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When Women Kill

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ABSTRACT

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The media is one of the strongest influences on how society views the criminal justice system

and all actors therein. This is especially true for offenders of violent crime. Notably, women

who kill are rare. However, when women do murder someone, the media tends to over

expose them and portray them in different ways. The current study is intended to examine

how the media portrays women murderers. In particular, this research is focused on how

fictional and true crime programs portray female killers. Do they portray them in a positive or

negative light? Do they portray them realistically? Are true crime shows more realistic than

fictional crime shows? Each of these questions was explored and it was found that true crime

programs, even though not wholly realistic, do portray women much more realistically than

fictional shows. It is important to study these portrayals in order to understand how women

killers are portrayed, how society views and interprets these particular criminals, and what

are the steps necessary in order to prevent and change the way media process this crime.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis work to my parents Mauro Sergio Andrade Lima and Ana Maria Chiarella Dykes whose words of encouragement and push for me to accomplish all my goals in life is what made me be here today. A special feeling of gratitude for my father's long hours of Skype listening to my talking about this work and always making me laugh, I miss you tremendously. I also would like to thank my mother's innumerous trips to the grocery store and personal delivery for me in order to make sure I don't forget to eat while accomplishing this thesis. You have been my best cheerleaders and I own you everything.

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I especially dedicate this work to my nona and nono. Without your letters, phone conversations, and encouraging words, it would have been harder to survive. You are my rock and my motivation in life.

Also, this thesis is dedicated to all my family and friends in Brasil. Although we are distant, you are always and forever in my heart and thoughts. To my many new friends who I made in the U.S.A, this work is also for you. It makes it easier to live away from home when I have friends like you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Women do not often kill. However, when they do, they tend to gain attention from the media and society. Society is fascinated by the fact that women, who are often seen as innocent, fragile, and dependable, can commit such heinous acts (Weatherby, Blanche, & Jones, 2008). In reality, what do women who kill look like? Are they soccer moms who take their children to school every day and have dinner ready by the time their husbands comes home? Or are women who kill those who live in poverty, have suffered abusive childhoods, are unemployed, and suffer from substance abuse problems? How do the popular docudramas and true crime television programs about women who kill such as *Snapped* and *Deadly Women* portray these women? Do these shows cast women in a positive or negative light? Do fictional television programs such as *Criminal Minds* and *CSI:Miami* portray murdering women in a realistic manner, or do they tend to create complete fictional accounts? In this study, I addressed those questions in an attempt to gain insight into the lives of women who kill.

First and foremost, one must look at why women kill. Most of the murders committed by women are due to greed, jealousy, self-defense, revenge, or psychopathology (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). In the past females were not seen as able to commit crimes due to stereotypical views about their maternal instincts, sensitivity, physical weakness, lower intelligence, and other characteristics that would not allow women to either be smart enough or strong enough to commit crimes (Weatherby et al., 2008). As stated by Weatherby and colleagues (2008), "throughout history, females murderers have been considered a rare and unique breed of criminal. When the crimes are especially heinous and against perceived female norms, the court system, media, and public come down exceedingly hard on these

unnatural and doubly deviant criminals" (p. 1). A woman's role in life has been traditionally more passive than active, which is one of the reasons why she was viewed as less likely or unable to commit certain crimes.

The background of women's history influences how female offenders and victims are seen in the society. In order to better understand, Rafter and Stanko (1982) identified six images of women that influence how they are perceived in both society and the criminal justice system: 1) the "pawn of biology" in which women are viewed as "gripped by biological forces beyond [their] control; 2) "impulsive and nonanalytical" in which women seemingly act intuitively and illogically'; 3)"passive and weak" in which women are seen as easy prey for victimization or compliant accomplices; 4)"impressionable and in need of protection" in which women are viewed as 'gullible and easily led astray'; 5)'active woman as masculine' in which women who break stereotypical passive role as deviant are likely to be criminal and also likely to be viewed as lesbian; and 6) 'purely evil' suggests that it is worse for women to be criminal than for men because women are breaking out both law-abiding boundaries and stereotypical gender role boundaries. These images of women often play a vital role when media and society describe what the female murderer looks like. Media outlets are fast in choosing which of those six images they will portray the female killer as and how society will decide how harsh her punishment will be.

Again, the purpose of this paper was to collect data from the media through the form of fictional and true crime shows and compare to the characteristics of women in prison to conclude which one of them portrays women more realistically. In order to do this, I examined and compared women portrayed by various sources to the typical female murderer. Does the media portray women who kill realistically or not? This study is vital because without it, we are unable to understand how women killers are portrayed and how the media portrayal influences society's beliefs about them.

Limitations

Some of the limitations in the method chosen, content analyses, are those of human factor and errors. This type of research requires a sufficient amount of research time and there must be precautions in place in order to prevent data form being distorted. If the researcher has any problems, her judgment can be compromised. With this particular research perhaps, the sample size being 40 hours may not be a sufficient amount of research and in the future additional episodes should be analyzed. Furthermore, the results of this research can be slanted or skewed if the words are misinterpreted. This analysis is limited to the availability of the material and on this research not all of the episodes were available for analyzes. Therefore, the research was limited on the availability of the episodes. The programs were chosen on a personal idea of the most viewed and most popular programs about female killers. Therefore, a limitation can be personal bias.

Another limitation of this program is that only fictional and documentary programs were analyzed. In future studies, a researcher could also include fictional movies as well as movies based on real life of female killers. By analyzing the data represented on both, the researcher can find how the producer of the movie changes the information from the real cases into the movies in order to make them more interesting and sell it. The information found on fictional movies can help determine how it deviates from the characteristics of the real female offenders.

In the chapters that follow, I attempted to explore the role of the media in influencing our perceptions of women murderers. In Chapter 2, I discussed the history of violent women, along with a profile of the typical female murderer. I also discussed the role of the media in our everyday lives and how it influences our perceptions of crime and criminal women. In Chapter 3, I described my methods for the content analysis that examined various television shows in their portrayal of women killers. In Chapter 4, I discussed the findings of my study.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I highlighted the major findings and discussed implications of this research for future studies.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

When researching the history of women's offenses and use of violence, it is important to understand the relationship between women's crimes and the lives they live. When a woman is known to have committed a crime, the first question that people generally ask is: "How could she do that?" (Chesney-Lind, 1997). This question is due to the cost and the duties of being born a female such as the expectations of taking care of the house, being loving wife and a mother, and being patient, calm, nurturing, passionate, and delicate (Chesney-Lind, 1997). Women are expected to behave a certain way due to societal expectations of femininity (Chesney-Lind, 1997). However, how could she do that, is not the question that should be asked. The real question should be why do women commit so few murders? And when they do commit murder, what was their main motivation? For example, was it a case of self-defense when there is abuse at home? Or was it motivated by greed or jealousy?

Women Who Commit Crimes and Those Who Kill

It is important to remember that women are rarely criminal and even less likely to commit murder (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996). Additionally, women's crimes rates are consistently and significantly lower than men's (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996). Nevertheless, the trends in women's crime tend to be similar to those of men, meaning they tend to rise and fall together (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996). Still, while trends in crime rates for men and women tend to be similar, the crimes generally committed by men and women are different (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996). Women tend to be arrested for minor property crimes such as larceny and fraud, which showed major increases in arrests for women (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996). The relatively low female participation in serious offenses is corroborated by

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data from the NCVS (BJS.gov). For example, at the end of 2010, 25% of female inmates were incarcerated for drug crimes and 29% for property crimes, counting for the majority of crimes committed by women being petty crimes (BJS.gov).

Because women do not often commit violent crime, much less homicide, and because there is a lack of information and understanding about how the media portrays female offenders, it is vitally important to understand this interaction. Not many studies have been conducted to compare the media's portrayal of female murderers with the demographic information about these women (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996). Only recently, when the prison boom for women began, did researchers become interested in studying women killers and in attempting to understand what drove them to commit those crimes. Rather, most studies were based on homicides committed by men (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996). Although the prison boom is due to women committing more petty crimes instead of felonies, it has opened the curiosity of researchers and criminologists to analyze and investigate female killers (Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996). According to Bureau of Justice Statistics, since 1990 the number of females convicted of felonies in state courts has more than doubled compared to the rate of increase in male defendants. Again, this emphasizes the disproportional growth of women in prison (compared to men) over the past few years.

The number of female offenders incarcerated for violent crimes has increased as well (BJS.gov). In 2004, 34% of female offenders were sentenced for violent crimes (BJS.gov). Additionally on the Bureau Justice of Statistics report from 2011, 37% (34,100) of females in state prison had committed violent crimes and out of those 10% of females were serving time for murder (BJS.gov). These statistics indicate that not only have the number of female offenders been increasing, but the number of women committing violent crimes including but not limited to murder and manslaughter have also increased.

The characteristics of most women who become criminals are as follows: young (between 25-29 years of age), economically disadvantaged minorities, unmarried or single parents, runaways, have a history of attempted suicide, substance abusers, victims of physical abuse (with over a third being sexually abused), and high school drop-outs (Florida Female Offenders, 2011). According to the Bureau Justice of Statistics, 2002, over half of the female jail inmates reported substance abuse dependence. Nearly 52% of female inmates were found to be dependent on alcohol or drugs and 36% of females reported that they were sexually abused in the past, typically by family members or friends and/or acquaintances (BJS.gov). Over a quarter of incarcerated women had been unemployed in the past 3 years prior to being incarcerated (BJS.gov). Furthermore, a great majority of women were in jail for larceny, theft, or drug related offenses (BJS.gov). Many of those convicted of manslaughter or murder were there due to killing a boyfriend or a husband who abused them, and for one half of women who were in jail for homicide, it was their first offense. It would appear that the crimes committed by women have not gotten more serious, but rather the system has gotten harsher on sentencing all types of crimes committed by women (Mann, 1996). According to Mann (1996) out of all domestic related arrests for women, 49.2% have been previously arrested with 30% of them having a violent history. The initial charges for those women were 89.6% murder and 5.6% manslaughter, and the final charge being shifted to 28.1% murder and 52.8% voluntary manslaughter (Mann, 1996).

Corresponding with the growth in felony convictions for women, over the past 20 years there has been a boom in the women's prison population (FBI.gov). According to the statistics from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in 2002, there were 1,970,089 women arrested, many fewer than the 2,083,579 in 2011. These numbers indicate that the percentage of females (adult) arrested has increased during those 9 years by 5.8% (FBI.gov). These statistics changed when the imprisonment rate for females decreased by 2.9% from 2011 to

2012, from 65 female prisoners per 100,000 U.S. female residents to 63 per 100,000 (FBI.gov). This was the first decrease in the incarcerated population in over 30 years. The distribution of offense categories was divided with 37% of females imprisoned for violent offenses, 28% for property offenses, and 25% for drug crimes. Therefore, the majority of females are incarcerated for property and drug crimes and only around one third of incarcerated women committed violent crimes (BJS.gov).

