PRIME-TIME MURDER:
PRESENTATIONS OF MURDER ON
POPULAR TELEVISION JUSTICE PROGRAMS[*]

by

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ABSTRACT

Entertainment television has long been fascinated with violence and murder. This paper examines presentations and explanations of murder in three popular prime-time television justice programs – *NYPD Blue, Law and Order,* and *The Practice* – and compares these mediated presentations with images presented by official statistics and established research findings. The potential implications of these television presentations on viewer knowledge and understanding are discussed. The findings suggest that murder is presented fairly accurately such that viewers should come away with a basic understanding of the nature and circumstances surrounding murder, although they are likely to be somewhat misled that violence is common. In addition, the explanations offered for the commission of murder are heavily individualistic, precluding an adequate sociological understanding of murder by ignoring important social factors.

INTRODUCTION

Television has long been fascinated with crime. Indeed, both news and entertainment television have included crime as a prominent feature over the past several decades (Dominick 1978; Graber 1980; Garofalo 1981; Estep and MacDonald 1984; Schlesinger, Tumber and Murdock 1991; Lichter, Lichter and Rothman 1994). Estep and MacDonald (1984) note, for example, that historically prime-time television has devoted at least one-third of its time to crime. Crime and law enforcement programs have virtually littered television programming for the past four decades and have included such diverse programs as *The Avengers, Mod Squad, Kojak, Baretta, Hawaii Five-O, The Rockford Files, Dragnet, Starsky and Hutch, Colombo, Hill Street Blues, Magnum, P.I., Cagney and Lacy, Simon and Simon, Miami Vice, T.J. Hooker, In the Heat of the Night, Murder She Wrote, L.A. Law, The Commish, NYPD Blue, Walker: Texas Ranger, The X-Files, Homicide, Law and Order, The Practice, Nash Bridges, JAG,* and *Judging Amy.* Furthermore, with the addition of several new criminal justice-type dramas to the current broadcast season such as *The Fugitive, The District, Level-9, The Job* and *C.S.I: Crime Scene Investigation*, this fascination with crime does not appear to be waning.

Television's persistent fascination with crime makes a study of contemporary justice shows imperative. The fact that both news and entertainment television have focused on crime and criminal justice means that, for the vast majority of us, our exposure to crime, violence and the criminal justice system may be obtained largely through the media rather than through personal experience or formal education (Dominick 1978). Television clearly stands as the most popular and most widely used communication medium (Althiede and Snow 1979; Gerbner and Gross 1980; Firestone 1993; Livingstone 1996) and there is little debate that television exerts a

powerful influence as a source of information about contemporary culture in today's society (Henningan et al. 1982; Murdock 1982; Firestone 1993). This, of course, extends to information about crime as well as other social and cultural aspects. If our exposure to crime occurs mostly through mediated communication such as television, then television content, in the form of images and messages, may be a primary force in shaping viewer understanding of crime.

Past analyses of entertainment-based television suggest that crimes of violence such as murder tend to be overrepresented in television programming (Dominick 1973; Estep and MacDonald 1984; Maguire 1988; Oliver 1994; Shrum 1996; Fabianic 1997). Violence also appears to be a common theme in many reality-based television shows (Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993; Oliver 1994; Carmody 1998; Kooistra, Mahoney and Westervelt 1998). The images and messages conveyed by these television programs about violent crime, in particular murder, may ultimately influence what viewers come to think about violent crime in terms of its prevalence and nature as well as possible explanations for its occurrence.

There is some evidence that images of crime presented through television programming are frequently inaccurate and grossly distorted (see Pandiani 1978; Lichter and Lichter 1983; Carlson 1985; Maguire 1988; Lichter et al. 1994) which may contribute to false beliefs or distorted views about crime. Thus, television portrayals, rather than enlightening viewers about crime, may in fact preclude adequate understanding. As Surette (1992: 296) contends:

> If most of us get our knowledge of crime and criminal justice
> from the news media and TV programs, which tend to cover
> or portray only the most sensational kinds of crime and criminal
> justice activities, it's no surprise that many of us develop perceptions
> that may not reflect what is really happening in the world of crime
> and in the various stages of the criminal justice system.

With the possibility that television provides viewers with a certain conception of crime, especially violent crime, which may be distorted, it is necessary to systematically analyze the content of contemporary entertainment television programs in order to assess the potential implications they may have on our epistemological frameworks concerning crime. Moreover, it is prudent to compare these television portrayals with official portrayals in order to reveal any distortions in TV images which may potentially affect viewer understanding of crime. Furthermore, although several past studies have examined television portrayals of crime in general, few have gone beyond simply recording and counting the number and types of crimes depicted. Since murder has tended to be the crime of focus on entertainment television, it is important to examine portrayals of murder in more depth and to assess what TV shows tell us about the nature of murder and its explanation. As such, an extensive examination of murder, as it is depicted in contemporary prime-time entertainment television justice programs, was undertaken in this study to uncover the way in which murder is presented to viewers and how it is typically explained. These television portrayals were compared to what is known about murder through official statistics and the relevant research literature to assess the degree of distortion by the entertainment television programs analyzed. These research objectives were pursued with the aim of discussing the potential implications of television presentations of violent crime such as murder on viewer knowledge and understanding.

TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF CRIME

Systematic content analyses of television have revealed that violent crime is a common feature of entertainment programming (Dominick 1973; Estep and MacDonald 1984; Maguire 1988; Shrum 1996; Fabianic 1997). For example, after examining one week of prime-time television, Dominick (1973) found that 22 percent of all prime-time crimes depicted murder while 8 percent depicted robbery. Eleven years later, Estep and MacDonald (1984) found similar results in their analysis of prime-time crime shows: murder comprised 26 percent of prime-time crimes, robbery 19 percent and assault 11 percent. As well, in analyzing forty-six hours of prime-time television crime and police programs, Maguire (1988) found that nearly two-thirds of the criminal offenses depicted were killings or attempted killings. Similarly, Shrum (1996) found that violent crime, especially rape, was a common major theme of daytime dramas. Violence also appears to be common in many reality-based programs. For example, Cavender and Bond-Maupin (1993) report that reality crime shows such as *America's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* tend to focus on serious violent crime such as murder. Likewise, Oliver (1994), in analyzing five reality-based television shows including *COPS* and *America's Most Wanted*, concludes that violent crime is significantly overrepresented. Furthermore, content analyses carried out by Kooistra and colleagues (1998) as well as Carmody (1998) confirm the commonality of violent crime portrayals by many reality-based police shows.

