Chapter 3
Media Portrayals of Crime and Youth

On the crime show *CSI*: *Miami* and similar television programs, violent crimes are commonly committed in beautiful settings, among the rich and well connected. Murderers and drug deals drive classy cars and wear expensive, if excessively pastel, suits. Beautiful young women are as likely to be murderers as anybody else, and no one…crime victims or criminals, is unattractive. Similarly, the police officers and lab technicians investigating crimes are all in the prime of youth and health, wear the trendiest clothes, and are undeniably pretty or handsome. Not a single police officer cracks an off-color joke about criminals or crime victims. Television homicides are oftentimes premeditated and cleverly covered up, with clear and practical motives such as money or sexual jealousy. To truly jazz things up, the occasional serial murder can be counted on to come along and play a sinister game of cat-and-mouse with the detectives.

Going into a typical police department or jail with these kinds of high expectations one would likely be quite disappointed. Naturally, shows such as *CSI: Miami* and the many other crime shows on the air are intended to entertain, not inform. Compare the images of *CSI: Miami* with a "real life" crime show such as *Cops,* which follows real police officers interacting with real criminals in a semi-documentary format. *Cops* itself is highly edited, because a "real life" show based on average looking cops arresting low-income drunk and disorderly men and women would likely not carry on for long without some editing to jazz things up. I happen to live in Laredo, TX and so it is interesting to watch my city depicted in *Borderland: Laredo* a recent "real" police show. Granted, both the cops and most of the criminals in that show are very average looking, and there is little doubt Laredo is the entry point for many of the drugs entering the USA. But Laredo is also generally a low-crime, peaceful city and it is interesting to see the distinction between television and reality.

This chapter examines the way in which both crime and adolescence has been portrayed in modern media. Given the mismatch between how fictional media portrays crime, and the circumstances of actual violent crime, media consumption may distort perspectives and beliefs regarding crime frequency, motivation, offender

characteristics, and cause. Some researchers have expressed concern that media depictions of crime may result in the *cultivation* of distorted beliefs about crime among viewers. Such distorted beliefs may lead to unnecessary anxieties about crime victimization, misallocation of crime fighting or other social resources, potential damage to constitutional rights of due process, or prejudices against minority groups who are portrayed as crime perpetrators. Similarly, inaccurate portrayals of youth may fuel generational divides, and moral panics about youth.

This chapter concerns itself primarily with the following main issues:

1. Begin by discussing data on real-life violent crime to form a framework against which media depictions can be compared.
2. Discuss the mismatch between crime in real-life and crime in the media, with regard to frequency, trends, and racial minority participation.
3. Cover research regarding the "cultivation hypothesis" that beliefs about crime are shaped by fictional media viewing.
4. Discuss the portrayal of racial minorities in fictional crime media and
5. Examine the portrayal of youth in fictional crime media.

By addressing these issues we can develop and understanding of how the media interacts with and shapes both our view of crime and of youth.

3.1   Violence in Real Life

Murder She Wrote was a popular television program running from 1984 to 1996 featuring Angela Landsbury as a mystery writer who oftentimes solved real murders in her fictional hometown of Cabot Cove, Maine. In the show, Cabot Cove was said to have a population of around 3,500 citizens and it is estimated that 2 % of the population of the town were killed off during the run of the series (Barron, 1996). To put that in perspective, on a nationwide scale, that would be equivalent to half a million people being murdered in the USA each year (the current figure in recent years has actually been about 15–16,000). Viewers might have wondered why citizens stayed in a town with such poor odds, particularly when most citizens were of high socioeconomic status (SES). Murderers were oftentimes over 40, usually Caucasian, of high SES and often female. Elderly, high SES women probably do, on occasion, premeditate murder for a variety of motives. Yet shows such as *Murder She Wrote* may present a distorted view of violent crimes in several notable ways including:

1. Overestimating the proportion of female perpetrators.
2. Overestimating the proportion of wealthy or well-to-do perpetrators and victims.
3. Overestimating the average age of crime perpetrators.
4. Overestimating the sophistication of motive, planning, and execution of the typical violent crime
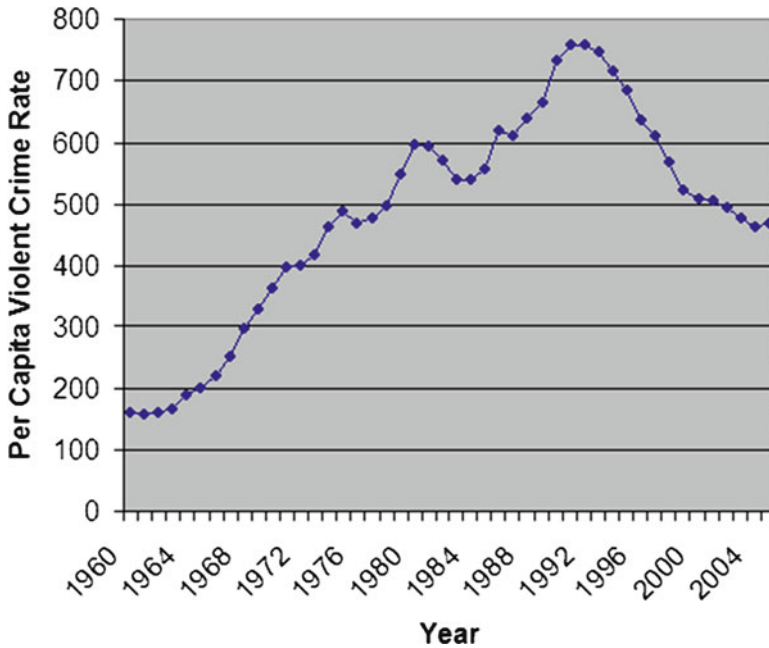5. Overestimating the frequency of violent crime overall.