In regards to women murderers, the number of women sentenced to death in 2007 was 56 (38 white and 15 black). The state with most women under death penalty was California (15) followed by Texas (9) (BJS.gov). In 2010, 36% of females were incarcerated for violent crimes (BJS.gov). However, the percentage of women committing murder is still quite low (Mann, 1996). Additionally, women constitute more than half of the world's population; however, they rarely commit serious crimes, especially crimes such as multiple murder, which is why when occurrences do occur, they tend to shock the masses because it is not believed that women are capable of committing these crimes. Therefore, when women do kill people, the media tends to blow said event out of proportion because this is not a usual type of offender and crime combination (Weatherby et al., 2008).

Because cases of female murders are rare, and not many studies have been completed, cases of violent women are used by the media to gain the public's attention and thus play upon their emotions (Weatherby et al., 2008). When the crime is committed, the media acts on the public's sense of anomie and classifies the female murderer as either good or bad (Weatherby et al., 2008). In the first type of portrayal, that the woman is good, the media focuses on the state of mind of the criminal rather than her actions, thus causing a feeling of sadness and an image of helpless and insane female. Those feelings combined give her the benefit of the doubt, and her past experiences and emotions are more often taken into consideration. The media portrays a woman as bad when her actions and behaviors are the

opposite of what is expected of her as a female and she must be manipulative and an evil person. Usually, this type of offender is burned by the society, devoid of excuses in the eyes of the media, and she deserves punishment to the fullest extent of the law (Weatherby et al., 2008).

As noted, women are less likely to commit crimes than men; however, their rates have been steadily increasing. Still, women are not typically violent offenders. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2012) most of the crimes committed by women were property and drug crimes, petty crimes, and misdemeanors. Notably, the arrest rate of juvenile females was nearly twice the adult female rate, as indicated on Bureau of Justice Statistics (2012). Nevertheless, as indicated by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, since 1993 the rates for both male and female who committed murder have declined. The estimated rate for murder offenses committed by women in 1998 was 1.3 per 100,000 (BJS.gov). On the other hand, the number of females arrested for murder and nonnegligent manslaughter increased by 1.6% from 2010 to 2011, even though the overall number of arrests between 2010 and 2011 decreased by 2.9% (BJS.gov). We can see that even though the number of females (adults) arrests has been on the decline, this decrease was due to other types of crime and the number of murders committed by women have actually increased.

Nature of Crime

Criminologists have often first theorized about women and then applied stereotypes to the study of women and crime (Rafter & Stanko, 1982). What dominate the literature about women and crime are often contradictory characteristics such as "determined, passive, impulsive, impressionable, masculine, and evil" (Rafter & Stanko, 1982, p.5). Those characteristics are considered deviant from the role a female should have because they are

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outside of the norms and standards. Thus, those deviant actions give a platform for crime that most previous research focused on those characteristics and explanations for crime.

First and foremost, women are seen as less likely to commit crime due to the stereotypes that they are soft, lovable, and calm (Rafter & Stanko, 1982). According to Lombroso (as cited by Rafter & Stanko, 1982):"women were less likely to than men to be born criminals, but that those women who were born criminals were more perverse and wicked than male counterparts" (p.6). Although Lombroso's theory is outdated and not accepted by many criminologists due to its highly stereotypical nature, he had made an effort to theorize about women who break the law. Later in the 19th century, there emerged the idea of the evil woman or bad little girl (Rafter & Stanko, 1982). The former is seen as masculine and aggressive, who lives outside of the norms and should receive harsher punishment. The latter is seen as an impulsive, sexually promiscuous, and passive and is seen as a women who can be educated, trained, and returned to the proper female manners and, therefore, receive lesser punishment (Rafter & Stanko, 1982). As a result of crime being seen as a masculine action, women who committed crime were thought to do so either because they were too masculine, which is applied the evil women theory, or because they had been led astray, in which the bad little girl theory comes into play (Rafter & Stanko, 1982).

A difficulty encountered in studying women offenders is the gender-role stereotypes of women as gentle, passive, caretaker, and mother figure. As found by Goetting (1988), women have mainly been studied as victims rather than criminals. That is because the ideal of female views in society can accommodate the women as a victim, it is easy for the society to view that image; however, it is not easy to view a woman as a perpetrator of violence. Few studies, however, reflect the pattern and trends of homicide by women as a result of gender bias (Shipley, 2001). Additionally, as pointed out by Wilbanks (cited in Shipley, 2001), when men commit crime it is often attributed to economic reasons, inadequate socialization, and other

factors, while criminal behavior by females is often attained by sickness, weakness, frailty, and vulnerability. According to Godwin (1978) sadistic cruelty in women is one of the most shocking to society and, therefore, receives an excessive amount of attention from the media because it directly contradicts with the conservative and pure perception of a women's nature.

Additionally, Smart (1977) analyzed the myth that female criminals are biologically abnormal because they are not thought to be fully female because their characteristics do not fit with the ideal of a female in the society. Furthermore, she said that these women were in a state of double jeopardy because they are legally sanctioned as well as socially condemned for being abnormal. Therefore, it is said that a women's value is determined by how other perceive her and when she does not fit with the ideal view of women, she is thought to be abnormal.

Along with that, Bell and Fox (1996) stipulated that there should be additional research done on women \other than those who kill their abuser in order to better understand who they are. As found by Shipley, "These researchers maintained that many feminist scholars have chosen to remain silent in these types of cases because they are relatively rare and this situation is less risky" (2001, p. 62). However, if feminists continue to endorse silence about these cases, more implications can be brought as most of the challenging issues for feminist's theory are being voided (Shipley, 2001). This is especially true when the victim is a child or another female. It raises even more difficulties to address those issues due to fragility of the offender and victim and the lack of study about such cases. Additionally, the reasons why female kill are not the same as males and their motives and reasons are different. Therefore, the profile, role of drugs, demographics, and details of women's cases are discussed in the succeeding subsection.

Traditional ideas about how females can commit such a grievous crime include that offenders are motivated primary by gain, are less violent than males, tend to commit murder out of reaction rather than their own initiations, and are not sexually compulsive in their bid to kill (Ramsland, 2007). However, just like everything in life, there are exceptions to the rule. Previous research has also shown a pattern in relation to the employment of the female offender and the type of women they are. For example, in some cases where the killer was female, the offender was employed and usually in a care-giving or health care environment that made it easy for her to find her victims (Ramsland, 2007).

Victim-Female Relationship

Most violent crimes conducted by females take place in family settings, and victims are usually the husband, the lover, or a child of the female offender (Mann, 1984). "Unlike males, females rarely kill or assault strangers or acquaintances; instead, the female's victim tends to be a male who she has been intimate with or a child; the offense generally takes place within her home, the victim is frequently drunk, and self-defense or extreme depression is often a motive" (Dobash et al., as cited in Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996). According to the Bureau Justice of Statistics (2008), 30% of the children under the age of 5 who were murdered were murdered by their mothers, and 5% were killed by female acquaintances. Furthermore, the female offender and male victim relationship accounted for 9% of homicides between 1980 and 2008, and 2.2% for female offender and female victim during the same years (BJS.gov). Of all homicides committed by female offenders, 29.7% were against a person with whom they had an intimate relationship and 25.6% against family members (BJS.gov).

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2010), in instances when relationships between victims and offenders were publicly acknowledged, 53% were killed

by someone they knew. Again, the majority of all murders are between people who know each other. So this trend is similar for both men and women. Moreover, women are not only likely to kill someone they know, they are also likely to kill their children and other family members (Mann, 1984). For example, mothers and stepmothers committed about half of all parental killings between 1976 and 1997 (Pollock & Davis, 2005). Notably, women rarely kill strangers, with an estimated 1 in 14 murders by females being committed against a victim who was a stranger to the offender (BJS.gov). These statistics indicate that the majority of murders committed by females are killing of someone they were acquainted with or are related to. As stated on Rafter and Stanko (1982), Blum and Fisher suggest:

> While murder in general is a very personalized crime, in the vast majority of cases taking place between people who know each other, female murder appears to be an especially intimate act. That is, women are more likely than men to murder another family member – particularly a husband or child; outside of husbands and children, the only significant choice for women appears to be a lover. (p. 166-167).

As a common characteristic, previous studies have shown that in the majority of cases there is a relationship between the victim and the offender. The most frequent affiliation between victims and offenders in domestic homicides cases was that of lovers, as indicated by Mann (1996), common-law marriage being the second most frequent, while husbands were third. Silverman and Kennedy (1988) reported a similar finding that husbands and children are the victims in two thirds of the homicides perpetrated by women. Much of the rest of the female-perpetrated homicide involves other family members and friends or acquaintances (FBI,gov). Notably, the killing of one's parents or siblings, however, was found to be rare among women (D'Orban & O'Connor, 1989).

Despite the fact that overall murder is typically an intra-gender and intra-racial crime for men, women are the exception to this rule because they are typically killed by men rather than other women. Wilkbanks (cited in Shipley, 2001) found that women almost never killed

other females. According to the Department of Justice (1992) only about 9% of women victims were killed by another woman. Those numbers indicate that men are by far the usual choice of murder victim by both male and female murderers.

Murder Location

Most of the previous studies conducted about female offenders have shown that murders characteristically take place at home, especially in the home that the offender and the victim share together (Mann, 1996). However, if the offender and the victim do not live together, usually the crime takes place at the offender's home rather than the victim's. The statistics indicate that 57.3% of the murders occurred at the home that the victim and offender shared together, 18.9% of murders took place at the offender's home, 2.8% at the victims home, and 4.2% in a third party home (Mann, 1996). Inside the house, the living room, family room, or dining room were most commonly used as the location for homicide (Mann, 1996). These statistics contradict Wolfang's (1985) study where he found that the kitchen and the bedroom were the most common places. Nevertheless, both of these studies indicate that murders are likely to occur in the residence of either the victim or offender or both.

Timing of Murder

Although the information is limited, studies done in the past on homicide victimization by Wolfang (1958) found that homicides in Philadelphia occurred most frequently during the weekends. In addition, Goetting (1987) also found that 91% of murders in Detroit took place during the weekends. Furthermore, Block (1987) found that in Chicago, Latinas (60%) and African American (61.5%) wives were most likely to kill their husbands on weekends; however, white wives were more likely to commit their murders during weekdays (Mann, 1996). Additionally, both Goetting (1987) and Wolfgang (1985) found that the majority of homicides are nocturnal. It seems that more than half of domestic homicides

take place at night between 8:00pm and 3:00am (Mann, 1996). Block (1987) went further by stating that the time when murders are committed can vary depending on the race of the female offender. She found that Latina wives most frequently killed their husbands anywhere between midnight and 3:59am, whereas African American and white females killed between 8:00pm and 11:59pm (Mann, 1996). Nonetheless, most women kill at night.

Alcohol and Drug Use

Homicides are often committed in congruence with the use of alcohol and/or drugs. It was found that 36.2% of female offenders were drinking at the time of the offense, and 8.7% had used some type of a drug prior to the commission of the murder (Mann 1996). In addition, over half of their victims (58.3%) were under the influence of alcohol and 12.1% were under the influence of drugs at the time of their murder (Mann, 1996). Additionally, Mann (1996) found that southern female killers were more likely to have been drinking just prior to their offense rather than nonsouthern female killers. However, nonsouthern women comprised 58.6% of the murderers when drugs (other than alcohol) were used just prior to the offense. The use of alcohol and drugs are found to be somewhat related to self-defense cases. Husbands attack their wives at any time of the day; however, when under the influence of alcohol or drugs the rate of attacks increases, which can be when the wife snaps or the abuse gets so violent that the females are forced to use violence to save their lives (Mann, 1996).