There is some suggestion that crime, as presented by entertainment television, however, differs dramatically from crime as described in official statistics and research reports. Comparisons reveal that the media tend to depict the crimes that occur the least in American society (violent crimes), while neglecting the crimes that occur the most (property crimes) (Maguire 19988; Liska and Baccaglini 1990; Warr 1995). Of course, it is important to keep in mind that producers of television crime dramas, including reality-based crime shows, have a very different goal than scientific researchers and government agencies which produce crime statistics for scientific and public consumption. Above all, the primary purpose of the crime drama is to entertain. In order to appeal to the entertainment senses of its consumers, crime drama content is likely to focus on unusual and/or exaggerated images and events. After all, the routine and mundane are the stuff of everyday life not drama. It is not surprising, then, that crime drama presentations will be more sensational and hence different from the images of crime presented through government statistics and research reports. Thus, it is expected that analyses of popular entertainment television programs will reveal a certain amount of distortion in presenting crime in general and in presenting murder.

Distorted presentations may contribute to inaccurate or false beliefs about crime among viewers. Indeed, several authors have contended that the media may be an important source of crime myths or false beliefs about crime (Pepinsky and Jesilow 1984; Wright 1985; Kappeler, Blumberg and Potter 1993; Fabianic 1997) and evidence suggests that media consumers may be influenced by these media myths. Lewis (1981), for example, reports that those who watch television the most have the most distorted views of crime. Likewise, Carlson (1985) found that adolescents who are heavy viewers of crime shows measure lower on knowledge of criminal justice processes. These results and others suggest that crime myths projected by television and other media may become encapsulated in the knowledge-base of consumers such that if we rely

heavily on the media for information about crime, without the influence of other sources, we are likely to acquire erroneous beliefs. It is important, therefore, to discuss the potential implications of mediated murder presentations on overall viewer understanding should such crime myths abound in the television programs analyzed.

TELEVISION EXPLANATIONS FOR CRIME

Explanations for crime and criminality offered by both news and entertainment media have tended to be overwhelmingly individualistic. That is, media characters are thought to commit crimes because of greed, jealousy, emotional instability, mental pathology, and other individual defects or weaknesses (Barrile 1984; Estep and MacDonald 1984; Maguire 1988; Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993; Fabianic 1997). Cavender and Bond-Maupin (1993), for example, report that criminals, as presented in the media, are dangerous people with ambiguous psychological capacities – in essence, "crazed killers" and "psychopaths". In this way, criminality is viewed as the failure of an individual who is morally weak or mentally deficient. Indeed, Maguire (1988) reports that social explanations are almost entirely absent from crime and police dramas, with a heavy emphasis on conservative and individualistic explanations that center around individual pathology. Similarly, Fabianic (1997), in analyzing homicide causation in TV crime dramas, notes 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 motives. Fabianic concludes that homicide is typically portrayed as the result of an individual weakness or defect such as mental illness, greed or jealousy, and little or no effort is made in these crime dramas to relate homicide to social-structural or institutional forces. It is important, then, to examine the way in which murders are explained in entertainment television programs in order to gain insight into the potential implications on viewer understanding of murder as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

Research Objective

The primary objective of the study was to obtain a detailed accurate picture of the presentation and explanation of crime, in particular murder, in three purposively selected entertainment-based television justice programs by using quantitative and qualitative content analysis techniques. In this respect, the purpose of the study was primarily descriptive, although an attempt was made to shed light on the potential implications of these television presentations on viewer knowledge and understanding.

Sample

The sample was selected from the population of prime-time entertainment-based "justice programs" broadcast on one of the major networks as part of the 1999/2000 television season. The major networks included: ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX and UPN. Prime-time encompassed the evening hours, specifically the time period between 8:00 and 11:00 pm Eastern Time. Considered a particular "genre", or general category of TV entertainment (Gitlin 1979), "justice" programs (sometimes called police dramas, crime dramas, legal shows or lawyer shows) were

defined as half-hour or one-hour television programs that focus on some aspect of the criminal justice system such as law enforcement, criminal prosecution, courts or corrections. Furthermore, entertainment-based justice programs were defined as fictional; that is, characters and events are fictional, they do not portray real-life characters or actual events. Using these carefully constructed definitions, the researcher discovered thirteen entertainment-based justice programs being broadcast on the various networks during the 1999/2000 television season which included: *NYPD Blue* (ABC), *The Practice* (ABC), *Snoops* (ABC), *Law and Order* (NBC), *Law and Order: SVU* (NBC), *The Profiler* (NBC), *Judging Amy* (CBS), *JAG* (CBS), *Martial Law* (CBS), *Nash Bridges* (CBS), *Walker: Texas Ranger* (CBS), *The X-Files* (FOX), and *Ally McBeal* (FOX). Time and budget constraints restricted the analyses to a one-year season only. The researcher chose the 1999/2000 television season as representing the broadcast year that corresponded to the start of the research project.

The sample chosen was not random but was purposively selected. In particular, three entertainment-based justice programs were selected for analysis: *NYPD Blue, Law and Order*, and *The Practice.* This purposively selected sample was chosen for several reasons. First, *NYPD Blue, Law and Order* and *The Practice* were considered the most popular, all three falling within the top twenty prime-time programs for the season, as ranked by Nielsen Media Research (USA Today 2000). Thus, it could be reasonably asserted that most people who were watching justice programs during the 1999/2000 television season were most likely watching one or all of these three programs. The popularity of these shows was further reinforced through critical acclimation, with each of these programs being recipients of multiple awards, including Emmy awards for Outstanding Drama Series. As television standards go, then, what this suggests is that these three justice programs are viewed as "good TV". Since the researcher was interested in uncovering and understanding the images and messages presented to the public via prime-time television, it made sense to evaluate the most popular shows, which have a relatively large viewing audience.

These programs were also selected because they represented various aspects of the criminal justice system. With a wide range of criminal justice activities portrayed in *NYPD Blue, Law and Order,* and *The Practice*, it was thought that these programs would provide valuable content from different perspectives which might shed light on the way in which murder is presented as well as various explanations offered for its occurrence.