Fig. 3.1 Per capita violent crime rates in the USA by year

Put simply, these types of shows portray homicide in a way that does not reflect the reality of the crime.

Before discussing the way that the media portrays violent crimes, we need to briefly consider the "reality" of violent crimes in order to have some perspective. Like most human behavior, it is somewhat difficult to offer true generalizations as there are oftentimes exceptions. Regarding the incidence of homicides, in recent years approximately 15–16,000 people per year in the USA have been murdered (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 1951–2011). This figure represents a significant decline from peak years during the early 1990s when nearly 25,000 homicides occurred on an annual basis. The USA has been in a precipitous decline in violent crimes in general, with the country becoming safer than at any time since the 1960s. As presented in Chap. 1, Fig. 3.1 presents long-term trends in violent crimes generally, while Fig. 3.2 presents long-term trends in murders and nonnegligent manslaughter cases. Even the violence surges in the 1980s and early 1990s were part of a broader pattern in the USA with similar violence surges occurring in the 1930s and late 1800s (Ferguson, 2002; National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, 1969). The FBI data may be biased, as it uses figures only from crimes reported to the police. Nonetheless, data from anonymous victimization surveys in the USA and most other Western nations agree that an international downswing in violent crimes in highly industrialized has been taking place for almost two decades (Childstats.gov, 2011; Nicholas, Kershaw, & Walker, 2007; van Dijk, van Kesteren, & Smit, 2007). Perhaps most important to the current book, rates of youth violence
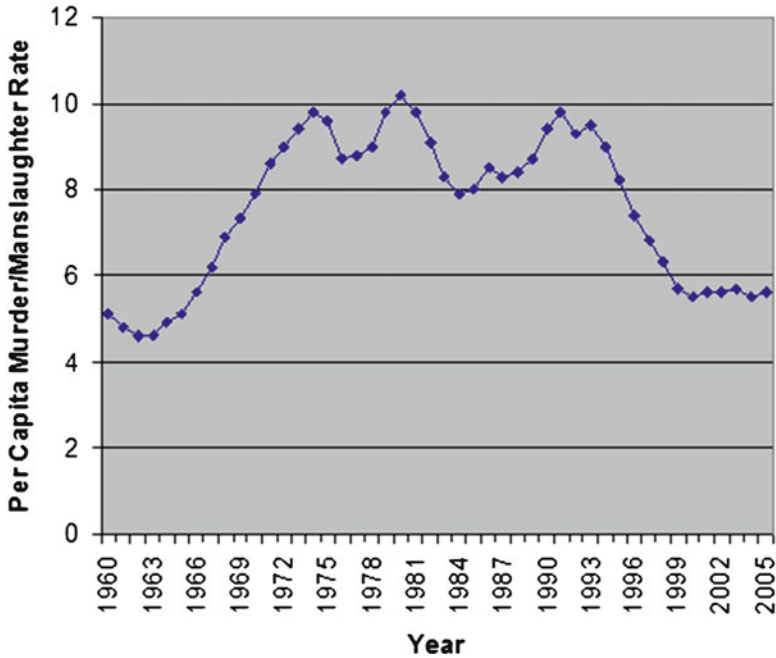
Fig. 3.2 Per capita murder/nonnegligent manslaughter rates in the USA by year

have followed this trend, declining precipitously to 40-year lows whether measured by victimology data (Childstats.gov, 2011) or via youth arrests data (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2010). That said, approximately 8 % of homicides are committed by individuals under the age of 18. 32 % of homicides are committed by individuals under the age of 22. Nonetheless, most homicides are committed by non-teens.

Violent crime surges of the past have typically followed considerable social upheavals. The 1970s saw increases in racial and social tensions, and a plunging economy. The 1930s saw Prohibition and the Great Depression. It is likely that this general trend in US crimes will continue, with periodic rises and falls. As with the current economic downturn (as of this writing in 2011), young males tend to be particularly hard hit by social pressures, and tend to be most active in social unrest.