According to Collins and Spencer (1999) alcohol and drug use are risk factors for males against female domestic violence offending. Other studies have found similar findings. For example, Goetting (1987) reported that alcohol is often a vital aspect of marital homicide committed by women. Eronen, Hakola, and Tiihone (1996) also noted that alcohol dependency in congruence with antisocial personality disorder increases homicidal

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tendencies. Moreover, according to Bureau of Justice Statistics (1999), 38.5% reported the offender was under the influence of drugs or alcohol during family violence incidents.

Psychosocial Factors

Another factor that contributes to females committing crimes is the way they deal with stress in their lives. Women are more likely to internalize negative affect as guilt and hurt rather than externalize at the target. This results in women' aggression often being more indirect, and women with a high level of aggression reporting more problems such as self-harm and anorexia (Yourstone, Lindholm, & Kristiansson (2008). Furthermore, women are supposed to express their emotions in a manner of insecurity, fragile, and fear (Yourstone et al., 2008). When a woman breaks the law by committing a violent crime, she is not only breaking the law that forbids violence but her natural law in which she is expected to act in a passive manner (Yourstone et al., 2008). It has been found that females who commit homicides have displayed less aggressive behavior during childhood because they show a more introverted range of problems (Yourstone et al., 2008). Additionally, female perpetrators of violence may have had harsher psychosocial circumstances during their childhood (Yourstone et al., 2008).

Motivations and Methods

Even though we have traditionally thought of women as caring and nurturing, they can be just as cruel and cold as any male killer. However, even though men and women are both capable of murder, their motivation and methods are somewhat different. According to social norms, murder is not a part of a woman's characteristics. A factor that may be particularly salient in trials of women for murder are times when they tested norms and ideas about gender roles. Well into the 20th century, the conventional picture of respectable women did not fit that women could be murderers (Friedman, 2010). Murder was not in their nature.

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Therefore, it was believed that if they killed, there must have been a good reason (Friedman, 2010). There is still gender bias in our society, and the majority of people cannot picture a woman killing anyone, let alone her husband or child. The traditional views of what a woman should be like come from a distant part of our history, when, as previously stated, the stereotype of Lombroso and, consequently, the evil woman and the bad little girl theories originated.

It is important to note that like men, women view murder as a solution to a problem (Shipley, 2001). As indicated by Shipley, (2001) women who kill are frequently in situations where the victim, usually a male, precipitated the violence by being the first to use physical force such as threatening with a weapon or striking a blow; thus, the female perpetrator responded to her victimization.

In a study conducted by Spunt, Brownstein, Crimmins, and Langley (1997), where a series of interviews were done with female homicide offenders in order to examine the various circumstances in which the women committed homicide in first place, it was found that any particular homicide may have more than one motive associated with it. The majority of these events had two motives that included self-defense, harassment, psychiatric conditions, a need to obtain money for drugs or for something else, retaliation, jealousy, or motive missing. Goetting (1988) noted that the most common motive grew out of an argument or confrontation. The FBI (2012) indicated that common reasons for murder were: a romantic triangle, children killed by the babysitter, substance induced brawls, argument over money or property, or other arguments in general. Although the FBI's information is not stratified by gender, these statistics indicates that relationships are often a common factor in the circumstances and motives for murder.

Although it appears that the motivation that drives female offenders to kill is in most cases the fact of her being in a relationship, it is evident that it significantly differs from what turns men offenders to such an act. What about the method? According to several studies, firearms were the most common method, followed by the use of knives (Goetting, 1987; Mann, 1996; Wilbanks, 1983b). There is also a correlation between the race and the weapon used. For instance, Block's (1987) study revealed that more than half of Latina and African American women who killed their husbands in Chicago used firearms, while only 39.6% of white wives did. Moreover, white female domestic killers were three times more likely to use long guns than African Americans women, and no Latina used long guns in the murder of their spouses (Mann, 1996).

The weapon of choice is typically a gun with a knife being the second choice. The offender appears to be acting alone 97.2% of times at the time of her attack (Mann, 1996). Premeditated offenses and self-defense count for the top two reasons and motives. (Mann, 1996). According to the Bureau Justice of Statistics from 2008, boyfriends were more likely to be killed by knives than any other group of victims. So, it appears that the type of relationship also influences the method of killing. Finally, drugs and alcohol seem to play a prominent role in the commission of murders.

Demographics

Women who kill are slightly older than the average age of criminals, are often unemployed, under-educated, and members of minority groups (Shipley, 2001). For example, by analyzing the data collected in Maricopa County, Arizona, of individuals charged with a nonnegligent manslaughter or homicide, it was found that women offenders were members of lower socioeconomic groups, dependent of someone, less likely to be the primary source of their household income, and either employed in nonprofessional occupations or unemployed

(Jurik & Winn, 1990). Additionally, the female homicide offenders are typically older than male counterparts (Shipley, 2001). Many females who commit murder are also members of minority groups, particularly African American and Latina (Mann, 1996). Their ages vary, with one third between 18 and 25 years of age and over half 26-45 years old (Silverman & Kennedy, 1988), so while they are still young women, they are on average older than their male counterparts. Of the 103,100 female prisoners sentenced to more than 1 year in state or federal prison, nearly half (48% or 49,100 prisoners) were white females. Black women made up 28% of all sentenced female prisoners and Hispanic women 17%. Since 2000 the number and percentage of white women among sentenced female prisoners have increased. At yearend 2000, white women accounted for 40%, while black women accounted for 38% of sentenced female prisoners. Women ages 34 to 39 made up the largest percentage of sentenced female prisoners overall (19%; BJS.gov).

In relation to their marital status, most of them responded they had been married at least once, which can include, married, common law married, separated, divorced, or widowed. Only 40% were single. The greatest majority of women who killed (69.5%) were mothers and had an average of 11 years of education, which is equivalent to some high school. Almost three fourths (71%) were unemployed. Housewife was the most common occupation of the offenders (44%). Husbands counted for 22% and common-law husbands for 18% of the victims. These findings agree with the previous ones, where the majority of homicides committed by females involve someone with whom they have a sexual relationship, followed by children, then friend, acquaintances, or other family members (Silverman & Kennedy, 1988). Furthermore, the female killer seems to have previous arrests, as more than half had previous records, and 35% had prior arrests for violent crimes (Mann, 1996).

All types of women commit crime, all ages, races, ethnicities, and backgrounds. As shown above, some studies have indicated women of some races commit murder more often than others and the times of their crimes are different. Moreover, the murder trends for each race and ethnicity change over time, and while one ethnic or racial group can increase in their offenses, others may decrease. Nevertheless, no matter what ethnic group, age, race, or background, women are committing murder.

Types of Female Killers

There are many reasons why women commit murder. Also, there are many different types of victims for female offenders. Often, as previously stated, women usually kill someone they know, with their victims often being a boyfriend, husband, or child. Women can also kill in self-defense or when protecting the life of a loved one. Her victims can also be more than one, in the case of serial killers. For the most part, females choose victims that are helpless, in other words, an easy prey. The idea that certain females chose easy prey is supported by the following statement, "Being a caregiver is something they know they can do, and for these offenders who crave the excitement of killing, there is a side benefit to choosing a profession that places them in situations where they are in contact with helpless individuals" (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000 p. 17). According to previous studies, criminologists have found that females tend not to move their location significantly when in commission of their crimes. Once they find a place where they can commit their crimes, while drawing little attention to themselves, they tend to stick around. Female predators remain in one local and choose very sick and helpless victims. To aid their crimes, they usually do not mutilate or torture their victims and chose methods of killing that are most likely to look like natural causes, such as poison or asphyxiation (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000). Besides choosing a victim who is helpless or depends on her, the female offender usually keeps a low profile when she

commits her crime, not calling too much attention to herself, playing the victim, and choosing a method of killing that will not bring much suspicion.

Mothers Who Kill

Women are typically seen as mothers, housewives, and caregivers. Female homicide offenders tend to be first described as wives, mothers, or women in the headlines or initial lines of the text before their names are mentioned (Gurian, 2011). This is used by the media in order to emphasize the 'bad' image, by stating it up front that the person who committed the crime you are about to view is a mother, a woman, a spouse and, therefore, can only be a bad, horrible person to have committed such an illegal act. An example of this is the 'tot mom', Casey Anthony case, which gained much attention for months in the news and inspired a lifetime movie based on this real life story.

Casey Anthony was first portrayed as a victim, an attractive women who had her daughter abducted by some nanny. Later, the media turned on her as more facts came to light about her daughter's disappearance and she was linked to it. Then, she was portrayed as a terrible person, who constantly lied about where she lived, where she worked, did not report her daughter missing for 30 days. Even worse, during those 30 days "partied like a rockstar" and got new tattoos celebrating life. Immediately, pictures of her partying, drinking and acting out surfaced on the internet and the news everywhere (hln.com).

From that point on, she was seen as a woman who failed to conform to the feminine ideal by acting out and not having maternal instincts. The media was fascinated by this case and so was the society mainly because she was such a bad mother. How could an innocent young mother kill her beautiful daughter just so she could go out to party? When she was found not guilty, threatening letters were sent to her and she had to move to an undisclosed place because many people wanted to kill her due to her actions (hln.com).

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, between 1976 and 1997 parents and stepparents murdered nearly 11,000 children. Mothers and stepmothers committed about half of these child murders. Sons and stepsons accounted for 52% of those killed by mothers. Additionally, mothers were responsible for a higher share of children killed during infancy (BJS.gov)

It is common for women who kill their children to be suffering from Munchausen syndrome by proxy (Kelleher & Kehheler, 1998). Munchausen syndrome by proxy is a mental disorder in which subjects injure or induce illness in children in order to gain attention and sympathy for themselves (Artingstall, 1995). With time, a growing number of MSBP cases caused law enforcements to give more attention and investigate the means in order to better understand the issues associated with this disorder (Artingstall, 1995). However, other motives may be used, such as revenge against the father or the benefit from the children's life insurance. In some cases there are no exact explanation but it can also vary from freedom to jealousy.

Typically, mothers who have killed their children are a good deal younger than those in other homicide categories. Mothers use their hands to kill their children. While those mothers who kill their noninfant children tend to beat them, those committing infanticide tend to suffocate or strangle (Silverman & Kennedy, 1988). In a study conducted by Weisheit (1986) where 39 incarcerated women who had killed their children were examined, two groups were examined in two different periods of time. It was reported that the group studied in the earlier period were married, whereas the majority studied on the latter group were single.

Self-Defense

Domestic violence has been and remains a pervasive problem in our society. It has been estimated that one in four women in the U.S. have been victims of intimate partner violence (CDC.gov)

Killing in immediately nonconfrontational circumstances would seem to point inexorably to the conclusion that the women's actions were not reasonable or necessary. The questions that usually surface around her are: "Why didn't she just leave, seek help or call the police?" (Hipkins, 2010). However, those types of questions only leave society with more unanswered questions. In Mann's (1990) study of Black female homicide, she found that the most common motive for murder was self-defense (41.7%). It was the most reported motive by offenders.