Furthermore, these programs were selected because they were readily accessible and easily recorded given their varying time slots. *NYPD Blue* (ABC) aired Tuesdays from 10:00 – 11:00 pm ET; *Law and Order* (NBC) aired Wednesdays from 10:00 – 11:00 pm ET; and *The Practice* (ABC) aired on Sundays from 10:00 – 11:00 pm ET. Not only did this allow for different nights of the weeks and for different networks to be represented, but the researcher was able to record almost the entire season of episodes for each program with limited programming conflict. Moreover, purposively limiting the sample not only rendered data collection more conveniently possible, but also rendered data analysis more manageable. Since a comprehensive content analysis was to be undertaken, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques, a relatively small sample was necessary to keep the analysis reasonably manageable within the restricted time and resource allocations.

Altogether, 24 episodes of *Law and Order* were aired on NBC during the 1999/2000 television season, comprising episodes #206 to #229. Twenty-three of these episodes were analyzed for the current study; one episode (#225) was missed due to VCR equipment failure. A total of 22 episodes of *The Practice* were aired on ABC, comprising episodes #58 to #79, with 20 of these episodes subsequently analyzed; episodes #67 and #74 could not be analyzed because of a faulty section of videotape. ABC aired 22 episodes of *NYPD Blue*, comprising episodes #133 to #154. Of these, 20 episodes were analyzed; episodes #140 and #151 were missed due to unexpected changes in airing date. Thus, a total of 63 episodes of the three entertainment-based justice programs were analyzed with data collected on a total of 113 criminal incidents.

Data Collection

Primary data consisted of videotaped episodes of the three entertainment-based justice programs, which provided both visual images and verbal text. Full and partial transcripts were also created from these episodes and housed in case files for reference. The case files were numbered according to the episode in which a particular event occurred.

Data Analysis

The videotaped episodes and transcripts were used to make sense of the episode content and to develop general content categories for which further data were collected. To be sure, an important part of any content analysis is the development of general content categories (Berg 1995; Riffe, Lacy and Fico 1998) using both inductive and deductive processes (Strauss 1987). On the basis of previous content analysis of justice programs, initial content categories were developed (deductive) and then modified according to the episode transcripts and images (inductive).

The resulting content categories for which data were collected for this part of the study included: type of crime, type of murder, and the gender and race/ethnicity of offender and victim characters. As one type of crime, *murder* was specifically defined as an intentional act or omission that results in the death of another human being. Included also was *attempted murder*, defined as an act with the intention to kill but where death did not ultimately result. Murders were further classified into specialized types such as: spouse murder, murder-for-hire, mass or serial murder, and drug-related murder. Once the crime was identified as a murder, further content categories were developed and explored including the circumstances surrounding the murder which encompassed weapon use, victim-offender relationship, alcohol/drug use, location, number of offenders and victims, and context factors (such as whether the murder was planned or spontaneous and whether a murder occurred in the context of another crime such as rape or robbery). The creation of content categories for murder explanations centered around the motives ascribed to the offender by various characters in the episodes. Motives were classified as either expressive, instrumental or the result of some mental illness. As well, any mention of social factors as a possible reason for committing murder were noted and explored as a separate content category.

Once the major content categories were developed to some degree of satisfaction, the researcher then developed a set of coding guidelines to assist in the coding of the content data for

each of the major content categories. These guidelines consisted of definitions used to identify particular content, attribute categories composing the particular content variables, as well as clues or indicators that assisted the researcher in assigning content to appropriate attribute categories. These coding guidelines not only facilitated the data collection process, but ensured that content was coded consistently across episodes and across justice programs.

Having carefully constructed coding guidelines was especially important to overcome the limitations of having a single coder in order to maintain validity and reliability. The videotaped episodes allowed the researcher to go back to the original data whenever coding problems or issues arose. As well, attempts were made to triangulate data and methods with the researcher relying on multiple clues for coding content. For example, both visual and text clues were often used to assign content to appropriate categories. It was felt that such triangulation would contribute to both reliability and validity of the research data and findings.

Appropriate descriptive statistics were generated for the quantitative data and, where appropriate, this quantitative summary was supplemented with qualitative verbal descriptions to illustrate or provide examples of key quantitative categories.

In addition, comparative analysis was undertaken using existing statistics and previous research findings. Specifically, content images of the murder presentations in the three television justice programs were compared with the portrayals of murder revealed by official statistics and appropriate research literature.   The primary sources from which official statistics were derived for comparison were the preliminary 1999 Uniform Crime Reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2000) and the 1998 UCR Supplemental Homicide Reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1999). Recognizing the limitations of official statistics, the researcher also made use of the findings from a variety of research reports that focused on murder.

RESULTS

Overrepresentation of Violent Crime

As expected, violent crime was overrepresented in the prime-time television justice programs analyzed, especially murder (see Table 1 below).

In sum, the three justice programs depicted violent crimes at a consistently high rate, comprising more than three-quarters of the crimes presented across the episodes overall. Murder/attempted murder emerged as the most common violent crime; there were 75 murders or attempted murders presented across the three programs, comprising 66 percent of the total criminal incidents depicted and 82 percent of the total violent crimes depicted.

This overrepresentation of violent crime does not coincide with official reports of crime in the United States, which conclude that violent crimes are less common than property crimes with murder/attempted murder being relatively rare. According to the Preliminary 1999 Uniform Crime Reports (FBI 2000), there were 299, 523 total index crimes reported in 1999 in New York City (the setting for both *Law and Order* and *NYPD Blue*). Violent crimes comprised only 26.4 percent of these total index crimes with aggravated assault the most common violent crime

TABLE 1: Criminal Incidents Presented on *Law and Order, The Practice*, and *NYPD Blue*

	Law and Order	*The Practice*	*NYPD Blue*	*TOTAL*
Murder	27 (62.5%)	19 (63%)	25 (62.5%)	71 (62.5%)
Attempted Murder	2 (4.5%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)	4 (3.5%)
Rape/Sexual Assault	3 (7%)	4 (13.5%)	4 (10%)	11 (10%)
Robbery	2 (5%)	1 (3%)	3 (7.5%)	6 (5%)
Burglary	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (2%)
Theft/Larceny	2 (5%)	0 (0%)	4 (10%)	6 (5%)
Securities Violation/ Fraud	2 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	3 (3%)
Drug Violation	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (1%)
Other	4 (9%)	4 (13.5%)	1 (2.5%)	9 (8%)
TOTAL	43 (100%)	30 (100%)	40 (100%)	113 (100%)

Note: Percentage totals may not always add up to exactly 100 due to rounding.

