The Absence of Gay and Lesbian Police Officer Depictions in the First Three Decades of the Core Cop Film Genre: Moving Towards A Cultivation Theory Perspective

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This study examined the frequency and quality of depictions of both gay and lesbian police officers and gay and lesbian communities in the first three decades of the Core Cop Film Genre. An examination of 88 films between 1971 and 2001 resulted in only one portrayal of a gay or lesbian police officer, two insinuations, and only two portrayals of law enforcement interactions with the homosexual community. Utilizing research on cultivation theory as a base, insight is provided as to the potential implications of both the lack of gay or lesbian police officer portrayals and the quality of the few images that were identified. In addition, further analysis of criminal justice professionals, utilizing cultivation theory, is called for.

INTRODUCTION

Mass media research conducted in the academic realm has generally been theoretical in nature, utilizing public data, with research agendas emanating from the academic researchers themselves (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). These academic studies have covered a gambit of areas including, but not limited to, antisocial and prosocial effects of specific media content, uses and gratifications, agenda setting by the media, and the cultivation of perceptions of social reality (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). The findings presented here are presented as the first of the two distinct steps of the cultivation analysis process, the first involving the content analysis of blocks of media content (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). As Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005) point out in their analysis of Latino depictions in primetime television, "Although effects cannot be determined from content, such data provide insights into the potential influence of consumption on consumers when viewed from the perspectives of cultivation theory" (p. 110). It is argued that the findings of this study point to the need to expand cultivation analysis to professionals in the criminal justice system, police officers in particular. More specifically the findings presented

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here provide insight into what could be a key variable concerning the recruitment, fellow officer acceptance, and subsequent retention of gay and lesbian police officers.

CULTIVATION THEORY

First developed and tested by George Gerbner in the 1970s, cultivation theory hypothesizes that long-term exposure to a repetitive and stable system of messages delivered through television programming can have cumulative consequences. Put simply, "Viewing television gradually leads to adoption of beliefs about the nature of the social world that conform to the stereotyped and selective view of reality portrayed in a systematic way on television" (Woo & Dominick, 2003 p. 110). Wimmer and Dominick (2003) note that cultivation analysis involves two discrete steps.

> First, descriptions of the media world are obtained from periodic content analyses of large blocks of media content. The result of this content analysis is the identification of the messages of the television world. These messages represent consistent patterns in the portrayal of specific issues, policies, and topics that are often at odds with their occurrence in real life. (p. 414)

The second step involves the utilization of the findings in step one to develop a set of questions that are designed to detect a cultivation effect (see Wimmer & Dominick, 2003 for more details). This study represents the first step of future cultivation analyses concerning the cultivation of both police officer and the general public's perceptions of gay and lesbian police officers.

While cultivation theory has been widely debated, some of the early criticisms have either been proven faulty in and of themselves (see Van den Bulck, 2003) or disproved in more recent studies that address and/or control for the issues of contention called for in the early criticisms. Several examinations of cultivation studies (see Hawkins & Pingree, 1981, Shrum & O'Guinn, 1993, and Morgan & Shanahan, 1997) have found that the research has demonstrated a consistent television viewing effect on subjects' perceptions of social reality (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Since Gerbner's first tests of cultivation theory, a wide variety of issues have been addressed through cultivation analyses including such topics as authoritarianism, Latino representations, juvenile crime, black criminals, cultural values, white police officers, fear of crime, and violence, among others. An equally diverse range of television viewing subjects (i.e., international college students, Israeli students, Chinese college students, elderly viewers, etc.) have been examined using cultivation theory since its inception. While criticisms of cultivation theory may never fully dissipate, a large number of recent studies have continued to produce findings that support cultivation theory to varying degrees (see Shanahan, 1998; McCreary & Sadava, 1999; Morton, Wilson, & Laing, 1999; Reber & Chang, 2000; Vergeer, Lubbers, & Scheepers, 2000; Cohen & Weiman, 2000; Nabi & Sullivan, 2001; Diefenbach & West, 2001; Zhang & Harwood, 2002; Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003; Woo & Dominick, 2003; Van den Bulck, 2004; Gutschoven & Van den Bulck, 2005; Hammermeister, Brock, Winterstein, & Page, 2005; Wilson, Martins, & Marske, 2005; Goidel, Freeman, & Procopio, 2006; Gentles & Harrison, 2006; Hestroni & Tukachinsky, 2006; Dixon, 2007).