Furthermore, in self-defense cases, 38% of the victims defending themselves from an attacker with a firearm, attacked the offender, and the others threatened the offender with a weapon. About three fourths of the victims who used firearms for self-defense did so during a crime of violence (BJS.gov). There are a number of patterns that are generally given as a justification for the females' commitment of murder. However, these reasons are highly questionable.

Serial Killers

When talking about women that kill, we must include female serial killers – even though they only comprise a tiny portion of serial killers (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). Unlike men, female serial killers are rarely involved in sexual homicides (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). Because it is such a rare case, female serial killers are usually more successful in the commission of their killing and provide more difficulty for the law enforcement to resolve their cases. They can be very young or very old, and investigation becomes more challenging

due to societal expectations (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000). Female serial killers are able to extend their killing up to 8 years before being caught- twice as long as male serial killers (Kelleher & Kelleher 1998). Their motivation, reasons, and victim typology are usually much different from those of male serial killers. When a female serial killer attacks a person it is usually someone known to her, like family; in other words, individuals who are easily dominated and who somehow depends on the offender (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998).

Motivation can be difficult to discern completely and accurately and usually allows room for subjectivity from the researcher or investigator of the case to influence the motives of those killings (Farrell, Keppel, & Titterington, 2011). The female serial killer is someone who holds the following characteristics: careful, precise, and methodical and quiet in the commission of her crime (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). Usually female murderers can fall into two categories: the ones who commit the crimes alone and the ones that partner up with someone else. Furthermore, they can be categorized into the following classifications: Black Widow, Angel of Death, sexual predator, revenge, profit or crime, team killer, question of sanity, unexplained, and unsolved. Each of these categories is discussed in detail below.

A black widow is a woman who systematically murders multiple spouses, partners or family members. Motives can be diverse and may also include profit or crime. The victims of a black widow are usually family members or someone with whom she has developed a personal relationship. Moreover, black widows are typically categorized as intelligent, manipulative, organized, and patient (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). An angel of death is a woman that systematically murders individuals who are in her care or who rely on her for some reason. This type of serial killer conducts her killing mostly at institutions that provide life-giving support or medical assistance of some type and seeks out victims who are helpless and unable to defend themselves. A sexual predator is a woman who systematically murders others in what are known to be clear acts of sexual homicide. This type of female serial killer

is so rare that United States has only experienced one single case – Aileen Wuornos. A revenge murderer is a woman who systematically murders individuals out of revenge. Usually, those are crimes of passion with little to no planning. Those are rare occurrences and usually the victims are family members. This type of a serial killer carries out her killing career for a period of time.

A woman killing for profit or crime systematically murders individuals in the course of other criminal activities, but it does not fit the criteria of a black widow. In order to fall into this category, a female must murder for profit and focus lethal efforts on individuals who are not members of her family. A team killer is a woman who works a conjunction with at least one other person who systematically murders others or participates in the murders of others. A team can be within the family or it can be with someone with whom they create a relationship.

In a situation where we deal with the question of sanity, the killer is a woman who murders in an apparently random manner, usually without a clear and explicable motive, and who is later judged to be legally insane (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). Those are females who are incapable of understating the meaning and consequences of their actions. An unexplained killer is a woman who systematically murders for reasons that are wholly inexplicable or for a motive that has not been made sufficiently clear for categorization. Additionally, in order to be classified into this group, the killer must not be judged insane. Those are the cases in which the motive of the perpetrator has never been understood in a satisfactory manner. Unsolved murders are a systematic pattern of murders that may be attributed to a woman or women with relative confidence but it has not been solved yet.

The Role of the Media and Female Killers

Although the number of female's offenders in prisons is more due to petty crimes as noted by Steffensmeier and Allen (1996), we tend to see from the media an increase in the number of violent crimes committed by women that are portrayed or reported. Overall since 1995 there has been an increase in 42% of females arrested compared to 27% of males (Pollock & Davis, 2005), even though it is mostly due to petty offenses. Furthermore, the increase in arrest of women for aggravated assaults and assaults is not consisted with other indicators of violence such as homicide (Pollock & Davis, 2005). This is likely because females are considerably less likely to commit crimes when compared to males; female offenders represent only a small portion of persons convicted of the most serious crimes (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). However, due to this very same reason, the media tends to explore and expose more when it is in relation (Brennan & Vandenberg 2009) to death row, violent female offenders and case studies of highly publicized criminal women. Although we all know that males can be more violent and usually account for the majority of violent crimes, violent women continue to be news. Some new stories in the media include a new female offender who has suddenly snapped and killed someone close to her, displaying the idea that female violent offenders are on the rise. (Pollock & Davis, 2005). Thus, the society believes women are committing more violent crimes because this type of crime is the one mostly publicized.

The mass media always influences crime and justice and the crime-and-justice events become a benefit for the media. The media and media technology are perceived as both a major cause of crime and violence and a powerful potential solution to crime (Surette, 2007). The media and crime relationship is one of the most important relationships that exist in our culture (Surette, 2007). It helps shape how the society views criminals, categorizes criminals, and resolves crimes. Moreover, for many in the society, mass images are their primary source

of knowledge about law and the legal system (Surette, 2007). Thus, the media helps shape the society's view. Additionally, it serves as mechanisms for resolving individual disputes but also mechanisms for legitimizing the broader society's laws, policies, government agencies, and social structure (Surette, 2007).

When the media learns that a woman has been involved in a heinous crime, such as murder, they usually try to add more drama to the story. Media outlets quickly decides if they are going to label this particular offender either as good or bad and what parts of her life they are going to show in order to emphasize their personal opinion of that person. When the media decides to portray the women accused as "real" women, they are often acquitted or given a lighter sentence (Surette, 2007). In those cases the women are portrayed as vulnerable, weak, influenced by things that were out of her control for the commission of such acts. When those women do not have the characteristic of being passive or weak, in other words, when their characteristics are deviant from what is expected of a woman, they are frequently judged harsher and receive longer sentences (Surette, 2007). That is due to society not accepting the fact that the female did not follow the traditional social norms (Weatherby et al., 2008). Regardless of being a true crime documentary or a fiction crime show, they both always pick how they will portray the women in the media and usually the way they portray them is the way society accepts and labels these offenders.

Entertainment television has recently become fascinated with violence and murder (Soulliere, 2003). Many new fictional and documentary shows have appeared in the past years. The only problem with this is that "the vast majority of us, our exposure to crime, violence and the criminal justices system may be obtained largely through the media rather than through experience or formal education. As a result our ideas and views are shaped based on the limited information the society wishes to provide us with" (Soulliere, 2003, para.3). Additionally, there is some evidence that the crimes presented and the manner of

their portrayal through television shows are frequently inaccurate and distorted, which can in return influence the society's view over those crimes and cause false beliefs as well as distorted views about the crimes, the offenders, as well as the victims (Soulliere, 2003). "Thus, television portrayals, rather than enlightening viewers about crime, may in fact preclude adequate understanding." (Soulliere, 2003, para.5). Moreover, it is important to analyze how television, including fiction and true crime dramas, portrays women who kill in order to revel the distortions in television images, which can potentially influence not only how society views female offenders accused of murder but how our criminal justice system studies and analyzes those women.

To elaborate, most media outlets group females into two categories. First we have "bad women" who are typically described as the women who willfully defy traditional gender-role expectations through their own actions and receive a more deserved punishment as they are seen as responsible for their actions (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). Then there are women who are portrayed as not fully responsible for their actions, and the media searches for justifications in order to label them as sad or mad (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). Specifically, in order to achieve such goals, media are likely to: attribute criminal behavior to a biological malady or medical conditions, emphasize the offender's feminine appearance, describe adherence to traditional female traits and fulfillment of domestic responsibilities, and/or portray the offender as sexually and religiously pure (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). Furthermore, there are also negative stereotypes, particularly for minority women. Landrine (1985) found that white women were more likely to be stereotyped as "competent, dependent, emotional, intelligent, passive and warm," while black women were more likely to be stereotyped as "dirty, hostile and superstitious" (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). These types of stereotypes have a big influence when the media is categorizing those women as bad or sad.

Brennan and Vanderberg (2009) conducted a study to find how many stories reported in *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* were about white women versus minority women. It was found that 48.9% of stories had a white female offender and 51.1% featured a minority woman offender. Thirty-nine percent of the stories were about murder or attempted murder and another 13% focused on other violent crimes. The study went further to determine how favorably a female offender was portrayed, and they used different measures of neutralization or rationalizations for their crimes. Close to 40% of female offenders' story denied their responsibility for the crime, injury was minimized in 16.7%, and in nine stories it was reported that no one was harmed. In addition, some of the stories reported how the white female offender was reformed after a process of disassociation from previous criminal crime (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). The authors then used measures of exacerbation in order to determine how unfavorable a female offender was portrayed. It was found that 46.3% of the stories took an overall unfavorable tone. Moreover, a vast majority (three fourths) of the stories attributed guilt to the accused women, and many discussed the type of injuries that resulted from this offense and involved remarks about the victims (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). The result was that white women were nearly 3 times more likely to have an overall favorable tone than minority women. Additionally, in a majority of the stories about white offenders (56.5%), the responsibility was denied while responsibility was denied for only about one in five (21%) of the minority cases (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). This study was useful as it explained that race is a big factor that media takes into consideration when labeling the female offender as good or bad.

Above all, the main concern of televisions shows, either fictional or true drama, is to call the public attention and get the viewer numbers they desire. In order to do so, they may create stories that are appealing to the public such as a love story that went bad. Therefore, crime dramas may tend to exaggerate their images and stories and distort the events, which

may be deviant from the government statistics and research reports. Brinkworth (1996) found that: "it is ironic that it is media themselves who hold the media responsible for the increase in female violence (though they are vocal in their condemnation of the 'new breed of violent criminal threatening to unstitch the very fabric of society'' (p. 35).

In addition, television shows tend to find an explanation for the crime that is very individualistic. Fabianic (1997) analyzed homicide causation in television crime dramas and noted not only the lack of explanations for crime in television crime dramas, but points to a heavy reliance on individualistic explanations that frequently do not go beyond superficial plot movies. Fabianic (1997) concludes that homicide is typically portrayed as the result of an individual weakness of defect such as mental illness, greed or jealousy, and little or no effort is made in these crimes dramas to try and relate homicide to social-structural or institutional forces (Soulliere, 2003). Those social structural forces would be employment, poverty, government assistance, discrimination, racism, economic class status, opportunities and judicial bias. Those factors have been determined to have a big influence on the reason why people, including women, commit murder.

However, it is fair to say that in the past years television has become more complex and sophisticated, and they have often been trying to incorporate facts from real life in order to make it more appealing to the viewers (Surette, 2007). On the other hand, convergence between the portrayal of women in television shows and real-life female murderers may be simply coincidental rather than intentional. An example is a show that involves a romantic relationship between the offender and the victim. Realistically, spousal murder is a very common type of murder committed by woman (Mann, 1984). However, the television shows may decide to include on most of their episodes some type of romantic relationship or a mother image because that is what gets the attention of the public and not because they want characteristics from real life female murderers.