 (51.3%), followed by robbery (46.7%) and rape (2%); murder comprised less than 1 percent of the violent crimes. Violent crimes was also less common than property crime in Boston (the setting for *The Practice*), accounting for 21 percent of the total 35, 078 index crimes reported in Boston in 1999. Again, the most common violent crime was aggravated assault (61%), followed by robbery (34%), and murder (0.4%).

Comparing this study's results to official statistics, then, it would seem that the prime-time justice programs analyzed tend to over-represent the crimes that occur the least (violent crimes) and under-represent the crimes that occur the most (property crimes) in American society. Within violent crime itself, the pattern that emerges from the justice programs is opposite the pattern that emerges from official statistics. For all three of the entertainment justice programs, murder was the most common violent crime, followed by rape and then robbery. Officially, aggravated assault is the most common (a crime, interestingly enough, that was not depicted in any of the justice program episodes), followed by robbery, rape and then murder.

Circumstances Surrounding Murder

Since the bulk (66%) of criminal incidents across the three justice programs were murder or attempted murder incidents, it is instructive to focus attention on the circumstances surrounding murder when making comparisons to official portrayals and discussing implications of television murder presentations on viewer knowledge and understanding. As such, data for the circumstances surrounding murder such as weapon use, victim-offender relationship, alcohol/drug use, location, number of offenders and victims, and context factors were collected and analyzed according to each of the 75 murder/attempted murder incidents presented. Since, for the most part, attempted murder incidents took on the same general characteristics as murder incidents with the exception that death did not ultimately result, attempted murder was treated as murder in the analysis of the circumstances surrounding the event.

Handguns and personal weapons such as fists, feet and hands figured prominently as murder weapons in the three entertainment justice programs, although blunt and other objects appeared to be the weapons of choice in several murder incidents depicted on *The Practice* (see Table 2 below).

TABLE 2: Weapon Use in Murder Incidents Presented

	Law and Order	*The Practice*	*NYPD Blue*	*TOTAL*
Gun	8 (31%)	5 (25%)	8 (40%)	21 (32%)
Hands, Feet or Fists	8 (31%)	5 (25%)	4 (20%)	17 (26%)
Knife	2 (7.5%)	3 (15%)	3 (15%)	8 (12%)
Blunt Objects / Other	4 (15%)	7 (35%)	2 (10%)	13 (20%)
Poison / Drug	2 (7.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)
Explosive	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
No Weapon	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	3 (15%)	4 (6%)
Unknown	3	1	6	10
TOTAL	29 (100%)	21 (100%)	25 (100%)	75 (100%)

Note: Percentages are based on incidents in which weapon use is known.

It should be noted that in a few cases (6%), no weapon was used to commit murder. For example, in one episode of *Law and Order*, a baby's death was caused by starvation; in an episode of *NYPD Blue*, a baby choked to death on its own vomit while in another episode a baby who was left in a country field died from exposure; in another *Blue* episode, a man died from a broken neck when a bag full of stolen clothes fell on him from two stories up. The fact that three of the victims in these no-weapon murder incidents were babies calls attention to the vulnerability of children who are dependent on their caregivers to keep them alive.

According to official reports, firearms are the weapons used most often in the commission of murder, especially handguns, usually following by knives or cutting instruments and personal weapons such as hands, fists or feet (Silverman and Kennedy 1993; Fedorowycz 1996; FBI 1999; Zawitz and Fox 2000). This makes sense given the lethal nature of guns compared to other weapons. Weapon use featured in the murders on *Law and Order* and *NYPD Blue* support this official finding, although knives were substantially underrepresented as murder weapons in all three of the justice programs. It might be argued that guns add to the drama and excitement of the overall plot line of entertainment programs or that shootings might be easier to stage than stabbings, which may, to some degree, account for the under-representation of knives as murder weapons in the three justice programs analyzed.

Furthermore, although Miethe and McCorkle (1998) content that men are more likely to use guns and women are more likely to use knives in committing murder, this pattern was only partially revealed in the analysis of the three justice programs. Male killers on *Law and Order*, *The Practice* and *NYPD Blue* were more likely than female killers to use both guns and knives; only three women characters chose guns as the murder weapon and only one female character chose a knife. Interestingly, females were shown as more likely to use no weapon at all, letting the victim starve to death, exposing the victim to the elements or being responsible for an accidental choking because of neglect. In addition, males were more likely than females in these

justice programs to use their hands, fists or feet as weapons; with the exception of character Pepper Garrison in *Law and Order* episode #209 and character Laura Kendrick in episode #220, it would seem that female murderer characters did not like to get their hands dirty.

Supporting research and official statistics, the relationship between offender and victim was classified as known in 80 percent of the murder incidents depicted in the three justice programs. A host of official and research reports confirm that murder victims are likely to know their assailants (Holmes and Holmes 1994; Fedorowycz 1996; FBI 1999) with acquaintances emerging as the largest category of known offenders followed by family (FBI 1999). For *Law and Order*, 75 percent of the relationships involved offenders and victims who were known to one another with 25 percent involving strangers. The largest category for known relationships was familial (42%) involving spouses, siblings, a parent killing a child, or a child killing a parent, followed by acquaintance (33%) including lovers. Likewise, 81 percent of the relationships for *The Practice* murders involved known offenders while 19 percent involved strangers. Both familial (35%) and acquaintance (35%) relationships were featured slightly more prominently than other known relationships (30%) such as doctor-patient, police-suspect and teacher-student. Furthermore, 84 percent of the relationships on *NYPD Blue* involved offenders and victims who knew each other while 16 percent involved strangers. Here, acquaintance relationships emerged as the most common (48%) of the known relationships, followed by familial relationships (33%). Overall, then, offender-victim relationships depicted in the murder incidents featured on the three entertainment justice programs fit the pattern described in the official records and research literature. However, these depictions of known relationships tend to contradict previous studies that point out that media are likely to depict violent crimes as random acts committed by strangers (Howitt 1998).