Who commits violent crimes, and who are the victims? The characteristics of these groups are actually quite similar (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008). Most perpetrators of violent crimes (88 %) are male, as are most victims (76 %). Most perpetrators and victims alike are between the ages of 14 and 34. Minorities, particularly African–Americans, are overrepresented among both crime perpetrators and crime victims, most likely due to the relationship between SES and crime. That is, generally speaking, violent criminals are more likely to come from neighborhoods that are low SES and high in poverty (Criminal Justice Research Center, 2006). Indeed the majority of violent crimes are committed by low SES perpetrators against individuals of a similar disadvantaged background. Criminals most often don't travel out of their home neighborhoods to commit crimes—crime is opportunistic.

Homicides in the media are often portrayed as well-planned clearly motivated affairs. In reality, most homicides are more spontaneous and poorly executed. Most homicides are due either to arguments, whether between romantic partners or even something as trivial as two young males looking at each other the "wrong way" in at a party or club, or are committed during the commission of another felony crime such as a robbery (Schwartz, 2009). Laboriously premeditated homicides are comparatively uncommon. Even gang-related homicides, another media staple, are comparatively uncommon, accounting for just 9 % of male and 1 % of female perpetrated homicides (Schwartz, 2009). Indeed the motives for many homicides are shockingly trivial, with little practical gain for the homicide perpetrator. Many homicides are instigated by the victim. Victims of homicide oftentimes began the argument or fight that ended in their death. Most homicides are also cleared quickly, usually within 48 h, although the number of solved homicide cases has been dropping over the last several decades from a high of approximately 90 %, to approximately 70 % today (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2010).

Despite the fact that violent crimes in the USA have been declining over the past 20 years, the USA remains more violent than comparable Western countries such as Germany, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand (Ministry of Justice, 2002). Why the USA remains so high in terms of violent crimes in comparison to other countries is not well understood.

3.2   Violent Crime in the Media

The fundamental purpose of media, with the specific exception of the news media, is not to inform, but to entertain. It should not be surprising that crime in the media differs from crime in real life. Nonetheless, entertainment media may unwittingly inform people's views about real life crime. Even the news media, through their focus on particular types of stories and not others in their quest for ratings, may influence people's perceptions of crime, particularly related to the prevalence of crime and fear of crime victimization. This chapter's focus is on violent crime in fictional entertainment media. Specifically, we examine research related to the effects of fictional crime media on beliefs about crime prevalence and involvement of minorities in violent crime.

3.3   How Much Violence Is There in Fictional Media?

Answering the question "How much violence is there in the media?" can be difficult, as it hinges upon definitions of violence itself. The World Health Organization defines violence as:

> The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (World Health Organization, 2002).

This is probably as reasonable definition as any, and we'll proceed with this definition. However, it is important to note that different individuals or groups may disagree over the specific behaviors that constitute "violence." Most of us would agree that shootings, knifings or beatings constitute violence, but what about verbal abuse or excluding others socially, or depriving a social group of food or resources needed to survive?

Merely defining a term is not sufficient if measurement of that term does not adhere to the definition. For instance, some individuals may not consider cartoons, or the kinds of comedic physical aggression found in some shows, to truly amount to "violence." Statistics about the prevalence of violent in the media are meaningful only in the context of how violence is defined in a particular study. It is important that individual studies are read carefully to see how violence is defined.

The National Television Violence Study (NTVS, National Television Violence Study Council, 1998) examined the prevalence of violent acts in fictional television media. Conclusions from the NTVS included:

- Approximately 60 % of television programs contain violence of some kind, inclusive of comedic or cartoon violence.
- Violence in entertainment media often has unrealistically few consequences, such as characters demonstrating little if any pain in response to violent attacks. Wile E. Coyote's reactions to being hit on the head with an anvil or blown up are typical of this point.
- 40 % of violent acts on television are presented as humorous. Cartoons, in particular, are a common source of comedic violence.
- 71 % of violent acts include no remorse or punishment or penalty (this includes violent acts by law enforcement officials and other "good guys".)

Thus, the NTVS concludes that media portrayals of violence are common and the NTVS often puts this in stark terms, although one could argue the NTVS at times seems naïve regarding the social context and intent of media portrayals of violence.

Some are concerned that youth and adults alike watching such frequent depictions of violence on television may begin to believe that violence in society is as common as violence on television. The concern is that viewers will begin to believe that what they view in fictional media is representative of real life. This can promote distorted beliefs about crime, and heightened fears about crime victimization.

The NTVS uses a fairly broad meter for what constitutes "violence." The NTVS definition of violence includes any threat or act intended to harm another animate being, in some cases including talking about violence. Such a definition incorporates acts such as throwing pies in a comedic movie or other "slapstick" acts of physical humor. These acts are not consistent with the WHO definition of violence. Similar problems exist in assessing other media. For example, in a video game involving football, does tackling or blocking constitute "violence?" The actions are part of a mutually consenting sports competition, in which the goal is to perform maximally at the sport, not to cause injury. On the other hand, the fights that break out during a hockey video game (or real hockey match!) would indeed constitute "violence" according to the WHO definition.