In addition to this continued prevalence of cultivation studies, the expanding issues examined, and television viewer categories explored, has been an expansion of the mediums that are explored. Although television has been the primary medium examined by cultivation theory, research of other mediums, such as newspapers (Vergeer & Scheepers, 2000) and video games (Williams, 2006), have also been explored. As Hendriks (2002) points out, "Gerbner formulated his theory in the late 1960s when three major networks and a public broadcast service dominated television. The invasion of cable and satellite has likely altered the accuracy of the assumption that all television content is equal" (p. 112). Further, it has been determined that the effects of cultivation grow stronger when people watch narrow genres of programming (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981). Therefore, the findings presented here continue the aforementioned expansion of mediums and analyses of specific genre content. The data that will be presented here comes from a study that explored a variety of depictions contained within the first three decades of the core cop film genre including any references or insinuations made regarding a police officer's sexual preference or about the gay and lesbian community in general. Therefore a brief discussion of the known issues surrounding gay and lesbian police officers as well as a discussion of the cop film genre is called for before discussing the methodology utilized and the subsequent findings.

GAY AND LESBIAN POLICE OFFICERS

The history of policing shows it to be a primarily white, male dominated profession (Messerschmidt, 1993). Scholarship focusing on the history and culture of policing has also consistently demonstrated strong resistance among police officers to the employment of gay men and lesbian women (Barlow & Barlow, 2000). In fact, in the United States, no police officer had openly acknowledged being gay or lesbian in public until 1981. Sergeant Charles Cochrane of the New York City Police Department made this historical announcement at a New York City Council meeting regarding a gay rights bill (Barlow & Barlow, 2000).

There is a long and consistent record of societal resistance to the rights of gay men and lesbian women to participate in a number of different professions; however, that resistance seems particularly strong in the area of law enforcement. Perhaps driven by the perception that the traditional duties associated with policing require "masculine" traits, law enforcement continues today to be dominated by male officers and resistant to the employment of women as well as non-heterosexual men. Much of the early opposition to the employment of gay men was situated in claims that the very nature of their sexuality made them unsuitable for employment in law enforcement due to the criminality associated with their sexual preferences (Bayley, 1974; Burke, 1994). Numerous municipal and state level statutes prohibiting various acts of consensual sex between same-sex adults served as a technical method to deny employment opportunities to people who openly lived gay and lesbian lifestyles. The U.S. Supreme Court invalidated those statutes (*Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003), however, resistance to the hiring of gay and lesbian police officers continues (Miller, Forest, & Jurik, 2003).

This resistance has been associated with the existence of persistent homophobic attitudes among persons employed in law enforcement (Bernstein & Kostelac, 2002) and it is probable that there is a tendency for people with lower levels of acceptance of gay and lesbian lifestyles to

be drawn to law enforcement careers. Studies of undergraduate students show criminal justice majors to be less tolerant toward gay men and lesbian woman than other majors (Cannon, 2005) and law enforcement majors to be more homophobic than other majors (Olivero & Murataya, 2001). These studies suggest that criminal justice as a profession may attract people who hold more negative opinions toward homosexual people and would concomitantly be more likely to oppose the hiring of gay men or lesbian women as police officers.

Lyons, DeValve, and Garner (2008) surveyed 747 chiefs of police in Texas and found that those reporting higher levels of contact with gay men and lesbian women as well as those reporting higher levels of education were less likely to accept stereo-typical representations of these individuals. Similarly, those police chiefs with greater levels of contact were significantly less likely to say that they would resign from their positions if forced to work with a gay or lesbian person. They also reported that almost half of the participants in their study said that they would have difficulty working with a gay man while only 27% reported that they would have no difficulty doing so. Bernstein and Kostelac's (2002) survey of over 200 sworn officers employed in a medium sized police department in the Southwestern U.S., shows similar patterns of resistance to the employment of gay and lesbian police officers with 68.9% of their respondents reporting that homosexuals do not belong in law enforcement and 84.6% asserting that male homosexuals would not be able to perform their job as well as others (p. 313). This study also shows that female officers and those officers who are not involved in a traditional marriage are significantly less likely to express these attitudes. Similarly, police supervisors expressed higher levels of acceptance of gay male officers but were more likely to report discrimination against lesbian officers.