There are a lot of true crime television shows nowadays. Some are more famous than others due to the type of stories they portray and some due to how close to reality they make their programs. The images are a replication of the real crime that makes the viewer's feel closely connected to those cases. Additionally, there are real life speeches of people that knew the offenders as well as the victims and when the offender herself agreed can be on the program and give her thoughts to what really happened. The majority of murders portrayed in this program were committed by ordinary women living in small towns, locked in dull marriages, conducting tawdry affairs, racking up debt they are desperate trying to hide from their partners (Kingston, 2008). What makes those programs watchable is their regularity and normalcy.

The programs try to pick women that viewers can relate to, such as women who shop at Walmart, take their kids to school, and watch Oprah (Kingston, 2008). Their stories are more complex and intense than fictional television shows. The programs can serve as a reality check for women who see themselves in those females and that no matter how unhappy they are, their life has not reached that desperation point yet (Kingston, 2008). It portrays the normal housewife who is tired of her failed marriage, who is trying to hide debts from her spouse, who wants her spouse's insurance money to start a new life, who does not want to go to the court and through custody battle, and just snaps and kills her husband. The most popular ones that profiles female offenders are described below.

Documentary Televisions Shows (Docudramas)

Snapped and *Deadly Women* are documentary shows that focus on female offenders and they go deep into their lives prior to when the crime was committed, investigating what turn did her life take to make her commit a crime, and how the media and society labeled her.

Furthermore it details how the life of the ones around her was affected and what sentence – if any – she received.

Deadly Women is a TV show about women who are on a mission to murder. The show investigates the motives and modus operandi of female murderers. It appears to have a pattern that women usually have more complex reasons to kill, and that the murderers committed by them are preplanned. Throughout the show they have former FBI agents who provide insights into the psyche of female killer and a forensic pathologist who provides expert commentary on the cases to make it more educational to the viewers. The stories are based on real events and are intriguing and horrifying. They show demographics and the reasons for and methods used by female offenders.

Snapped is a true crime series that profiles the fascinating cases about women who are accused of murder. It brings questions such as, "did they really do it", and how, when and why? Furthermore, it analyzes the lifestyle of those offenders such as employment, education, race, and marital status. The show is interesting as it relates the life and the events that took place in those women's lives that made them snap.

Fictional Television Shows

Fictional crime dramas are on almost every channel of television. They fascinate viewers because they tend to relate their situations to real life at the same time while keeping some type of unknown and suspense. Also, it is safer that way to portray murder because people do not think (or hope) the crimes portrayed in those fiction programs actually happen in real life, and they can distance themselves from it. The ones I picked to use in this research are as follows.

CSI: Miami is a crime drama television series that takes place in Miami. It relates the cases and the work of the police officers who work in the Miami-Dade Police Department

using physical evidence to solve grisly murders. The series mixes deduction, gritty subject matter, and character-driven drama.

Criminal Minds is also a crime drama television series that revolves around an elite team of FBI profilers who analyze some of the craziest and most twisted offender's minds. The show relates fictional cases about people who murder ranging from offenders who are mentally ill to the simply evil ones.

The connection between how those television programs portray the female offenders and how they really are will be analyzed and compared. By analyzing the programs above, it is believed that we can have a better understanding as to how the television programs affect the reality of female offenders and find the differences and similarities amongst them. Furthermore, the way in which the media portrays the female offenders and how it affects the manner in which society views them will be studied as well.

Additionally, why certain types of crime are reported most often may be due to the rarity in which they occur. "The selectivity of crime in the news-media, and/or the reason why some criminal events are chosen in preference to others, may be directly related to the unusual as well as unique nature and/or seriousness of the crime." (Kumar, 1999 pg. 18). Therefore, it is important to understand the significant role crimes have with the media and how they choose to portray the crime and the criminal.

It is believed that media coverage and news media have become a relatively common and usual topic in the everyday news. Crime news tends to be exciting and catch the attention of the public, which is why crimes are reported so frequently. Consequently, crime coverage in the news media cannot be a reflection of the real word in crime. Additionally, the victims and offenders portrayals tend to switch according to how the media can gain more attention and publicity. If the media believes that reporting these offenses a certain type will bring

more publicity, media tend to twist the truth and create their own version of the facts. However, because the news is the most direct way the society gets informed about crimes, it tends to influence society's perception of a particular crime, victims, and offenders. Thus, it is crucial that we understand the realities of crime and reduce the distortion of offenders in our media (Kumar, 1999).

By examining those TV programs, with the current data available from incarcerated female offenders, we can see to what extent they deviate from the truth and how it affects the society's view of female killers.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This chapter includes a review of the research methods and discussion of what steps I took in order to accomplish the goals previously stated in Chapter 1. In addition, the variables, research questions, how the sample was chosen, and what specific characteristics of female offenders who commit homicide were analyzed and compared will be discussed.

The current study was designed to explore and understand how women murderers are portrayed in the media using two different types of media forms. First, I examined how women are portrayed in docudramas or true crime dramas, and then I looked at fictional crime television shows. Specifically, there are three research questions this study seeks to answer:

1) *How are the female murderers portrayed in true documentary television programs?*
2) *Do true documentary TV programs portrays women murderers more accurately than fictional crime dramas?*
3) *Do true documentary TV programs portray premeditated murders more often than fictional TV programs?*

Data and Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, I analyzed episodes of four popular television programs portraying women murderers. Two of these programs are docudramas, which purportedly tell the true stories of women who kill: *Snapped* and *Deadly Women*. The other two programs are fictional crime shows that portray various aspects of the criminal justice system and the offenders they apprehend: *Criminal Minds* and *CSI: Miami*. The decision was made to select popular crime dramas because these are the programs that reach the greatest number of viewers, and thus, have the greatest potential to impact viewers.

A program analyzed is *Snapped.* In order to sample this program, I placed all seasons into a random number generator to choose two. It chose seasons three and four. Then I placed all episodes of those two seasons into the number generator that picked episodes 3E1, S3E2, S3E6, S3E10, S3E11, S4E4, S4E5, S4E8, S4E9 and, S4E11. The episodes from *Deadly Women* were also placed into a random number generator to choose two seasons. It chose seasons six and seven. Because each episode shows three stories and I am analyzing 10 stories from each program, I have watched S6E1, S6E11, S7E3, S7E11 for a total of 10 stories, with 3 stories being watched on the first 3 episodes and 1 story being watched on the last episode. The episodes from *CSI: Miami* were chosen by reading the synopsis of all episodes and choosing the first ones that contain a women killer. They are S10E19, S10E16, S10E13, S10E6, S10E2, S4E22, S4E18, S4E13, S4E11, and S4E9. The episodes from *Criminal Minds* were also chosen by the method of reading the synopsis of all episodes and choosing the first ones that portrayed a women killer or part of a team. They are *S5E8, S8E5, S5E12, S4E16, S2E18,S3E18,S5E16, S8E12, S5E7, and S8E14.* Taking into consideration that each of those episodes is roughly an hour long, the total number of hours analyzing those programs was approximately 40 hours. Data were collected in order to offer a description of female offenders on these programs that also offers the opportunity to check the validity of the portrayal of female offenders by comparing what is known about actual female offenders, which is the main goal of my thesis. In addition, information was also collected from images and the dialogue that allows for identification of other characteristics contained in these portrayals.

When watching these specific shows, particular characteristics of female offender portrayed were analyzed. The characteristics that were examined for each female offender portrayed were: age, race, marital status, employment, level of education, method of killing,

offender-victim relationship, time of killing, alcohol and drug abuse, and psychological condition.

The author made every effort to accurately discern information about the female offenders, even if the information was not expressly given in the episode. For example, if the age of the offender was not reported, which was especially true for fictional shows, an approximate age range for the woman was estimated. However, if the employment status or occupation is not included, no such attempts of estimation were made.

After the data gathered the information from the televisions programs was compared to the profile of a typical female murderer in order to address the research questions of how accurately these types of television programs portray women.

Collecting, Coding, and Analyzing the Data

While watching the episodes, I filled out a coding sheet that included the women characteristics that were analyzed in the study. I looked at those different characteristics of women and coded them in groups. For example age was grouped in categories of under 20, 20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, and over 60. Races included white, African American, Latina, Asian and other. Marital Status included single, married, divorced, widowed, and unknown. Victim-offender relationship was coded from significant other, children, family member, friend, clients and employees, acquaintances, and not known to the victim. Their employment was coded into prostitute, unknown, seamstress, store clerk, housewife, business owner, writer or musician, researcher, operation and management, and police. Time of killing varied from morning, night, afternoon, or unknown, while day of killing were coded with the seven days of the week. Method of killing included stabbing, shooting, suffocation and asphyxiation, blunt head trauma, poisoning, sabotage, gas leak, sedation and prevention of life, ax and live cremation. The motives ranged from revenge, jealousy, financial reasons,

keeping a secret, excitement or fun, madness, and psychological reasons. Also, the numbers

of killings were observed and it was 1,2,3,4, 5, or more than 5. This code sheet was

developed as a result of capturing the most important characteristics of the women who kill

according to the data collected from the literature review, and in order to observe and

compare to the real characteristics of women who kill. The data were then imputed into SPSS

in order to find frequencies from my data and analyze it.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In this chapter the results of the data analysis are presented. The main goal of this study was to develop a better understanding of the portrayal of women killers by our media and to determine if they are portrayed in a more positive or negative light than in reality. In order to do this, the results of the content analysis were compared with the information found in literature review. They include physical and personal characteristics of women killers, psychological issues, motivations and methods of killing, victims, and overall characteristics of the murders committed. The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate the way media views and portrays women as killers. Table 1 indicates the average and percentage of the characteristics of crimes portrayed in reality compared to fictional and true crime shows.

Table 1.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Characteristics	Reality	Fictional Shows	True Crime Shows
Age (average in years)	43.5	30	35
Race (African American)	38%	5%	40%
Unemployed	71%	35%	40%
Housewife	44%	20%	70%
Victim-Offender Relationship (Intimate Partners)	29.7%	25%	45%
Previous arrest	33%	0%	0%
Premeditated	58.3%	85%	65%
Marital status (married)	60%	20%	50%

Fictional Shows

Overall, the women in *CSI* resembled super models. Most of them were middle to high class and maintained full lips, beautiful hair, white teeth, manicured nails, and with perfect skin. Their bodies were different in sizes and shapes, but they tended to meet the societal standards of beauty by having well accentuated bodies, not being overweight, sleek and shiny hair, beautiful skin, and being tall and white. Their outfits accentuated their bodies and revealed most of their skin. Their image was very sexualized by showing them with tight, low cut, and short clothes. They all wore some kind of make up with big red lipstick and bright eyes. Their ages did vary somewhat. Three were early to middle 20s while three were early 30s to middle 40s, keeping the majority of them at a young age. Out of 10 cases from *CSI:MIAMI*, nine were white and one was Latina. In regards to marital status, seven of them were single, one engaged, one divorced, and one married. Most of the women portrayed in this program killed by using power and beauty in order to get what they wanted. Their motivations were cruel, and their crimes cold. For example, one woman killed her husband and son for financial reasons, while another killed her boyfriend by using nitro acid to sabotage his parachute to get back at him for not wanting to have children, and yet another killed her boyfriend by a gas leak.

