts, the instincts of animals and demons. Humans are seen as being capable of moral reasoning and rational behavior, and when newspaper articles represent non-white offenders in this light, it is reaffirming that racial bias that might already exist. It creates a fear in the general public that non-white offenders aren't capable of reason and cannot control their more primitive instincts. Though white offenders were described in this way as well, a sympathy-worthy technique was frequently used to neutralize their behavior...that of humanization.

Humanization is a technique that exists in these newspaper articles to ultimately neutralize or create sympathy for an offender that might otherwise be seen as nothing but a vile creature that needs to rot in prison. These techniques include mentioning family, employment, religion, or their appearance. These items ultimately make a person more relatable to the public, someone in whom they can see parts of themselves. This study found that, despite there being less white offenders, the humanization neutralization techniques were used twice as frequently than for non-white offenders. In total, there were only five humanization techniques used in regards to non-white offenders for the forty-three dehumanization techniques that were used. This finding is important, as it demonstrates that newspaper articles, whether intentionally or unintentionally, often make excuses for, or make more relatable, white offenders. The general public, who are consuming these articles, will be impacted by this form of biased reporting. Collins (2014) found that excuses were often used when describing white offenders, while Crothers (2007) found that non-white individuals are typically depicted in the media as out-of-control predators, while white individuals are seen as the epitome of picturesque and all that is good with the world. The findings from this study support the previous findings and make a

similar claim that white serial rape offenders have their crime neutralized by making them seem more relatable to the general public, or making them seem as though this is not something a white individual could have done. Non-white offenders are seen as non-human, surrendering to their animalistic-like tendencies. The reality that is created when this happens, demonstrates to readers that white offenders make mistakes, but are inherently good, while non-white offenders also make mistakes, but that what they've done is simply in their nature and cannot be controlled – thus reinforcing negative stereotypes.

The last variable this study explored was that of understanding the extent to which newspapers described, in-depth, the nature of the crimes committed against their victims and whether those descriptions also changed based upon race and ethnicity. What this analysis ultimately demonstrated was that, despite being a pretty consistent theme throughout, there appeared to be no distinct pattern based upon the offender's race or ethnicity. This finding holds true with other reporting techniques that are associated with reporting on sensationalized crime. Greer (2006) reports that the news media are going to be more likely to report on a crime when it can fit the pattern of a story of “the cold-blooded, evil offender versus the innocent victim” (Robinson, 93). In the case of serial rapists, these offenders are committing one of the most heinous crimes imaginable and, for the most part, against highly vulnerable populations...women who are alone and defenseless. This narrative is one that sticks with the general public and creates that aura of fear, no matter the race or ethnicity of the offender.

While this study demonstrates, with the other findings, that the media socially constructs the offenders and their crimes in a certain way based on their race or ethnicity, it appears that for the overall crime as a whole, for the story-telling process that takes place during a sensationalized crime, that the story itself holds the most importance, that the nature of the crime

and what happened to the victims, is the main driving force in the amount of detail put forth in these newspaper articles. Dowler (2006) found that when news media reports on sex crimes, like that of serial rapists, they are more likely to create fear in their news stories while Horowitz (2007) found that public interest in sex-related crime news stories has increased, thus creating a higher demand for news media outlets to report on such events. Jewkes (2004) found that the media, on average, over reports on crimes of a sexual nature “distorting the overall picture of crime that the public receives, and instilling exaggerated fears among women regarding their likelihood of being victims of such crimes” (48). While the findings here do not demonstrate a racial and ethnic bias, the frequency with which these crimes are reported and the racial bias that occurs in terms of how the community expresses fear and the non-human reporting techniques used for non-white offenders, will ultimately contribute to already existing racial biases, as well as form new beliefs regarding white offenders as inherently good and non-white offenders as inherently bad.

### The Ideal Offender

Prior research has suggested that society and the criminal justice system operate in regards to whom they deem worthy as victims. The data show that society sees young, white women as the “ideal victim” and those are the stories that are more likely to be reported in the news and are more likely to receive sympathy from the general public in regards to the crimes that occurred. (Christie, 1986; Eliasson-Nannini, Sommerlad-Rogers, Bradley, & Pearson-Nelson, 2010; Randall, 2010; Wilson & O’Brien, 2016). In the same respect, this study aimed to explore whether or not the newspaper socially constructs, in a similar fashion, the “ideal offender.” An “ideal offender” is ultimately the person that society imagines when they close

their eyes and think about who they should fear most... who is going to be committing a crime against them. What does that person look like? Prior research has shown that the public fears non-white offenders over white offenders and believe that, no matter the race or ethnicity of those surveyed, they believe non-white individuals are going to be the ones committing a crime against them (Bishop, 2006; Russell-Brown, 2006; Crothers, 2007). The media works to socially construct this image who the ideal offender might be. The media over reports on crime where the offender is black (Dowler, 2004; Dixon, 2007; Dixon, 2008) and doing so will ultimately construct a reality that non-white offenders are more common and more dangerous. Add this in with the findings of the current study, which demonstrate that when a non-white serial rapist is present, fear and anxiety are reported in the news at higher rates. Additionally, the current study found that newspapers tend to dehumanize both white and non-white serial rapists, but that newspapers tended to neutralize the crimes of white offenders by making them seem more relatable – a technique that was almost never used regarding non-white offenders.

The oversaturation of the news media with sex crimes, along with the explicit detail present in the newspaper articles regarding serial rapists, work together to construct a fearful reality that the general public, and women more specifically, should be afraid of these sensationalized types of crime. This socially constructed fear is amplified when the news media chooses to report levels of fear and anxiety in response to non-white offenders but not as a response to white offenders and by creating an atmosphere where non-white offenders are seen as animalistic and dangerous – we see that news media creates a perfect storm for socially constructing the “ideal offender.” Statistics consistently show that crime tends to be intraracial, or between the same race (Fox, et. al. 2012; Hough & McCorkle, 2017), yet the fear tends to gravitate toward being fearful of non-white offenders. The news media as an institution has

worked to socially construct a reality in which non-white offenders are dangerous, non-human entities that should be feared and monitored closely, and that construction has permeated the general public to reinforce racist and prejudicial beliefs.

### Limitations and Future Directions

The nature of this study is limited in a few ways. First, the data themselves are taken from newspaper articles in five different regions of the country. It is possible that not all cases of serial rape were covered during this time period and that there are instances that could be missing and thus possibly impacting the data. Additionally, race of offender, for the overall number of serial rapists, was still relatively low, with only 297 cases out of 1,037 having known race of offender. This percentage, if higher, could help potentially result in a more definitive statement regarding reporting surrounding serial rape offenders. As with any qualitative study, the findings and themes created are subjective and are thus open to the interpretation of the researcher, however, validity checks were conducted along the way to ensure the least amount of bias possible.

While thorough, this study lends itself to important future research implications. Due to the small number of instances in which the race of the victim was known, it would be important to study how the newspaper reporting changed regarding race and ethnicity of the victim. Additionally, future research should examine the community level responses to the offenders on an extended-level. Several themes regarding community reactions to the crime were discovered, but were beyond the nature and the scope of this particular study.

## **APPENDIX: TABLES**

*Table 1: Dehumanization and Humanization Counts for White and Non-White Offenders*

Race of Offender	Dehumanized	Humanized
White	24	10
Non-White	43	5



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