Research consistently demonstrates that people who express the strongest opposition to gay and lesbian lifestyles in general are those who also report having had little or no direct experience with people living those lifestyles (Herek & Kapitanio, 1996; Vonofakou, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). The extent to which familiarity with gay and lesbian lifestyles is influenced by media imagery and representation mediates anti-gay attitudes in general is not clear (Ciasullo, 2001; Levina, Waldo, & Fitzgerald, 2000) and the impact such representations might have on attitudes about gay and lesbian police officers is virtually unexplored. Therefore, this study explores both the extent and quality of how homosexuality among police officers has been portrayed in theatrically released films in the first three decades of the core cop film genre.

CORE COP FILM GENRE

Prior to 1967 police officers were presented as foolish patrolmen (keystone cops), tough federal agents, or cool private investigators (Rafter, 2000). The 1950s and 1960s saw the Western and noir era lose its appeal and urban police officer depictions rise; due in large to the publication of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration Justice which called for advanced education, technical skills, and scientific training among police officers (Rafter, 2000). Rafter (2000) points out that the rise in street crime and urban disorder of the time period made the market rich for a new law enforcement officer who lives in and protects the people of the modern city. In 1968, the film *Coogan's Bluff* (1968) served as the watershed film which brought the movie industry one step closer to the cop film genre. In this

movie, Clint Eastwood played a sheriff who tracks a killer from Arizona to New York City, thus anticipating the union of the Western with the city-centered noir (Rafter, 2000).

Among the plethora of turbulent events presented in the media during the 1960s were police actions which only served to help tarnish the reputation of the police. However, in 1970 public opinion began moving toward the law-and-order perspective (Rafter, 2000). Then in 1971, the film *Dirty Harry*, a film driven by the underlying belief that liberal laws had tied the cops' hands, thus keeping them from catching criminals was released marking the beginning of the cop film genre (Rafter, 2000).

In both *Dirty Harry* and later in *Magnum Force* (1973), Don Siegel and Clint Eastwood successfully shifted the gunslinger to an urban police setting (Rafter, 2000). Later the 1980s and 1990s saw the splintering of the cop film genre into sub genres of the traditional cop film genre. Some of these splinter genres included, but are not limited to, "rogue cop films", "corrupt cop films", "buddy cop films", and "cop comedy films" among others (Rafter, 2000). Despite the splintering of the cop film genre, many of the characteristics that originally defined what made a film a cop film have endured; it is this group of films that we designate the core cop film genre.

METHODOLOGY

In the past the study of social science issues in film has been prone to strictly qualitative observation techniques and/or non-probability sampling techniques. In fact in an examination of 94 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1996 and 2006 which examined social science issues in theatrically released films, Wilson (In Press) found only one study which attempted to utilize probability sampling. Wilson (In Press) suggests that the lack of probability sampling has been due to the difficult, if not insurmountable, task of identifying clear film populations from which samples can be drawn. In an effort to alleviate this problem Wilson (In Press) developed the Unified Film Population Identification Methodology (UFPIM). The UFPIM is a new methodology designed to help film researchers who wish to examine large film populations, utilize probability sampling techniques, make some sort of statistical inference regarding their findings or simply wish to establish a replicable film population (Wilson, In Press). The UFPIM utilizes the Internet Movie Database Power Search (IMDbPS) as part of its three phase process of identifying specific film populations. Phase I of the UFPIM involves developing an operationalized definition, rooted in relevant literature, of the film population to be analyzed. Phase II utilizes the IMDbPS to identify a base film list. This base film list is acquired by utilizing at a minimum the IMDbPS search criterion of "key words in the movie plot summaries", "movie genre" (the primary genre to which the IMDbPS associates a film), "year" (the year or series of years in which films were released) and "key words" (for further details see (Wilson, 2006) or (Wilson, In Press)). Although, this analysis employs the UFPIM utilizing the IMDbPS, any database that retains the ability to search for the aforementioned search criteria could be substituted. Phase III is a two stage process, the first of which involves the development of an identification coding sheet designed to further isolate those films that meet the operationalized definition. Stage II involves the examination of plot summaries for all the films identified in Phase II utilizing the aforementioned coding sheet. In stage II of Phase III plot summaries from at least two independent sources, one being the IMDb, are to be examined

to help insure the accuracy of the final population. In this study the UFPIM was used to identify the core cop film population to be examined.