On *Law and Order*, females were as likely as males to be killed by strangers; six female victims and six male victims were killed by strangers in the 8 murder incidents involving a stranger relationship. Additionally, two out of three of the spouse murders involved female victims and both victims who were murdered by lovers were female. Females were more likely than males to be killed by strangers on *The Practice*; seven females and one male were killed by a stranger. Female victims also comprised the majority of spouse murders on *The Practice*; four out of five of the victims of spouse murder were female. On *NYPD Blue*, males outnumbered females (9 to 1) in being killed by strangers. In addition, all of the victims of spouse murder or murder by a lover were female. The analysis plotting gender against offender-victim relationship, then, does fit the established research pattern that females are more likely than males to be killed by an intimate such as a spouse or lover (Silverman and Kennedy 1993; Wilson, Daly and Wright 1993; FBI 1999; Zawitz and Fox 2000). However, only the murder incidents depicted on *NYPD Blue* reflect the consistent pattern that males are more likely than females to be killed by strangers (Silverman and Kennedy 1993).

As well, official records and research reports have long noted the importance of alcohol and/or drugs in the commission of violent offenses including murder (Wolfgang 1958; Luckenbill 1977; Reiss and Roth 1993; Fedorowycz 1996; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998; Miethe and McCorkle 1998), especially alcohol. This pattern was not, however, significantly highlighted in the three justice programs analyzed. Alcohol and/or drug use by either victim or offender was noted in only a small number of incidents, 15 of the 75 murder incidents or 20

percent. Interestingly, drugs figured more prominently in the murder incidents than did alcohol, especially among victims.

By far, the most common location for the murders/attempted murders presented by the three entertainment justice programs was residence, comprising slightly more than half (52%) of the known locations for murder (see Table 3 below), followed by street/road/highway (27%).

TABLE 3: Location of Murder/Attempted Murder for Murder Incidents Presented

	Law and Order	*The Practice*	*NYPD Blue*	*TOTAL*
Victim's Residence	3 (11%)	6 (32%)	9 (39%)	18 (26%)
Offender's Residence	5 (18%)	0 (0%)	2 (9%)	7 (10%)
Shared Residence	4 (14%)	5 (26%)	2 (9%)	11 (16%)
Street/Road/Highway	9 (32%)	4 (21%)	6 (26%)	19 (27%)
Car/Other Vehicle	3 (11%)	0 (0%)	2 (9%)	5 (7%)
Workplace	1 (3.5%)	2 (10.5%)	1 (4%)	4 (6%)
Institution (hospital, prison)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)
Public Area (park, abandoned Building	1 (3.5%)	2 (10.5%)	1 (4%)	4 (6%)
Unknown	1	2	2	5
TOTAL	29 (100%)	21 (100%)	25 (100%)	75 (100%)

Note: Percentages are based on the total number of incidents in which location is known.
Note+: Percentage totals may not always add up to exactly 100 due to rounding.

Victim's residence was the most common murder location on both *The Practice* and *NYPD Blue* while street/road/highway was the most common murder location on *Law and Order.* Interestingly, on *Law and Order*, more males than females (7 to 3) were killed on the street while more females than males (8 to 4) were killed in a home or residence. Furthermore, intimate and familial relationships comprised the bulk of murders that occurred in a residence shared by both victim and offender. Similarly, on *The Practice*, females were more likely than males to be killed in a home or residence. Moreover, all of the murder incidents that occurred in shared residence involved spouse murders. For *NYPD Blue*, just a little over half of the victims (53%) killed in a residence were female; this pattern was not as pronounced as the pattern revealed for location and gender of victim for *Law and Order* and *The Practice.* Murders that occurred in a shared residence were spouse murders, involving female victims. More males than females were killed on the street; all six of the victims killed on the street were male.

Official statistics and the research literature confirm that the most common location for murder is the home, followed by street, road or highway (Miethe and Meirer 1994; Perkins and Klaus 1996). All three of the justice programs fit this official picture for location as well as support the research findings that females are more likely to be killed in homes while males are more likely to be killed in the street (Fedorowycz 1996).

Moreover, the murders/attempted murders presented in the three entertainment justice programs support the common finding that few homicides involve multiple offenders and fewer involved multiple victims (Zawitz and Fox 2000). Indeed, only two incidents of mass murder

and two incidents of serial murder were depicted. Furthermore, there were multiple offenders in only 12 of the 75 (16%) murder incidents and multiple victims in only 7 of the 75 (9%) murder incidents. In some cases, however, murder incidents resulted in multiple defendants who did not actually participate in the murder but were deemed co-conspirators or were contractors of hired killings.

Factors concerning the context of murder are also important to examine such as whether a murder was planned or spontaneous and whether a murder occurred in the context of another crime such as rape or robbery. Interestingly, the results do not fit the general pattern that most murders are not planned but are situationally-induced acts of violence (Miethe and McCorkle 1998) as nearly one-third (32%) of the murder incidents presented across the three justice programs were planned (see Table 4 below).

TABLE 4: Context Factors for Murder/Attempted Murder Incidents Presented

	Law and Order	*The Practice*	*NYPD Blue*	*TOTAL*
Planned	13 (45%)	8 (38%)	3 (12%)	24 (32%)
Argument or Dispute	7 (24%)	4 (19%)	7 (28%)	18 (24%)
Felony	4 (14%)	2 (10%)	5 (20%)	11 (15%)
Other	4 (14%)	6 (28%)	5 (20%)	15 (20%)
Unknown	1 (3%)	1 (5%)	5 (20%)	7 (9%)
TOTAL	29 (100%)	21 (100%)	25 (100%)	75 (100%)

Note: Percentage totals may not always add up to exactly 100 due to rounding.

Almost one-half (45%) of the murder incidents on *Law and Order* were planned with five (38%) of the planned murders being contract killings and two (15%) being spouse murders. Similarly, a little more than one-third (38%) of the murder incidents on *The Practice* were planned with one planned incident involving the murder of a spouse. Planned murders were less common on *NYPD Blue* with only three (12%) of the murder incidents being planned, one of which was a contract killing. Thus, it would seem that only *NYPD Blue* fits the overall research that murder is typically spontaneous rather than planned.

According to the research literature, the spontaneity of murder is often due to the fact that many murders occur in the context of an argument or dispute (Polk 1994; FBI 1999; Zawitz and Fox 2000). This is supported, to some degree, by the finding that nearly one-quarter (24%) of the murder incidents presented across the three justice programs occurred in the context of an argument.