One study reported that violent content is common in E-rated video games (Thompson & Haninger, 2001), a category of games rated as acceptable for young children. This study examined a convenience sample of 55 commercially available E-rated games. An undergraduate student played each of the games and raters examined the recorded game play for violent content. The authors concluded that 64 % of E-rated games such as *Q*Bert, Sonic Adventure, Super Mario Bros, The Legend of Zelda*, and *Donkey Kong 64* included some intentional violence. This finding seems alarming until it is noted that the definitions used are broad enough that primitive first generation video games involving spaceships or monsters shooting at each other such as *Space Invaders* or *Pac Man* could fit this definition of a "violent game."

It is usually assumed that violent content in the media has increased over time, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Yet this belief has not yet been empirically studied. Nonetheless, it is probably true that this is the case, particularly as new media forms such as television and video games have been developed in recent decades without substantively removing past media forms. With the advent of cable television, video games and the internet, the availability of violent media has undoubtedly increased across the twentieth century.

3.4   Types of Media Influence

Most actual criminal arrests are for relatively minor crimes. Looking at the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, we can see that minor thefts (larceny), property crimes, burglaries, and auto thefts predominate among crimes (FBI, 2010). Murders and nonnegligent manslaughter cases account for less than 1 % of all crimes. Violent crimes overall account for approximately 12 % of crimes. On television, murders account for approximately one quarter of crimes portrayed, with violent crimes more generally, including rape, assault, and kidnapping, accounting for almost 90 % of crimes portrayed on television (Surette, 2007). It is clear, then, that television, and presumably other media, including books (Durham, Elrod, & Kinkade, 1995) are heavily weighted toward portrayals of serious violent crimes. This is hardly surprising; after all, a police drama centered on vandalism and petty larceny would scarcely draw in the viewers.

The media provides two main potential influences. These are important to understand and contrast when examining the issue of media effects. These influences are:

- Information. Information is just what it sounds like: by watching the media a viewer learns about a particular topic. The media you see may never have intended to be informative per se, and indeed you might have learned something that in fact is erroneous. Yet this kind of transaction is fairly passive requiring no active motivation on the part of the viewer. Examples would include:

  – Bleach can be used to destroy DNA evidence.
  – Traces of blood evidence can remain even after a thorough cleaning.
  – Serial arsonists will often stand in the crowed watching a fire they set burn a building down.

None of these pieces of information make a person more inclined to commit a crime. They could make a criminal better at committing crimes he or she already would commit.

Along these lines it is important to understand that the influence of marketing and advertising is more informative than behavior changing per se. In other words, advertising's power is not in making people buy things they don't already have an inclination to buy, but rather in directing people toward specific brands. The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines marketing as:

> Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large. (AMA, 2007)

The customers are thus active judges of information provided by marketers, not passive recipients programmed to want random products. It certainly is true that the information provided by advertisements and marketing can, at times, be misleading, misinformative, or outright fabrications. Yet advertising is sometimes compared to fictional media along the idea of "If the advertizing industry spends X bazillion dollars a year to change people's behavior, why doesn't all media change people's behavior?" This line of argument presents a poor reasoning for exactly what it is that advertizing does. A person is unlikely to buy cola, or something similar, unless he or she has tasted it, in the past and enjoyed it. Advertizing makes that cola enjoying person more inclined to choose a brand they identify with such as Coke or Pepsi, and eschew lesser known, potentially cheaper brands. Advertizing, then, does not create massive behavior change, or shape people's core personality or beliefs. It does nudge people in the direction of particular product *brands* the result of which can be windfall profits for those brands (see Kotler & Keller, 2009).

- Behavior change. Significant behavior change involves the media changing the core personality or motivations of viewers, usually via social learning. This differs from informational influence. While there is little controversy over whether the media provides information, there is considerable controversy over whether the media changes core behaviors among adolescents. For instance, if in watching a television show about sexual behavior the narrator says that "62 % of high schoolers report having sex before graduation" (which actually represents a significant decline over time; Childstats.gov, 2011), an easily absorbed statement, will it influence the viewer's perceptions of teenage sex? Certainly it has provided a statistic which the viewer learned and can repeat to others. How do efforts geared at actually changing sexual behavior work? Despite decades of abstinence messages, the majority of youth continue to have sex before reaching their twenties (Abma, Martinez, Mosher, & Dawson, 2002). An evaluation of abstinence-only and abstinence messages in combination with information about contraception finds that such programs have little impact on in the onset and frequency of teen sexual behavior (Kirby, 2007). In other words, the biological drives to have sex easily override the social message of others including strangers on television. At the same time, the same evaluation finds that providing

information on something teens already want (i.e., avoiding sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy) can have at least a modest effect as evidenced by increased condom use. Thus, social and media messages can be effective when informing people how to do something they already want to do, but are less successful when attempting to change core motivations, personality traits or values. Put more simply, the media does not appear to be very effective in getting people to do things that they didn't already want to do.