The original study from which this methodology was developed and from which the findings presented here are derived, sought to analyze a variety of depiction issues in the first three decades of the core cop film genre. Therefore, Phase I of the UFPIM resulted in the first three decades of the core cop film genre being operationalized as theatrically released films between 1971 and 2001 that take place in the United States where one or more actors play the hero who is an active urban police officer of traditional ranks, either acting alone or with a partner in a street cop/detective role, in the past or present, that appear to be reality based. Given that this operationalization excludes those films that are not reality based, any films categorized by the IMDb as falling into such genre categories as fantasy, comedy, science fiction, horror, film-noir, or war were excluded. Further, films that depict police officers who are outside their jurisdictional boundaries (i.e. *Beverley Hills Cop)* or in specialized units that do not traditionally fall into the day to day crime fighting units in police department organizational structures (i.e. internal affairs, forensic units) are excluded from the genre. Consequently, at the end of Phase II, a base film list of over 500 films was produced (for further details see (Wilson, 2006) or (Wilson, In Press)). In Stage I of Phase III the core cop film identification coding sheet was developed. In Stage II of Phase III over 1000 plot summaries from both the IMDb and Amazon.com were evaluated using the core cop film identification coding sheet resulting in a final population of 104 films.

During the examination process several of the films were excluded for a variety of reasons. Eight films could not be located and were determined to be out of production. The three films, *Electra Glide in Blue* (1973), *The Indian Runner* (1991), and *Partners in Crime* (2000) were excluded because the films involved police officers that were not city police. Additionally, two films were excluded due to not fitting into one of the required genre categories. Upon viewing it was determined that the film *The Black Marble* (1980) was a comedy and the film *God Told Me To* (1976) fell more appropriately into the horror film genre. The film *The Onion Field* (1979), although dealing with the shooting of police officers, primarily focused on the justice system rather than law enforcement. Lastly, the film *Wild Things* (1998) and *Cement* (1998) both were excluded due to the fact the police were not portrayed as heroes in any way. Therefore, due to the fact that eight films could not be accessed and an additional eight films were excluded for various reasons, the final population for the first thirty years of the core cop film genre totaled 88 films (see (Wilson, In Press) for a complete list of films). While the UFPIM provides a mechanism to identify an entire population of films from which samples can be drawn, in this study the entire population of films were examined. Each of the 88 films represented a unit of analysis and was examined for both the direct portrayal of gay or lesbian police officers, insinuated gay or lesbian behavior and portrayals of the gay and lesbian community.

FINDINGS

Barlow and Barlow (2000) point out that "gay and lesbian police officers confront a number of the same issues as other marginalized officers who are treated as outsiders by the

white, heterosexual, male-dominated police occupational culture" (p. 275). The same can be said about the portrayal of gay and lesbian police officers in the core cop film genre. In the first three decades of core cop film police officer portrayals, only one portrayal of a gay or lesbian police officer, two insinuations, and only one portrayal of the gay or lesbian community in general were observed. The one portrayal of a gay or lesbian police officer and one of two portrayals of the gay or lesbian community occurred in a film staring Al Pacino entitled *Cruising* (1980). In this film, Pacino plays police officer Steve Burns who goes undercover in the San Francisco, California gay sadomasochism underground in search of a serial killer. While Burns plays the role of an observer, the film does portray one police officer as a member of the gay community. This officer is depicted as preying on the gay community using his authority and ability to arrest in order to receive sexual favors. Therefore, the only portrayal in the first three decades of the core cop film genre of a gay or lesbian police officer was that of an individual who not only takes part in the gay sadomasochistic underground, a community that may be viewed in a negative light by a large portion of both the heterosexual and homosexual community, but is also portrayed as being viewed as evil by the members of the sadomasochistic community. Additionally, this film represents the most significant portrayal of the gay or lesbian community in the United States. The second portrayal of the gay or lesbian community occurred in the film *Busting* (1973) where actors Elliot Gould (Detective Keneely) and Robert Blake (Detective Farrel) briefly go undercover in what appears to be a gay night club. The club appears to be filled with drag queens and predatory gay males, which Keneely has to protect Farrel from ultimately leading to the two officers being attacked when it is revealed they are heterosexual police officers. Later in the film two drag queens arrested in the bar are degraded publicly by a judge for their dress and sexual orientation. Lastly, throughout the film the terms gay or homosexual is not used; rather the police use the term 'fruits'.

Therefore, the most significant portrayal of the gay or lesbian community is that of those individuals involved in the sadomasochistic underground, arguably neither a favorable nor a representative portrayal of the community as a whole. Further, the married heterosexual Burns is portrayed as being pulled into the sadomasochistic community or tempted into a homosexual life style; arguably advancing the position that homosexuality is a choice. While the less prominent depiction of the gay or lesbian communities in the film *Busting* (1973) portrays gay men as drag queens and predators.