Research also suggests that murders are likely to occur in conjunction with the commission of a felony (Miethe and McCorkle 1998; FBI 1999; Zawitz and Fox 2000). Fourteen percent of the murder incidents on *Law and Order* occurred in the context of a felony, specifically burglary, robbery and rape. Likewise, 10 percent of the murder incidents on *The Practice* occurred in the context of a felony such as rape and robbery. As well, a substantial 20 percent of the murder incidents on *NYPD Blue* were classified as felony murders, involving a range of crimes such as burglary, motor vehicle theft, rape and robbery. Miethe and McCorkle (1998) further contend that felony murders are more likely to involve strangers than persons who

are known to one another. In support of this general pattern, three of the four felony murders on *Law and Order*, one of the two felony murders on *The Practice*, and four of the five felony murders on *NYPD Blue* involved a stranger relationship.

In addition, the murder incidents presented on the three justice programs coincide with the gender-by-gender pattern reflected in official statistics and the research literature that males are most often the murder victims of male offenders, while females are also more likely to be murdered by males (Fedorowycz 1996; FBI 1999). In the episodes of *Law and Order*, for example, there were only five incidents in which females killed males, and only five incidents in which females killed females. In the episodes of *The Practice*, there were only three incidents in which females killed males and only one incident in which a female killed a female. Furthermore, in the episodes of *NYPD Blue*, there was only one incident in which a female killed a male and two incidents in which a female killed a female. Thus, the murders presented to viewers by these justice programs reinforce the officially created notion that males are likely to be killed by males and that females are also likely to be killed by males.

Officially, it is also the case that, where women commit murder, victims are likely to be family members (Fedorowycz 1996). The results of the analysis of the three justice programs support this, with 9 of the 17 (53%) murders committed by women involving the killing of a family member such as a spouse, child, parent or sibling.

Moreover, the research literature confirms that murder is predominantly intraracial (Hewitt 1988; Miethe and McCorkle 1998; Zawitz and Fox 2000); that is, people are more likely to be killed by members of their own racial or ethnic group than to be killed by members of other racial or ethnic groups. The murders presented in the three justice programs demonstrated quite strongly that murder is indeed intraracial. Only two murder incidents depicted on *Law and Order* were interracial; in episode #211, for example, a Hispanic male robbed and killed a white female and in episode #222, two young black males beat a young white male to death. In addition, there were no known incidents of interracial murders on *The Practice* and only three interracial murders depicted on *NYPD Blue*. In episode #139, for example, a black male shot an off-duty white police officer; in episode #142, a white male drug addict killed his black male supplier; and in episode #146, three black males killed an elderly white male in the course of stealing his car.

In sum, for the most part, the murders/attempted murders presented on *Law and Order, The Practice,* and *NYPD Blue* fit the general patterns revealed by official reports and research literature. The murder incidents depicted support the official picture of murder as a male-perpetrated, intraracial act of violence most likely committed by someone known to the victim and frequently committed in the home. The television murders also highlight the use of handguns as the murder weapon of choice, although they under-represent knives and other cutting instruments as alternative weapon choices, instead emphasizing the use of body parts such as hands, feet and fists which are, in reality, less likely to be lethal. Furthermore, these television murder presentations support Miethe and McCorkle's (1998) observation that television crime dramas tend to give the impression that most murders are meticulously planned. Indeed, the over-emphasis on planned murders on television masks the spontaneity of real-life murder, which is often the result of an argument or dispute or fuelled by alcohol and/or drugs.

Special-Type Murder

The 75 murders presented on the justice programs were further classified into special-type murders depending on whether clearly defined characteristics were present. If the murder occurred between spouses, then it was classified as a *spouse murder.* If the murder involved at least one person hiring another to kill a third party, it was classified as a contract killing, or a *murder-for-hire.* A murder was designated a *mass murder* if it involved multiple victims at one point in time and was designated a *serial murder* if it involved multiple victims over a period of time. Furthermore, murders that occurred in the context of a drug transaction were appropriately labelled *drug-related murders.* Any murders that did not fit within these categories were not considered special-type murders. For a breakdown of these special-type murders across the three justice programs, see Table 5 below.

TABLE 5: Special-Type Murders Presented

	Number	Percent
Spouse Murders	11	15%
Murder-for-Hire	5	6.5%
Mass Murder	2	2.5%
Serial Murder	2	2.5%
Drug-Related Murder	2	2.5%

Fifteen percent of the murders presented involved persons who were murdered by their husband or wife. For example, the *Law and Order* spouse murders included: Walter Grobman, who hired someone to murder his more successful civil court judge wife; Charles Hallenbeck, an elderly man with Alzheimer's who killed his wife in a fit of jealousy; and Maggie Callister, a woman under the influence of her financial advisors, who planted a bomb on a helicopter which killed her husband and five other passengers. *The Practice* spouse murders included: Pierce Stanton, a man who strangled his wife in order to escape an unhappy marriage; Raymond Oz, a man on the verge of senility, who killed his wife during a paranoid state in which he believed that she was trying to kill him; Louise Morgan, who was accused of deliberately running over her husband with their sport utility vehicle because she had grown to dislike him; Zachary Kingman, who struck his wife in the head with a hammer in order to pursue an affair with another woman; and Scott Simpson, who shot his terminally ill wife in the head to alleviate her suffering. Finally, the *NYPD Blue* spouse murders included: Dwight Gunther, a man who was fed up with his wife so he killed her and packed her body away in some suitcases; Harvey, a physically abusive husband who fractured his wife's skull during an intense beating; and Pete Mangrini, an organized crime boss who was suspected of killing his wife and hiding her body out of state.

Admittedly, these incidents of spouse killings may not appear to be the most common when they are compared to real-life reports of spouse murder, but they do follow some of the general patterns established through research. For example, spouse murder tends to be a male crime (Langan and Dawson 1995). All but two of the spouse murders presented on the justice

programs involved husbands killing their wives, the most common type of spouse murder. Interestingly, only one of the murder presentations showed a clear history of domestic violence, even though spouse murders are likely to occur when there is a pattern of spousal abuse (Fedorowycz 1996). As well, four of the spouse murders were planned, deliberate murders, suggesting that, at least in the context of prime-time justice shows, husbands and wives plot the murders against their spouses rather than murder during the course of an argument or because of a history of violence, the more common real-life contextual factors (Hotaling and Sugarman 1990; Pan, Neidig and O'Leary 1994). One of these planned spouse murders was a contract killing, in which the husband hired someone to kill his wife; this single incident supports the official finding that very few spouse murders are the murder-for-hire variety (Langan and Dawson 1995). Finally, only one of the murders presented revealed that alcohol was a factor in the spouse killing, which fails to highlight the role alcohol and/or drugs often play in spouse violence (Hotaling and Sugarman 1990; Pan et al. 1994; Langan and Dawson 1995).