3.5   The Cultivation Hypothesis

The Cultivation Hypothesis suggests that television and other media have become a primary source of information and dictate how we view the real world (Gerbner, 1969; Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, & Huang, 2000). For instance, the cultivation hypothesis would suggest that individuals who consume a lot of media featuring violent crimes may begin to believe that violent crimes are common and ever increasing. This is sometimes called the *mean world* belief…that threats and violence are common in the world (Hawkins, Pingree, & Adler, 1987). Somewhat anecdotally, in my own classes in forensic psychology, I note that many students are surprised to learn that violence in the USA (as well as in Canada and most other Western countries) is declining and has been for some time. When I ask students how many believe that violent crime among youth is on the rise in the USA, approximately two thirds regularly raise their hands. From this it is not hard to speculate that generational divides between adolescents and older adults may also be cultivated by media. Stereotypes of each group may be highlighted in media portrayals, increasing rather than decreasing generational differences. For instance, many older adults continue to believe that mental health and behavioral outcomes for modern youth continue to decline, despite considerable evidence to the contrary (Ferguson, 2008a).

There remains much controversy over the cultivation hypothesis. Most of the research has focused on individuals' fear of becoming a crime victim, rather than perceptions of how crime rates have changed over time. One early study suggested that television viewing, including exposure to crime dramas specifically, was not related to fear of crime or the perception that crime is more prevalent than it actually is. By contrast, television news reporting of crime was related to increased fear (O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987). This study consisted of a probability community sample of adults living in the Midwest. Respondents were asked about their frequency of viewing crime dramas and television news, as well as reading newspapers. Respondents were also asked to rate the dangerousness of their neighborhood, how concerned they were about crime, and preventative measures they used to protect themselves from crime, such as installing extra door locks. No effects were found for viewing television crime dramas, and only weak effects found for television news.[1]

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[1] $\beta = 0.10$

A separate study found inconsistent results, such as that exposure to crime dramas may increase estimates of crime in the real world, but that this does not transfer to other attitudes such as fear of crime (Hawkins et al., 1987). In this study, four separate samples of adults and adolescents from the USA and Australia were included. Participants reported on their total television viewing or kept diaries about shows that they had watched, and asked to report on their beliefs about violence and crime. Overall results were weak and inconsistent, in many cases disconfirming or contradicting the authors' hypotheses. Television viewing of crime dramas was weakly related to overall frequency estimates of violent crime, but not consistently related to other beliefs about or fears of crime. Other early research suggested that increased television viewing was related to distorted views about crime more generally (Carlson, 1985; Lewis, 1981). By contrast, other researchers found that this relationship vanished once actual crime rates in the viewer's local neighborhood were controlled (Doob & MacDonald, 1979). In other words, actual knowledge about real crimes committed in the viewers' neighborhoods was a confounding variable in studies of the cultivation hypothesis. People who lived in more violent neighborhoods tended to watch more violent crime drama, and estimate that violent crimes were more common. Far from representing a cultivation effect, this merely was a reflection of the social reality in which these viewers lived.

One early article attempted to resolve some of the conflicting findings seen in early research on cultivation and fears of crime (Heath & Petraitis, 1987). In their first study, the authors randomly sampled adults from the USA using random telephone dialing. Respondents were asked to report how often they viewed crime dramas and the frequency of violent crimes in their home city and in a large distant city in which they did not live. Results suggested that viewing crime dramas was not related to personal fear of crime in the immediate environment, but did inflate estimates of crime in the distant city. In their second study, the authors replicated these findings with an undergraduate sample, achieving similar results. These results suggest that, if the cultivation hypothesis does have any influence, it is only for distant, abstract urban environments with which individuals are not familiar. It should be noted that results even for the distant urban environments were weak.[2] Overall results such as these suggest that the influence of crime dramas on fears of crime is weak at best.

More recent research has generally not supported the view that viewing crime dramas increases fears of crime (Grabe & Drew, 2007). Grabe and Drew used random telephone dialing to randomly sample a group of adults in Indiana. Respondents reported their rate of viewing crime dramas, reality police shows and television news. Respondents also estimated the likelihood that they would be victims of several types of crimes in the coming year. Overall, no relationship was found between viewing crime dramas and reality police shows and estimates of personal crime victimization.

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[2]r values between 0.12 and 0.20

Exposure to television dramas depicting violent crimes seems to be a weaker predictor of fear of violent crime and overestimates of violent crime rates than is exposure to television news (Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2004). A recent study found that viewing television crime dramas was not related to total crime frequency estimates, and only weakly related to estimates of violent crime (Hetsroni & Tukachinski, 2006). This study surveyed Israeli university students. As with most other studies of the cultivation hypothesis, participants were asked to report on crime dramas they had watched and their estimates of violent criminal acts in the real world. They found that some individuals do indeed overestimate real-world crimes, yet the authors concluded that this was not due to viewing television crime dramas. The authors surmise that the relationship between viewing television crime dramas and the development of beliefs about real-world crime is more complex than suggested by the cultivation hypothesis.

As indicated above, research suggests that the influence of viewing television crime dramas, and related fictional depictions of violent crimes in other media, on perceptions and fear of crime is weak at best. Effect sizes found in cultivation research, particularly related to crime estimates and fear of crime, are small overall. More importantly the effects of cultivation largely disappear when other variables are considered (Hirsch, 1980; Potter, 1993).