As for *Criminal Minds,* all of the women were white. Additionally, regarding their marital status, seven were single and three were married. The characteristics of the women who killed were close to the perfect image of a women: intelligent, beautiful, the perfect housewives (the ones married), and combined their power and beauty to contrast the characteristic of your typical murderer. However, as data indicate, the typical women do not reside in the upper class, nor does she have the best clothes or eat the fanciest restaurants (Florida Female Offenders, 2011). The ideal woman killer portrayed on the program goes hand in hand with the marketing for what women want. As we see through this program,

women imagine themselves living in a penthouse in Miami Beach, being the CEO of a company, driving a Mercedes, and killing a young girl who she thinks her boyfriend may be cheating on her with. Furthermore, the obsession with women's physical and sexual appearance on programs like these may have the effect of trivializing and decontextualizing women's criminalization in the "real world" (Rizun, 2011). Real women who kill live in poverty after having an abusive childhood, often live off food stamps, and have prior records with the police (BJS, 2011).

Notably, the women killer portrayed in *Criminal Minds* were more cruel and unusual than *CSI* with women being serial killers in 6 out of 10 episodes watched. Their method of killing included more unusual methods such as live cremation, an ax, and sedation and prevention of brain function. Even though the majority of women were serial killers, their victims were unknown to them and chosen by convenience. Notably, the typical female serial killer does not choose unknown people for victims. They usually kill someone who depends on them, needs them, such as the elderly, their own children, or their husbands, as in the cases of the black widows (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). Therefore, even when portraying female serial killers, the image given is not accurate. Additionally, eight of the women portrayed on *Criminal Minds* suffered from psychological conditions such as schizophrenia, childhood trauma from abuse, and hallucination. Five of them killed due to their psychological conditions and four of them killed due to revenge.

Both *CSI* and *Criminal Minds* portray women using their sexual appeal, part of the upper class, and holding high standards in the society such as being CEO of important companies and being part of the elite society. While in *Criminal Minds* the appearance of physiological issues and trauma from being abused is portrayed more often and is the reason for many kills, it is still overemphasized. While in *CSI* the emphasis is on the beauty and power of cruel women who kill for apparently no reason, in *Criminal Minds* the emphasis is

on the idea that most women who kill are serial killers, killing more than one victim and suffering from some type of psychological condition. The programs revolved around the minds of those women and the reasons they commit such crimes. Their background and childhood history were analyzed, which resulted in most of them having some type of trauma or psychological disorder. Although the houses, jobs, and families of the women appear to be those of your neighbor next door, the darkness was hidden inside the walls. When the women committed crimes, they acted in the most cruel and unusual manners. *Criminal Minds* does hold more common grounds to the reality of women who kill then *CSI*.

Docudramas

The women from *Snapped* were the typical housewives. They had some level of education, got married at a young age, and gave up their hopes and dreams in order to get married to the men who promised to give them the life they deserved. When financial problems started getting in the way, they found a way of killing the men and cashing in the life insurance policy. Thus, their problems are solved. The typical women portrayed on *Snapped* appear to be the girl next door, the perfect wives, mothers, and women. They kept their problems inside the house and did what they were told. The women portrayed in this program are from the middle class and have middle class jobs such as store clerk, high school teacher, and housewives. Their age varied but the majority were between 30-40. The houses portrayed in this program were houses in middle class neighborhoods, and the cars were common such as Honda. Often the women's clothes and jewelry were not the most expensive, and they were beautiful although this was not emphasized.

In *Deadly Women*, the women were cruel. They belonged to lower - middle class, held jobs that varied from bartender, politician, and physical therapist to students. The emphasis was not placed on her socioeconomic status like seen in *CSI*, rather it was focused on her background and motives for the crimes. Their crimes were committed because the

women went after what they wanted. Some psychological reasons were portrayed as well as pure cruel and unusual reasons schizophrenia, personality disorder, particular dislike of a person, and excitement. Their age varied, but the majority of women were between 20-30. Typically the women killed at night and acted alone. The houses portrayed in this program were in low to middle class neighborhoods with many women living in lower income housing. Additionally, many of the killers portrayed were unemployed women. These women did not have any fancy belongings, nor did they hold a high status in the society.

The majority of women portrayed in true crime programs were unemployed or housewives. They appeared to have been from low to middle class with normal houses. They did not have expensive jewelry, clothing, or belongings, and some of them even struggled financially. The socioeconomical characteristics of women in docudramas were closer to reality than the fictional shows. They were housewives or held more common jobs such teachers and store clerks. They lived in middle to lower class neighborhoods and drove late model cars. Many of the characteristics of women in these shows mirrored women offenders: they struggled financially, some abused alcohol, and they looked like "everyday women" rather than the beautiful actresses in the fictional shows. These shows also portrayed women who held more traditionally accepted jobs for women. Thus, all in all, these women, while not exactly your typical offender were much more similar to average women offenders than the women portrayed in fictional shows.

In sum, true crime programs have characteristics that are closer to reality than fictional crime programs. While fictional programs did not seem to portray self-defense, poverty, psychological conditions, those characteristics are found in the docudramas. The women from the docudramas are more closely related to the viewers and to women offenders because they belong to low-middle class and have houses in the suburbs. They were housewives or soccer moms in *Snapped* while in *Deadly Women* they belonged to lower

class. The fictional programs focused more on the marketing of those women, their housing, their belongings, their social standards and their cruel reasons for murder. *Criminal Minds* tried to incorporate the abuse and psychological conditions; however, it was overdone with almost every woman portrayed having a psychological condition and while it is true that many women offenders do suffer from mental illness, certainly not all do, nor do they suffer as many severe mental conditions as the women portrayed in this series (Florida Female Offenders, 2011). *Snapped* tried to make the women look as close to reality as possible. It is based on real stories, and the real killers sometimes made appearance on the program. *Deadly Women* focused on a variety of crimes and incorporated all types of reasoning and motives into their shows. Still, while the true crime shows did focus on real crimes, it is important to remember they most likely chose crimes that were dramatic or would appeal to the viewers. Thus, many murders were likely excluded from even these shows.

As noted, there were many demographic and methodology differences portrayed by these fictional and nonfictional shows of women killers. Additionally, many of these characteristics and motives diverged from the reality of women offenders. However, along with these characteristics and methodology differences in the portrayals, several interesting themes emerged. The following sections describe these themes in detail.

Socioeconomically Privileged and Crime

One aspect of the female killers that appeared on the four programs analyzed was their socioeconomic status and its relation to crime. The position they held in society, their type of jobs, houses, and education in reality play an important part in identifying and understanding the female killer; however, although all programs analyzed their socieconomic status, it was not referred to as amongst the reasons, motivations, or characteristics of the commission of crime. Instead, oftentimes, individual and psychological factors were focused on in an effort to explain their actions.

The characters of *CSI: MIAMI* seemed to be portrayed as socioeconomically privileged, and every killer was white except for one Latina. The majority was upper and middle class. Five of them were employed, one was a housewife, two unemployed, and for two their job status was never acknowledged. Their socioeconomic standing was interpreted through their clothing, jewelry, houses, and cars that seemed to be high-end based on the car brands, type of jewelry, and designer brand clothes. Some of their homes included unique and/or modern architecture, decorated with artwork and sculptures, with workers around the house who helped them keep up with maintenance. This view is consistent with the general media portrayal of offenders: "the typical criminal portrayed in the entertainment media is white and of high social status" (Surette, 2007, p.59). None of the women portrayed in *CSI* represented the social and economical characteristics of a typical woman who is imprisoned in the U.S. In fact, the women portrayed in *CSI* did not seem to look like the typical female offender at all (i.e. African American or women of color, poverty-stricken, or low levels of education and achievement; BJS, 2011). This misrepresentation of female criminals as socioeconomically privileged reinforces the stereotypical view that has traditionally existed towards women who are in trouble with the law. The portrayal of criminalized women as socioeconomically privileged may send a message that "real" women commit their crimes in similar circumstances and that the intersections between race, class, and gender do not matter. As a result of the portrayal of these women, the punishment of such women is more easily justified.

On *CSI,* a lot of the stories involved women with power, in a good financial position, single, and independent, who become criminals due to jealousy or revenge. This portrayal describes the image that is constructed by the media of "the beautiful, solitary, ominous, male-identified childless, pathologically obsessive women, 'liberated' in anti-feminist terms, who would take what she wants at any cost" (Rizun, 2011, p.). The "at any cost" means

hiring a gang member to kill someone she thinks her boyfriend is having an affair with, participate in gang-related activities to gain more status with the male friends, kill her husband due to financial reasons, and kill her boyfriend who betrayed her.

Most women in *Criminal Minds* were also employed and belonged to middle to upper class. However, their houses were not as lavish as the ones portrayed in *CSI,* nor did they have the latest fashion items and the most expensive jewelry. They did, however, appear to be educated, had some type of job, and had a higher status in society. Their psychological disorders were hidden by their beauty, intelligence, or perfect image of a housewife. They also abused their power, beauty, or simply their womanhood in order to prey on their victims.

Women from *Snapped* and *Deadly Women* also belonged largely to the middle and upper classes. Their houses were in the suburbs, and the majority of them had average cars such as a Honda. Although the majority of them did not belong to lower class as expected, they were still closer to lower class then those portrayed on *CSI* and *Criminal Minds*. Indeed, some of these women were portrayed as lower class. Still, a majority resided in the middle class or higher.

As a result, such portrayals may send the message that women's crime is a result of equity and enhanced opportunities instead of inequality and limited opportunities (Rizun, 2011). This means that women commit crime because they want to or because they can with no other reason or motivation. Without a portrayal of the 'real work' context in which women commit crimes such as poverty, single parent, and lack of education and opportunity, such behaviors can appear unreasonable and punishable. Therefore, this hyper-focus on upper and middle class women committing murder marginalizes the experiences of real women offenders. Rather than accounting for their difficult circumstances and lives, these shows focus on free-will and revenge. Thus, the audience of these shows may have an unrealistic view of women who kill and their status and privileges in society.

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Female offenders commit crimes for many different reasons. Commonly, it is related to physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, and poverty (Florida Female Offenders, 2011). However, those were not common factors that motivated female offenders on the fictional crime dramas. Although research indicates that female offenders have stories of abuse, this was not a common characteristic of the female offenders of *CSI*. *CSI* portrayed only one episode that seemed to show a connection between criminal behavior and victimization. In this episode, a woman named Valerie killed the man who raped her 6 years ago, and while the portrayal was closer to reality, it was still not wholly realistic. However, none of the episodes used a psychological condition or mental illness as a reason for the killings. The most common motives in this show were jealousy and revenge. Additionally, the most used manner of murder was shooting followed by stabbing and force head trauma.

On *Criminal Minds*, however, the presence of psychological issues appeared six times and was the most common reason for the crimes. Their issues appear to be schizophrenia, trauma from childhood abuse, and personality disorders. Yet, another common reason was revenge. The methods of killing in this particular program were numerous and included live cremation, poisoning, asphyxiation, stabbing, ax, head trauma, and shooting. The reason for the different types of method of killing can be related to their psychological condition.