Overall, then, a somewhat distorted image of spouse murder emerges from the entertainment justice programs. While the spouse murders depicted support the image of spouse murder created by official reports and research literature as being a predominantly male crime, they fail to acknowledge that such murders are mostly spontaneous, growing out of general discord or a history of abuse, with alcohol and/or drugs often playing a crucial role.

Less than 7 percent of the total murder presentations were classified as contract killings or murder-for-hires in which a person hired another person to kill a third party. In one *Law and Order* episode, Walter Grobman hired a petty thief to kill his wife for thirty thousand dollars. In another *Law and Order* episode, socialite Regina Mulroney hired a man with mob connections to cover-up the murder of a man by her daughter; the hired killer shot the dead man in the back of the head, execution-style, and then shot two other people in a similar manner in order to give the illusion that all three murders were the work of a serial killer known to the police. In another episode, stockbroker Bruce Valentine hired Mitchel Sims, a friend who was knee-deep in gambling debts, to kill a co-worker to prevent him from revealing Valentine's involvement in stock fraud; Valentine paid Sims forty-five thousand dollars for his efforts, though Sims ultimately killed himself. As well, in a further episode, Andy Palone agreed to fund two brothers' drug manufacturing lab in exchange for them eliminating a young woman who threatened to expose Palone's involvement in insider trading. Furthermore, in one episode of *NYPD Blue*, Joaquin Enriquez hired another man to kill his brother because he was in love with his brother's wife.

Interestingly, handguns were used in three of the contract killings presented and a shotgun in another. In one of the contract killings, the victim was strangled. The use of guns in the presented contract killings makes sense since guns are the most lethal weapons and would therefore be expected to be used in order to "take care of business".

There were few incidents of mass or serial murder presented on the justice programs, which supports the official rarity of both types of murder (Reiss and Roth 1993). One of the incidents of mass murder occurred on *Law and Order* which involved the case of Dennis Trope who open fired on a group of pre-med students in Central Park, killing fifteen and wounding another twelve. The other incident of mass murder occurred on *NYPD Blue,* which involved the

murder of seven men who were bagging cocaine when two cocaine addicts decided to steal the cocaine and eliminate any witnesses. Interestingly, the two serial murder incidents presented or referred to both occurred on *The Practice.* Several episodes highlighted the exploits of George Vogelman, a character introduced during the 1998/1999 season. Represented by Ellenor Frutt of the Donnell firm, Vogelman was acquitted of stabbing and beheading a woman whom he had met at a bar. Later, dressing up as a num to disguise himself, Vogelman stabbed Lindsay Dole, one of the firm's other partners, who ultimately survived the attack. During the season under study, Vogelman also tried to stab Frutt who narrowly escaped with her life when her roommate shot Vogelman as he lunged at her. It is clear that the Vogelman character was on his way to becoming a serial killer, one who dressed up as a num and stabbed female victims with whom he couldn't establish a romantic relationship. In addition, in another episode the Donnell firm was asked to represent a convicted serial killer in his petition for release from a psychiatric hospital on the grounds that he no longer suffered from the condition that made him commit the heinous acts for which he was confined; Walter Arens, a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, had tortured and murdered five young girls. Furthermore, there was one incident of serial murder alluded to in an episode of *Law and Order* where several murders were executed in a style similar to a serial killer known to the police as the .44 Calibre killer.

Presentations of drug-related murders were rare across the three justice programs. Only two such incidents could be identified, both depicted on *NYPD Blue.* For example, in one episode, two cocaine addicts came across a group of seven men who were bagging cocaine for a supplier; they stole the cocaine and killed the men to avoid identification (Note: This case was also an example of mass murder). In another episode, a young man shot his supplier in a drug transaction that turned sour. These couple of incidents clearly do not provide viewers with a clear understanding of drug-related murder and especially do not highlight the current official trends that show an increase in drug-related homicides (Wellford and Cronin 1999).

Explanations for Murder

Since the majority of criminal incidents presented by the three entertainment justice programs related to murder, it was instructive to focus on the explanations provided specifically for the murder presentations, looking first at general motives for murder. According to Miethe and McCorkle (1998), criminologists tend to differentiate between expressive and instrumental motivations. Expressive motives are those that derive mainly from emotional responses or psychological reactions such as anger, jealousy, resentment, frustration, fear, love or general dislike. Instrumental motives derive from a desire to obtain some personal goal or end such as money or status enhancement. Murderers may also be motivated by some mental illness or defect that essentially controls their responses to situations. Table 6 below summarizes the various motives ascribed to offender characters in the three justice programs.

Expressive motives were most commonly ascribed to the offender characters who committed murder, with more than half (56%) of the characters committing murder out of emotive responses such as jealousy, anger, frustration, or fear. This bodes well with the research literature which emphasizes a predominance of expressive motives for real-life murder (Luckenbill 1977; Polk 1994; Block 1995). While much less common (18%), instrumental

TABLE 6: Motives for Murder on *Law and Order, The Practice,* and *NYPD Blue*

	Law and Order	*The Practice*	*NYPD Blue*	*TOTAL*
Expressive Motive	23 (66%)	13 (50%)	13 (50%)	49 (56%)
Instrumental Motive	9 (26%)	3 (11%)	4 (15%)	16 (18%)
Mental Illness	3 (8%)	8 (31%)	3 (11%)	14 (16%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	2 (8%)	3 (4%)
Unknown	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	4 (15%)	5 (6%)
TOTAL	35 (100%)	26 (100%)	26 (100%)	87 (100%)

Note: The total number of motives (87) exceeds the total number of murder incidents (75) to account for multiple motives that were ascribed to an offender as well as multiple offenders where motives may have differed, such as in the case of a contract killing.

motives still figured prominently in the justice program murders; such motives were evident in some of the contract killings in which the killer was paid for committing the act, in cases where the offender stood to benefit monetarily by the murder because of an inheritance or promotion, and in cases in which another economic crime was the primary goal, such as robbery or burglary.