The two films in which it is insinuated that a police officer is homosexual by another character are *Serpico* (1973) and *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998). In *Serpico*, Frank Serpico, portrayed by Al Pacino, walks in on one of his fellow officers in a dark bathroom where the officer is spying on a woman in another building. After following Serpico and catching him and the other officer in a dark bathroom Serpico's supervisor falsely accuses Serpico of being engaged in homosexual behavior with the other officer.

In *Lethal Weapon 4*, Roger Murtaugh, portrayed by Danny Glover, and Martin Riggs, portrayed by Mel Gibson, are suspicious of a young Detective Lee Butters, played by Chris Rock, because of his apparent open affection for Murtaugh. Riggs continues to make comments and places Murtaugh in uncomfortable situations with Butters even after he discovers that the reason for Butter's affection is due to his secret relationship with Murtaugh's daughter.

CONCLUSION

In reality, gay and lesbian police officers have been present in policing for years. Gay males have probably been involved in policing since its origins, but, out of fear of reprisal, have chosen to keep their sexuality hidden. Unlike marginalized groups such as racial minorities and females, whose presence on a police force is visually apparent, a gay or lesbian police officer's presence is only revealed through that officer making it known. This makes estimations of the actual number of gay or lesbian police officers on police forces virtually impossible to determine. This, in conjunction with the relatively recent occurrence of the first police officer to openly announce in a public forum that he or she was gay in 1981, only serves to make the identification that much more difficult. This said, perhaps the question of how to identify the number of gay or lesbian police officers is not the question researchers should be concerned with. Instead the concern should be with why it makes a difference in the minds of some officers if their fellow officers are gay or lesbian and subsequently how can these concerns be curbed.

In the literature regarding gay and lesbian police officers in the real world, "lesbian police officers appear to be more acceptable to the heterosexual male police officer than the gay male police officer, because the former poses no threat to the heterosexual police officer's self image" (Barlow & Barlow, 2000, p. 275). This begs the question of how the dominant heterosexual police officer's self-image is developed and how it is maintained. In the beginning of this article Mastro & Behm-Morawitz (2005) were quoted from their first step analysis of Latino depictions in primetime television as saying that "although effects cannot be determined from content, such data provide insights into potential influence of consumption on consumers when viewed from the perspective of cultivation theory"(Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005 p. 110). The findings presented here clearly demonstrate not only a failure to portray gay or lesbian police officers but a failure to present depictions of the police interacting with the homosexual community in general. The one actual representation of the homosexual community and of a gay or lesbian police officer depicts both as sexual sadomasochists, arguably supporting much of the general publics engrained perceptions and fears of gays and lesbians.

Arguably few researchers can truthfully say that their populations of study are all-encompassing. It is quite possible that not every theatrically released film between 1971 and 2001 that meets the operational definition of the core cop film genre was captured utilizing the UFPIM. However, it is believed that a large enough portion, if not all, of the available films falling into the core cop film population between 1971 and 2001 were identified and subsequently examined in this study. Therefore, given the current understanding of the issues faced by homosexual police officers in today's society in conjunction with the findings of this study, additional analysis is justified both in regards to the second step of cultivation analysis as well as further content analyses of large media blocks to determine if the findings of this study are consistent.

While the majority of cultivation theory studies focus on overrepresentations and their effect on heavy viewers, based on the findings presented here future researchers could approach

the second step of cultivation analysis from two different perspectives. One can either argue that it is the overly masculine heterosexual representations of police officers, or one could also argue that it is the under-representation of gay and lesbian police officers that leads to the continued perpetuation of the long held stereotypes and prejudices affecting gay and lesbian police officers still today. However, given that traditionally cultivation studies have been approached from the overrepresentation of issues (i.e., crime, race of criminals, etc.), the safer route for future studies would be the heavy representation of masculine heterosexual police officers and its effect on the social construction of the acceptable police officer image among both police officers and the general community.

Lastly, as noted earlier, cultivation analyses have examined a wide variety of issues, television viewer types, and genres. Cultivation studies have become increasingly more specific in these categories, while at the same time expanding into other media formats. It is our contention that given the growth of mediums through which films can be accessed, be it the ever-widening system of cable and satellite networks with specific film channels, pay-per-view films, video rentals, mail order film rentals, the Internet, or the traditional showing of films in theaters it is time for specific analysis of films. Further, to date there has been little if any examination of the applicability of cultivation theory among criminal justice professionals such as police officers; clearly, further exploration is needed.

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