In *Criminal Minds*, the appearances of psychological conditions were high and included childhood traumas, such as being abandoned by a father that led her to prey on executive males who did not pay child support, as in the case of Megan Kane. In the case of Samantha Malcom, her childhood was filled with her father sexually abusing her and making her undergo electric shock treatment. Samantha abducted women. Emma Kerrigan started to hallucinate and have delusions after the death of her husband that led to her serial killer activities by abducting males to create the perfect human fertilizers (her husband's ashes

were disposed in her tomato farm that made her think she was being cured due to his ashes).

Such reasons are closer to reality as most of female offenders suffer from some psychological

condition or mental illness; however, these were much more severe forms of mental illness

than many women offenders face. In most of those cases, the women are portrayed as victims

because their actions are based upon previous abuse and trauma and thus the punishment is

light for them. Therefore, while they were still seen as criminal, they were seen as less

culpable due to their traumatic histories. Again, as noted these portrayals were closer to

reality because many women offenders have faced trauma and have mental illness; however,

the cases portrayed in *Criminal Minds* were much more extreme and had much more

devastating consequences.

In both fictional crime programs the motives of revenge were included. Their

different methods of killing and appearance of serial killer were more predominant on

Criminal Minds, a show about catching serial killers, while *CSI* portrayed more the use of

shooting and one murder committed by each woman, which is much more realistic of women

who kill. On both shows the majority of crimes appear to be premeditated. This is close to

reality where 58.3% of murderers by women are premeditated (Mann, 1996).

On *Snapped*, there were three stories where the motive was self-defense. This is a

motive that fictional shows did not portray. In one episode, a woman named Kimberly killed

her husband because he threatened to kill her and the children. He had abused her constantly

throughout their relationship and she believed his threat. Apart from the self-defense, other

common motives were financial reasons and revenge. Revenge included not wanting to go

through with a divorce and not wanting to lose the custody of the children. Although the

reality is that women kill more due to self-defense, financial reasons were the most common

reasons along with self-defense for women to commit murder (BJS, 2011). Therefore, if the

"reality" show was true to the facts, one would expect to see self-defense as the most common motive along with financial reasons.

On *Deadly Women*, the most common motives were revenge, excitement, and anger, amongst jealousy and meaningless reasons. A lot of the episodes portrayed women killing others for no apparent reason. Sometimes the killing was not intentional, but rather was an assault that resulted in death. For example on one episode, Ruby Thomas, a rebellious teenager and gang member, enjoyed torturing people. Occasionally, she and other gang members would walk around at night and choose their victims by opportunity, and they would beat and kick them. One night the gang beat a man and left him for dead, but Ruby felt like she needed to finish the job and went back for the final kick that was fatal. Another unjustified, unreasoned killing was by Elva who liked only two of her grandchildren and treated the other two as slaves, keeping them in a room, feeding them with scraps of food on the floor, and not allowing education, time in the sun, or time to play. Day by day the prevention of food and sun caused the death of one of the children. The episode did not give a reason for her dislike of those two particular grandchildren nor did it indicate she suffered from any type of mental illness. Thus, her killing was completely random and unjustified.

On *Snapped* the motives and method of killing were closer to what the society thinks with motives being from financial means, jealousy, and revenge. On *Deadly Women* there was a broader variety of reasons and methods and the characteristics of those killings varied more, some of them showing low family incomes, which is more close to reality. However, when comparing these two programs, *Snapped* gains more attention and has more popularity among its viewers. It represents more middle class with women having the same type of problems the women killer have, and thus the identification is higher and the viewers also.

Furthermore, what sells is the cool and unusual things such as powerful women committing murder to get what she wants rather than the boring stuff that does not attract

audience or profit such as self-defense of a woman who lives in poverty. Therefore, although women do not commit crimes that often, in all the shows the crime tends to focus on women in trouble and women involved in violent and dangerous situations because the violence committed by women doubles the fascination of the public. (Rizun, 2011)

Victims and Method of Killing

Most of the time, on *CSI*, women knew their victims, with four killing someone with whom they had an intimate relationship, two being their employees, one being her stepfather, one being her boyfriend's wife, and one being her real estate agent. In fact only one woman on *CSI* did not know her victim. This portrayal of the women knowing their victims is quite true to reality because most women, indeed most people, kill someone known to them (BJS, 2008). Notably, while the women's victim choices were realistic, their motivations for crime were not as true. Instead of focusing on alcohol, drugs, or psychological problems or focus on the relationship between crime and poverty, as is common in many real crimes in the U.S., this show focused on more self-centered and individualistic reasons for the murder.

Notably, many of the themes highlighted by Rafter and Stanko (1992) were found throughout the television shows analyzed. For example, *Criminal Minds* tended to portray women as impulsive and nonanalytical because their actions were seen as abnormal and extreme. *CSI*, on the other hand, portrayed many women as purely evil and to some degree a "pawn of biology" because they were motivated by jealousy and greed, and often held jobs that are nontraditionally feminine such as CEO. These women were the most apt to break gender norms by holding a nontraditional job, and they tended to be portrayed as the most evil as well, hence they followed the framework established by Rafter and Stanko. *Snapped* portrayed women somehow to be passive and weak because some of their action was of a 'easy prey', they committed the murderers as self-defense or due to financial reasons that can be related to keep the children fed and continued to support the family. *Deadly Women* was a

mix, it is a true crime show; however, the motives and crimes were related to cold blood and unexpected and unusual ways. Therefore, they were portrayed as active women as masculine as some of their crimes related to nonsense motives such as desire to commit a crime of excitement and challenging as well as pure dislike of someone and obtain the feeling of hurting someone. Again, these matched many of the stipulations posited by Rafter and Stanko.

Regarding time of day and actual killing mechanism, in *CSI*, five of the murders happened during the day, early evening, four at night, and one over a period of time because it was poisoning. As for *Criminal Minds*, three were nights, one during the day, and six occurred over a period of time. Shooting was number one method of killing, followed by stabbing, hitting in the head, poisoning, and gas leak. Premeditated murders were the most common with 8 of the 10 cases of *CSI* being premeditated while only 2 were not. In *Criminal Minds* 9 of the 10 women committed premeditated murder, while only 1 did not. Jealousy and revenge were number one motivation for the killings, followed by financial and pure excitement.

In most of the episodes the women's motivation for crime and violence appear to be illogical, abnormal, and unjustifiable. However, they did not all appear cruel. Some of them were not premeditated but rather spur of the moment decisions, and the reasons, although unreasonable, were very common, such as jealousy and revenge. In all but one of the *CSI*: *MIAMI* episodes the women committed murder out of unjustifiable reasons such as a women who thought her boyfriend was cheating on her and killed the lover, when in reality this was not the case or a mother who killed her son because he was running the family business to the ground. The cases on *Criminal Minds* were more unusual and portrayed women in a more masculine manner. Additionally, the women were seen as capable of committing serial murders with different methods of both capturing and killing their victims. However,

although cruel and masculine, it was "justified" by their psychological conditions and childhood traumas.

Snapped often portrayed women using a gun, while *Deadly Women* showed women killing more through some manner of head force trauma. Notably, the victims on both programs were typically someone with whom the killer had an intimate relationship. As for the time of the killings, in *Snapped* six of them happened in the morning and four at night. As for *Deadly Women*, six of the murders occurred at night, and three during the day, and one over a period of time. Their crimes seemed to be more in a spur of the moment, as the women got tired of being abused, or snapped due to jealousy or in order to avoid granting a divorce. Seven of the murders were premeditated while three were not for Deadly Women, and six were premeditated while four were not in *Snapped*.

All in all, the fictional programs showed killing occurs more over a period of time as in the case of poisoning each day a little and preventing life by deprivation of food, sun, and activity each day. For docudramas the time of killing did not impact the results of the research as the number of killings were pretty consistently at night with only one being reported to take place in the morning. Taken that most killings occur during night, the docudrama portrays it closely to reality (Mann, 1996).

The types of weapons used by fiction TV shows included more unrealistic manners such as live cremation, asphyxiation, gas leak, and use of acid. The true crime shows portrayed the weapon used being a gun for the majority of cases, followed by stabbing and force head trauma caused by an object she had easy access during the alteration. The weapon most used in reality is gun followed by stabbing with a knife (Mann, 1996). As for the motivation docudramas indicated that the most common motives are revenge, financial reasons and self-defense while fiction programs indicated physiological reasons, jealousy, and revenge. The study conducted by Mann indicated that in reality motives included self-

defense, harassment, psychiatric conditions, a need to obtain money for drugs or for something else, retaliation, jealousy, discipline, scare tactic, or motive missing. The motives are then divided as half of them appears on true documentary and half on fictional shows; however, self-defense is reported as being a motive at 58.9% and the fact that only true documentary shows portrayed that indicates that the motives are more close to reality in those programs (Mann, 1996).

The women portrayed in the true crime programs appeared to be between 20 and 40 while in fictional programs they tended to stay in the range on 20-30. On true crime shows 50% of them were married compared to the 20% of fictional shows. The race was primarily white on both types of program. The preferred method of killing, shooting, appears to be the same on both shows, and while only 25% of the women killed their significant other in fictional shows, 45% of them killed their significant other in true documentaries. The majority of them were premeditated on both types of programs.

Overall, the women were white on fictional and true crime shows, which is far from reality as women killers are often women of color (Block, 1987). Their ages were also similar with most of them being young at around 20-30 years old. Socioeconomic statuses, education, and employment differed from reality on all programs, with women on the programs having higher levels of SES, education, and employment than those in reality. Previous arrest and drug and alcohol use was found only in one episode of *Deadly Women* when in reality 52% of female inmates were depended on alcohol or drugs (BJS, 2002); therefore, substance abuse was overlooked and underrepresented in television portrayals. In regards to the marital status, docudramas were closer to reality than fictional crime dramas with 50% of the women reported being married.

The motives included reasons found in reality such as retaliation, jealousy, need for money, or an argument and confrontation. However, few were reported of being self-defense

and psychological reasons were mostly found in one program, *Criminal Minds*. Considering self-defense and financial gain are the two most common reasons for murder among females (BJS, 2008), it is notable how under-portrayed these motives are on television. Interestingly, the victim-relationships reported on all four programs were close to reality, with the victims often being someone with whom the offender had an intimate relationship. According to the BJS (2008), this information is correct with 29.7% of murders committed by women being against someone they had a relationship with and 25.6% against family members. *Criminal Minds* was the furthest from reality in regards to victim-offender relationship because many of these women, killed someone they did not know. However, according to the BJS (2010), only 1 in 14 women kill a stranger. Furthermore, female serial killers are rare and in *Criminal Minds* 80% of the female killers ended up being serial killers which is again far from reality, still the purpose of this show is to portray serial killers; therefore, this unrealistic tendency was expected. However, what was not expected was the lack of relationship between the female offender and her victims. Even for female serial killers, they often kill someone they know or someone close to them (Mann, 1984). Therefore, the portrayal that they were abducting and killing strangers is not realistic even for serial killers.