Comparatively little research has looked at another interesting possibility: that media portrayals of adolescents could result in cultivation of attitudes about adolescents in older adults. Could the impression that adolescents are feckless, irrational, impulsive, and in need of firm guidance by adults be guided by news or fictional media? Or are such media merely responding to older adults a priori beliefs? Unfortunately I am aware of little research that has addressed this question.

In summarizing the data on the cultivation hypothesis we find that:

- Watching crime dramas produces weak to no influence on people's fear of personally becoming a crime victim.
- Watching crime dramas may slightly increase people's perception of violent crime frequency in an abstract sense. People do not fear personally becoming crime victims, but may believe that crime is more common than it is in distant urban environments. These effects appear to be small.
- Cultivation effects vanish, once actual crime rates in the viewers' neighborhoods is controlled.

As such, overall, cultivation effects, at least from fictional media, are weaker than proponents of the cultivation hypothesis might have expected.

These rather weak results for the cultivation hypothesis may come as something as a surprise and bear explanation. In part, this result may be understood by examining the medium of transmitting information about crime. With crime dramas, neither the producers of the shows, nor viewers, expect the medium to have the transmission of accurate information as its primary goal. Crime dramas and related media are clearly fictitious and don't claim to be real-world depictions of actual events. In other words, viewers can easily tell "fact from fiction." Most viewers know better than to rely on fictional media to develop factual beliefs about the world. Most of the research

done on the cultivation hypothesis has been conducted with adults or adolescents, who would be expected to be capable of abstract thought and critical thinking (Piaget, 2001). Research suggests that even children as young as three can reliably distinguish fact from fiction (Skolnick & Bloom, 2006; Woolley & Van Reet, 2006). Although violent crimes may seem common on television, this does not translate into much effect regarding estimates of crime perpetration in the real world. This may seem obvious, but it must be remembered that much of the concern about media effects in general hinges upon variations of social modeling theory (see Chap. 2) wherein viewers are relatively passive consumers of information.

One other explanation for the seemingly weak influence of fictional depictions of violence on attitudes and beliefs regarding crime may relate to desensitization specificity. Desensitization refers to the concept that as individuals are exposed to a phenomenon, they gradually exhibit less and less emotional response to that phenomenon. So, for example, the first time a viewer witnesses someone brutally murdered in a movie he or she may find it to be frightening or shocking. By the one-hundredth time, it may seem relatively "ho-hum" and it takes more to cause fright. This may be one reason that some media becomes more violent over time, as it takes more violence to produce the desired effect such as excitement or horror-movie fright. It is oftentimes assumed that this process of desensitization to fictional violence will generalize to real life violence, although research on this is fairly scarce. For instance, most research on desensitization focuses on physiological reactions to media violence, but don't demonstrate that reduced physiological arousal translates to different beliefs about crime victimization (e.g., Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2007; Cline, Croft, & Courrier, 1973). By contrast it may be true that desensitization is specific. This means that while you are watching fictional depictions of violence, you gradually get desensitized to violence in this form. Yet, you also are aware that you are watching fictional depictions. An incredibly violent movie such as the *Saw* series may ultimately get only a modest startle or fright response out of you. Nonetheless, watching violence when you know that real persons are being injured, or indeed, seeing violence occur in your own life right in front of you, can still generate intense emotional reactions, including fear, dismay or even trauma.

As an anecdotal example, I occasionally teach a course entitled "Psychology of War." Students are warned upfront that some combat footage is included in the class. Regularly I show the opening sequence from *Saving Private Ryan,* an intensely violent and graphic scene of warfare. Students typically watch quietly, with great interest, and naturally express appropriate sympathy for the experiences of frontline combat troops in the ensuing discussion. Their reaction to the movie is sympathetic, but not terribly invested. By contrast, showing footage of actual combatants being hit by gunfire, though typically grainy and much less graphic, elicits a much more emotional reaction. Even watching infrared footage from an AC-130 gunship pounding human targets on the ground, which looks like an old 1970s video game in quality of graphics, leaves students quite disturbed. Similarly, though people may have become quite accustomed to watching violence and mayhem in movies, television, and video games, watching tapes of the 9/11 terrorist attack or terrorist beheadings of individuals such as Daniel Pearl created considerable anxiety, fear and trauma, specifically because these incidents were real, not fictional.

It may simply be that because people are aware that the images they watch in crime dramas are fictional, they do not use the shows to form opinions, feelings, or beliefs about crime in the real world. Our minds may process information differently, depending on how we evaluate the intent of the source. In other words, people are able to distinguish fiction from reality.

3.6   The Presentation of Minorities in Crime Media

One concern that is often raised about media depictions centers on the way in which minorities, particularly Latinos and blacks, are represented (Mastro, 2003). As with portrayals of crime in general, much of the research in this area focuses on news media rather than on crime dramas, and this is discussed in the next chapter. Concern remains that minorities are underrepresented as positive role models in fictional media, and overrepresented as negative role models such as criminals and drug users (Ferguson, 2008b). Certain ethnic groups seem to be overrepresented in depictions of criminals and this kind of common negative portrayal raises concerns that they may foster negative stereotypes of these ethnic minorities in the general population.

Not surprisingly, one group that is often stereotyped in the media is Italian–Americans. There is a long history of mafia related media from *The Godfather* through *The Sopranos* depicting Italian–Americans as heavily involved in mafia organizations. Of course there is some historical precedent to this, with the Italian crime families of the twentieth century being at the forefront of organized criminal organizations (Messina, 2004). Yet other ethnic groups including Irish, Jewish and blacks were also involved in organized crime at different points in history and see relatively little attention in mafia films. Moreover, the vast majority of Italian–Americans are not involved in mafia organizations. There is concern among some that, while Italian–Americans are "Caucasian," because of mafia related media depictions they may be stigmatized and experience prejudice similar to non-Caucasian minority groups (Messina, 2004). There is little evidence to suggest that Italian–Americans are at a clear economic or social disadvantage in US society so this concern does not seem borne out. More recently, other groups, particularly recent immigrants from Eastern European countries such as Russia and Albania, also seem to be seeing increased attention regarding their affiliation with organized crime in crime dramas such as *Law and Order*.

Although some portrayals of certain Caucasian sub-groups such as Italians or Irish may irritate some who view them as stereotyping, greater attention has focused on minority groups who are considered to be socially and economically disadvantaged in the USA. In particular much research attention focuses on Latinos and blacks. Native Americans are also a group for which concern is expressed, given their historically disadvantaged status in North America. Native Americans tend to be portrayed, if stereotypically, in a positive light, as wise and in tune with nature and themselves. Latinos and blacks are portrayed more often as criminal, dysfunctional, and violent.

Latinos and blacks are underrepresented in the media altogether. In recent years about 6.5 % of characters on television were identified as Latino (Ferguson, 2008b). This is approximately half of the proportion of Latinos in the US population (US Census Bureau, 2003). Part of this discrepancy may be due to characters on television that are of ambiguous ancestry (meaning that the proportion of characters that are clearly identified as one ethnicity or another may not add up to 100 %), yet the television media is clearly underfocused on Latino characters. Many academics who study media presentations of ethnic minorities suggest that Latinos continue to be more often presented as perpetrators of crime, low income, functioning in less prestigious jobs, and tend to speak with thick accents more often than Caucasian characters. Thus, the portrayal of Latinos on television tends to be more negative than for Caucasians.

Similar issues have been found for portrayals of blacks (Eschholz, 2004; Eschholz, Mallard, & Flynn, 2004; Poindexter & Stroman, 1981). Representations of blacks have been increasing in the media over time, yet the tendency remains to render them as undereducated and overly involved in crime. One study of the popular crime drama series *Law and Order* and *NYPD Blue* found that blacks are more often portrayed as offenders than whites, and less likely portrayed as attorneys, and that black offenders are more likely to be depicted in handcuffs than white offenders (Eschholz et al., 2004)

This disinclination to include minorities in television and other media, particularly in a positive light, appears to generalize to crime-related media as well. As discussed earlier, crime dramas tend to focus on white against white violence. At the same time there are many more positive portrayals of whites in addition to a few criminal white characters. By contrast, although media depictions of minorities are fewer overall, when they occur they tend to be more likely to represent minorities in a negative light, including as perpetrators of violent crimes. In fairness, it should be mentioned that this is not entirely an inaccurate representation. For instance, in 2005, blacks were seven times more likely to be homicide perpetrators and six times more likely to be homicide victims, per capita, than whites (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008). Similarly, it is generally agreed that Latinos are likely overrepresented in actual criminal populations as well (Ferguson, 2008b). Despite this real-life parallel, continued negative portrayals of minorities run the risks of perpetuating an existing problem, increasing prejudice and decreasing minorities' esteem in their own cultures.

The evidence is pretty clear that media portrayals of Latinos and blacks tend to continue to portray these two groups as highly involved in criminal behavior (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Thus, we see that, compared to actual offender data, whites make up a much higher proportion of offenders in television crime dramas, but when minorities such as Latinos and blacks are represented, it is more typically in offender roles. This situation presents a somewhat complicated situation in relation to the Cultivation Hypothesis. We might expect viewers to think that most offenders are white, yet that nonetheless, most individuals of minority groups are offenders.

There is some indication in support of the Cultivation Hypothesis in relation to perceptions of minorities as highly involved in crime. For instance, reality-based police shows such as *Cops* have been demonstrated to increase estimates of blacks' involvement in violent crimes (Oliver & Armstrong, 1998). More research needs to

be done in this area and it remains difficult to tease apart the influence of media from other factors that may influence stereotypes. There does seem to be some evidence that representations of minority figures as criminals may at least reinforce existing stereotypes of minority groups.

3.7   Adolescents in the Media

In many ways debates over media are reflective of intergenerational struggles between society's elder's and youth. Society elders, perhaps experiencing a dose of juvenoia (Finklehor, 2010), fret about "kids today with their music and their hair", perceiving current youth as more dysfunctional than previous generations, even when data do not support such claims (see for example, Ferguson, 2008a, 2008b). The youth, in return, see the elders (at least those who vocally complain about youth) as out of touch and hostile. Ironically, the youth of one generation simply become the elders of the next, repeating this cycle.