In conclusion, by analyzing both types of shows, the true crime programs overall had characteristics closer to reality. The demographics, victim and offender relationship, socioeconomic status, methods, and motives have more resemblance with reality than fictional programs. However, it was observed that although the true crime programs portray women more closely to what they really are, they are still missing the main and most important aspects, such as race, economic background, previous abuse, self-defense, and the use of alcohol and drugs. Such characteristics are crucial and should be reported to society in detail and accurately in order for society to fully understand the women who kill.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATION

In this chapter, I highlight the important findings from my study and discuss the relevance of this study on the literature. The main purpose of this thesis was to determine how the media through television shows portrays women who kill. In order to accomplish this, four different television programs were analyzed, two were fictional and two were true crime shows. Determining the media effect on women killers is important because it helps us understand how society may view these women, given that much of society is influenced by the media (Surette, 2007).

I was also concerned with the different manners fictional and reality-based shows portrayed women killers. Considering true crime shows purport to be based on reality, I was concerned with whether or not these programs were indeed more realistic than their fictional counterparts. One would hope that true crime dramas are closer to reality; however, I examined whether or not this was the case. I found that docudramas were in fact more realistic than fictional crime shows; however, they still diverged from reality. The implications of these differences between real women offenders and those portrayed on television are discussed in this chapter, along with considerations for future research.

Conclusions

In this study, the data showed that on fictional television shows women are portrayed quite unrealistically. These women are portrayed in a way that is violent, sensational, and unreasonable. Notably, these are the very themes that make viewers watch episodes. Fictional crime shows, however, not only influence how the viewers' perceive fictional characters, they also influence how viewers perceive women offenders' real lives (Rizun, 2011). Moreover, these shows help society accept the given explanation of crime, such as individualistic reasons and traits, that can in turn hurt how we view, understand, and process

criminals. If society views female killers as a white housewife who kills her husband to prevent a divorce or custody battle, then they may have little empathy for or understanding of women who kill. Additionally, when faced with an African American, who was abused and killed someone when under the influence of alcohol, society may not know how to react. They may still look to those more individualist reasons and explanations for the murders rather than recognizing situational aspects that may have influenced the commission of the crime. Moreover, juries may view and decide upon real cases based on their conception of female murderers from the media and may give a different sentences depending on when they think it is acceptable. Therefore, the "wrong" kind of female killers or those differing from media portrayals such as African American or poor or mentally ill women may have a higher probability of receiving a harsh sentence.

Additionally, public perceptions can be transferred to criminal justices policies because criminal justice policies are often public policies (Surette, 2007). This can in turn affect how the criminal justice system is viewed, and the action it takes and may result in harsher or more punitive treatment of women offenders. The punishment for the white murdering housewife, who is educated and employed, may be different from the punishment for an African American, who is unemployed, with a history of violence and alcohol abuse, because society and the criminal justice system are not used to, nor has have they been exposed to the "real" or typical female killers.

In the true crime programs many of the women murderers were portrayed as the next-door neighbors that simply snapped one day. The women portrayed were often stay-at-home moms who had dinner cooked by the time their husband got home from work. More importantly, she was the woman who did not allow the problems to leave her house, thus giving an impression of a perfect marriage, perfect house, and perfect family. When people learned that she committed murder, they are shocked and surprised. She was the last person

that would suspect could be capable of such an act because she was so pretty and calm and seemed so lovable. These women also lived in the suburbs and belonged to the middle class, which even furthered the shock of her committing a crime. Although based on reality, these women are not typical women who kill. Most of the women portrayed were white, middle class, educated, and did not suffer from any psychological conditions or mental illnesses, nor were they under the influence of alcohol or drugs. This is a major divergence from the typical female offender.

The image that appears on those programs is the image that sells. It is an image that society can identify with because the people portrayed on these shows represent the norm or ideal of society: white, middle-class, suburban families. One reason that those shows may portray women in a particular manner is because white, middle-class women have typically always been seen as innocent victims (Weatherby et al., 2008). Thus, portraying them as cold-blooded killers might shock and fascinate people and thereby improve the ratings of TV shows.

Additionally, many viewers who have access to cable and similar programs are from the middle class, and therefore the media portrays women in a manner that viewers can relate to and can be shocked by. Portraying the female killer as being African American, with low income, living in poverty, who has been abused in the past and suffers from psychological conditions and is under the influence of alcohol or drugs may not be as lucrative for television producers. The viewers may not as readily identify with actual women offenders, and therefore this may cause them not watch it as often.

Even though the docudramas were not completely realistic, they had more common characteristics of the typical female offender than fictional shows. They portrayed more self-defense cases or where women just suddenly lose their self-control intoxicated and having some psychological condition. Although one of the fictional shows, *Criminal Minds,*

portrayed a lot of women with certain psychological conditions, it was overdone because they do not portray women killers in a realistic manner. The age, marital status, and employment with most of them being housewives was also more accurate in docudramas than in fictional dramas.

Another interesting finding in this analysis was that premeditated murder occurred far more often in fictional programs than in true crime shows. In the docudramas, 13 cases were premeditated while 7 were not. In fictional programs 17 cases were premeditated while only 3 were not. Because in fictional programs the entire plot is made up, the idea to make it more brutal, more planned, and colder in its execution may be in order to have more impact on the viewers. This impact may also have stronger influence on the way the portrayal of murders in such programs is seen by the viewers and may have the effect of misleading viewers to the reality of women who kill.

In reality, as found by Mann (1996), the top two motives are self-defense and premeditated offences. In the shows analyzed, those numbers are flipped, with premeditation being more common, in order to make the stories more interesting. While self-defense may make an interesting plot, it is not nearly as exciting or fascinating as cold-blooded murder. Another finding was that out of 10 cases from *Criminal Minds*, in more than half (6), the offenders were serial killers. Furthermore, their victims were unknown to them in the majority of cases and their methodology was not expected. Female serial killers are rare. Additionally, as stated by Kelleher and Kelleher (1998), when a female serial killer attacks a person it is usually someone known to her, such as a family member or someone who she can easily dominate.

Recommendations

The number of female offenders processed through the criminal justice system has increased substantially in the past 2 decades (FBI, 2012). During this time news and media sources have been reporting on the modern female offender who is more violent and cruel than ever before (Rizun, 2011). Additionally, it has been noted that there has been a change in the way our society reacts to crime committed by a female, rather than an actual change in their behavior (Rizun, 2011). The crimes portrayed on the fictional television shows reinforce the need to punish, not rehabilitate those women. The fictional crime dramas presented are inaccurate and exaggerate the dangerousness of female offenders by portraying them as cold, premeditated murderers and serial killers. Therefore, it is the atypical female offender that creates a false image of the female offender, confusing society and changing the ways in which we view female murderers. The exaggerations of female murderers are more prevalent on fictional crime dramas than in true crime shows. It is not a lie that females murder their children, their significant others, use their power to control people, and commit crimes out of jealousy, revenge, and greed; however, that is not the typical offender. Nor is the typical offender a serial killer. Female serial killers are quite rare and are not found as often as indicated on *Criminal Minds*. Of course, it is important to note that male serial killers are quite rare as well, and yet they too are overly focused on in this drama.

As stated in the literature review chapter, the typical female offender is African American, comes from poverty and has an extensive history of abuse, suffering during her childhood, and or has a substance abuse problem (Yourstone et al., 2008). Yet, this side of them is not projected in these dramas. Moreover, the typical female offender commits nonviolent crime and not murders, yet this is still the main theme of many fictional and true-life television shows. On the docudramas women killers are portrayed more closely to reality, in relation to their characteristics, social economic class, reasons and methods of killing, and

victim and offender relationships. Most of the scenarios of these shows were like Donna Yaklich, who killed her husband with a gun due to financial reasons and Erin Dukes who killed her husband in self-defense, both presented on *Snapped.*

On a typical fiction show, the female offender is violent, cruel, and rarely uses drugs. The case of Diana Turner is an example of a cruel murder portrayed in *CSI: MIAMI.* She was rejected from a PhD program and stalked and killed the women she thought to be responsible for her rejection. As a result of this misrepresentation, the females are completely responsible for their criminal behavior, and furthermore it ignores the social context that female crime occurs, which in return makes it harder for the public to understand the role society plays in the creation of female criminality (Rizun, 2011). Although both shows *CSI:MIAMI* and *Criminal Minds* portrayed women and their crimes in different manners as to their motivation, psychological conditions, and victims, they both portrayed women who are far from the truth in relation to their demographic characteristics and background that are closer to what sells and what gives profit to the real female offenders. By portraying them in such ways, their viewers can be more intrigued by women who they thought to be innocent and then turned out to be cruel and killers, as well as identify themselves and friends and acquaintances with the women who are portrayed on those shows.

There is no doubt that media has to find a way to portray criminalized women in a manner that is entertaining, easy to relate to and realistic; thus, they must adapt more socially responsible roles when representing people who commit crimes and are marginalized from the real world (Rizun, 2011). Creators and those responsible for such shows can spend more of their time and resource on informing themselves about the reality of women who kill and find better ways to represent them in a more realistic manner. Incorporating more reality, such as systematic issues (i.e., education, employment, previous offenses, poverty, and race) are necessary in order to explore the real issues behind women who become murderers.

While the majority of the documentary TV shows portray women in a more realistic manner due to the simple fact of being based on real stories, they do tend to inflict more attention to certain aspects of women that are not necessarily the real cause of their crimes. The aspects that gain more attention are the ones that society is more interested in, such as cruel and unusual crimes committed due to jealousy or financial reasons. Not many of those shows show a women who kills in self-defense, a women who was abused by her partner or suffered in poverty, with a lack of resources and education.

As of today, the responsibility should lie in the hands of the producers of the shows who can make a change by painting women who kill with their true colors. Instead of reinforcing representations that are unrealistic, such as cruel women who kill for no good reason, the media could go further into explaining the consciences of the women, the real problems they encounter, and what brings them to committing such heinous crimes. In order to accomplish such goals, they must research and receive encouragement to investigate the real issues of women who kill and portray them in a more realistic manner. Women who kill should not use simply to sell a story to television so, it is a reality in our society and in order to deeply understand this uncommon phenomenon, society must be able to view it and perceive it as it really is.

Furthermore, future researchers may want to consider studying and comparing how the media also influences other types of crimes and criminals to verify how the influence of a particular type of crime associates with a specific gender. This tie from crime type to gender may influence society's beliefs. Also, researches must analyze how the way female killers are portrayed influence future potential killers. Females that have thought about committing the same crime may feel they can get off easy based on how those women are portrayed on television. Conversely, the portrayal of women on these shows may prevent some women from committing murder. Future researches should fully study the affect of media on women.

Additionally, more research should be conducted to make it possible to give accurate and

reliable information to society about the media's effect one women's behavior in general.

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APPENDIX

Code Sheet

Show:	
Variable	**Description**
Age	
Race	
Marital Status	
Employment	
Education	
Victim/Offender Relationship	
Alcohol	
Psychological Condition (Y/N)	
Type	
Time of Killing	
Day of Killing	
Method of Killing	
Motivation	
Secondary Motivation	
Previous Offense	
Premeditated	

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