In most of this chapter we consider how violence has been portrayed in the media, but what about youth themselves? This issue is explored in depth in the next chapter, Jamieson and Romer (2008) argue that representations of adolescents in the media exploded in the latter half of the twentieth century as adolescents came to drive much of the market for media, and the internet gave adolescents increasing opportunities to produce their own media content. Of course much of the news media focus on the negative aspects of adolescents, and tend to highlight their alleged vulnerability to harm or which have repeated "moral panics" about youth (the "More and more" school of news media, as in "More and more teens are doing X" or "Youth today watch more and more media…," "Adolescent girls are more and more often involved in violence…" etc.,) which is discussed in another chapter. But what about fictional media?

Most research has focused on potential harm of media to adolescents. Relatively little scholarship has looked at this puzzle from the opposite direction. How do adolescents shape the media itself, particularly given so much of the market for modern media is driven by adolescents? Are adolescents being shaped by the media, or are adolescents shaping the media? This is a return to the old "chicken and egg" question of whether the media shapes us or we shape it.

Unfortunately, comparatively little research has examined the media from this direction, and there has been no much research examining portrayals of adolescents in the media. In part, this may be because teens remain relatively undervalued as members of our society. Thus, how they are portrayed in media has not been an issue of concern for scholars. Nonetheless, I argue that portrayals of adolescents fall within a few recognizable lines.

Realism. It should be recognized there are some shows that appear to do their best to present both older adults and youth realistically and fairly. Both sets of individuals are treated with respect, and potential flaws noted. The adult/child dynamics

portrayed in shows such as (contemporary in 2011) *The Killing* or *Law and Order: SVU* probably fit best within this category. *My So Called Life* a drama from the 1990s also received critical acclaim for this approach. This approach seems most common with story and character driven dramas.

Rebel Without a Clue. The second approach, and one which appeals particularly to teens themselves, portrays the younger generation positively and the older generation negatively. Youth are portrayed as generally complex, "with it" and wise, whereas older adults are generally two-dimensional stereotypes, clueless or deliberately obstructing of youth. Helpful older adults may exist but are more exception than norm. This type of media is most inclined to address the generational divide in a hostile manner. The old film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* is probably a good example of this type of film and of course generations ago the rock band The Who typified this approach in music claiming to "Hope I die before I get old" (the surviving members are in their late 60s as of this writing). Such media may give teens an outlet to express frustrations with the older generations attempting to curb their culture and restrict their freedoms.

Disneyfication. The third approach treats the generational divide in a more humorous, less hostile manner. Youth are generally treated as more fun-loving, serious about school, and generally positive in intent. Older adults may include a mixture of "out of touch" and "hip" characters, but older adults are generally portrayed as helpful in intent if sometimes mocked for being culturally out of date. In general, conflict between the generations is deemphasized, treated as something humorous and indulged by both older adults and youth. Many Disney shows (hence the name) such as *Hannah Montana* or *Wizards of Waverly Place* fit within this motif. Such shows arguably allow teens a humorous outlet for intergenerational struggles while maintaining an image of teenage "purity" that allows older adults to approve.

Teen Psychopath. The final set lean more toward the elder view of teens as irresponsible, reckless and lacking in empathy. Sometimes this may be presented in a humorous format such as in the Bart Simpson character in *The Simpsons*. Or teen social life may be presented as Darwinianly vicious as in *Mean Girls*. Older adults themselves probably are attuned more to negative messages about teens in news media than to fictional media, so even these films and shows may market toward teen audiences themselves. Some, however, reinforce the notion of teens as inherently susceptible to media effects and thus may play into older adult fears. *Mazes and Monsters* was one such example, of youth (including Tom Hanks) being led into delinquency and psychosis by a *Dungeons and Dragons* like role-playing game. The film tapped into a moral panic which existed at that time that players of such games would be unable to distinguish the fantasy of the game from reality.

In this sense fictional portrayals of teens in various ways tap into conflicts between generations, either treating them seriously or with humor. Teen psychopath portrayals may further tap into conflict between teens themselves. Some films may reflect societal panics about media effects themselves. To just what extent these panics is discussed in subsequent chapters.

3.8   Concluding Statements

It is widely acknowledged that fictional media is not very accurate in its portrayals of crime, either in regard to common types of crimes committed, who commits them, why they commit them, or how police respond to such crimes. Although fictional depictions of crime may result in some faulty beliefs about crime prevalence and involvement of racial minorities, the evidence does not support fictional depictions of crime as a leading factor in the formulation of individual beliefs about crime. As we have discussed, it may be that most individuals are able to distinguish the fictional message of crime media from real-life crime, and thus fictional depictions of crime have little effect of beliefs or behavior. The potential remains that these mechanisms for distinguishing fact from fiction may not apply to news media or other "real life" depictions of crime. It is to news media that we turn in the next chapter.

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