Surprisingly, a substantial percentage (16%) of the motivations were considered the result of some mental illness or defect. Take for example the case of a ten-year-old character, Jenny Brant. In one episode of *Law and Order* she was labelled by an evaluating psychiatrist as a sociopath, a "textbook serial killer", who had committed her first murder and was likely to continue unless she was put under psychiatric care. In an episode of *The Practice*, murder defendant Raymond Oz was described as mentally unstable; the motive for killing his wife was that he was under a paranoid delusion in which he believed she was trying to kill him. Furthermore, in one episode of *NYPD Blue*, Detectives Sipowicz and Sorenson make it known that they believe the murderer, Roger Unquist, is a crazy psychopath who killed his parents and then tried to get a woman he held hostage to provide an alibi for him. Despite these common presentations of mentally ill murderers, mental illness is rare among violent offenders (Monahan 1992), with paranoid schizophrenia actually being the most common mental illness linked to violence (Lunde 1976; Bartol 1995). Only one of the fictional murderers was presented to be diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. It would seem, then, that the mental illness-violence connection remains a strong theme in contemporary television justice programs, a theme also found in the program content of their prime-time predecessors, albeit to a much greater degree (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorelli 1981; Fabianic 1997).

The preoccupation with motives, whether expressive, instrumental or the result of mental illness, calls attention to the individualistic nature of most popular explanations of crime which tend to locate the "cause" of criminal behavior within the individual; that is, people commit crimes because of something uniquely inside them – a feeling of jealousy, a biological deficiency, an emotional instability, or some desire to achieve a personal goal. Motives, by their very nature, are individualistic. Everybody who commits murder commits it for a uniquely different reason, although there may be some commonality across motives. The tendency of the popular justice programs analyzed to focus on and even highlight particular motives detracts away from theoretical explanations of criminal behavior that go beyond individualistic explanations to include more encompassing sociological explanations. It may be that

entertainment programming is simply not equipped for social theoretical explanations or that producers and scriptwriters see little entertainment value in including more sociologically-based explanations in their program content. Regardless, focus on motives in entertainment justice shows allows individualistic explanations, rather than other explanations, to take center stage and, ultimately, to find a place in the viewing audience's perceptions and knowledge-base.

To their credit, there were some attempts to present more sociologically-based explanations by these contemporary justice programs. In one episode of *Law and Order*, for example, lead character McCoy places blame for the mass shootings on the gun manufacturer for making it easier for the offender to kill the women in Central Park by manufacturing a weapon that is easy to convert into an automatic firearm. McCoy further blames the state of New York and the United States in general for allowing firearm companies to make such products. Here, McCoy scratches the surface of a simplistic sociological explanation that essentially shifts the blame from the individual to the social environment in which he lives. In another *Law and Order* episode, the social environment is emphasized as a particularly important influence on individuals by laying the basics for a violent society hypothesis. In this case, the murderer character, John Talford, is presented as a violent teenager who is the product of the violent society he lives in. It is explained that John has been socialized by his father to "be a man" by learning how to fight with deadly martial arts weapons that are easily accessible via the Internet and by imitating fight scenarios depicted on the violent video games he plays. The argument is, of course, that John Talford (and other teenagers like him) cannot help but be influenced by this ever-present emphasis on violence. It's not John, but society, that is to blame for his violence aimed at a rival classmate.

Interestingly, there were a couple attempts at constructing a conflict theory of crime, which emphasizes the natural division in society between those with power and those without (Turk 1969), and sees law as a tool of the powerful (Chambliss and Seidman 1971). When wealthy socialite Pepper Garrison escapes criminal prosecution for the murder of her daughter in an episode of *Law and Order,* McCoy and Carmichael (the lead prosecution character) express displeasure with the discriminatory legal system. Carmichael comments that "the laws for the rich are different" to which McCoy responds cynically, "What laws for the rich?". It is clear that the prosecutors are acutely aware of the power differential that exists within the law and within the criminal justice system. Furthermore, the central issue in an episode of *The Practice* highlights the powerful/powerless distinction often at work in the legal system. Here, Rebecca Washington defends an indigenous young man, Ronny Vaga, who confesses to a hit-and-run homicide. It is suggested that real estate tycoon, Teddy Barrington, is actually paying Vaga to say that he was driving to prevent being exposed as the one who, under the influence of alcohol, hit and killed the woman. Not only does this point out that the rich and powerful can use their money to avoid criminal prosecution but also that the poor and powerless are willing to take the fall.

Other sociological explanations found in the justice programs include feminist theory and subcultural theory. For example, an episode of *Law and Order,* which presents the case of a baby who starves to death because he was not fed sufficiently with breast mil, highlights the pressure many mothers face by society, through special interest groups, to breast feed their babies. When they have difficulty, these women are made to feel inadequate and are labelled

"bad mothers". The overall argument here is feminist in nature. As well, an episode of *NYPD Blue* puts forth the subculture of violence theory (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967) by emphasizing the police subculture as one in which violence is taken-for-granted and expected under certain circumstances, such as when offenders disrespect police officers or challenge their authority.

Although attempts at sociological explanations were made in the entertainment justice programs, the explanations were, for the most part, fairly unsophisticated, simply blaming society for the individual offender's actions, or were somewhat obscure so that they were likely to go unnoticed by the average (non-criminology trained) viewer. As well, the explanations fail to hit upon some of the more unique sociological explanations for murder and violence which include: structural explanations which call attention to racial inequality (Messner and Golden 1992) and labor instability (Crutchfield 1989) as potential sources of conflict and violence; routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979) which states that crime depends on the intersection of a motivated offender, a suitable target and an absence of guardianship; interactionist interpretations (Luckenbill 1977) which highlight the series of stages through which offenders and victims of violence proceed; and phenomenological theories such as those advanced by Katz (1988) which stress that the causes of crime are constructed by offenders themselves in ways that are compellingly seductive, often stemming from emotional logic and moral appeal.

DISCUSSION

It is clear that the analysis revealed both divergence and convergence in comparing mediated murder presentations with official statistics and relevant research literature. One of the most obvious distortions in the presentation of crime in the three entertainment justice programs was the overrepresentation of violent crime, especially murder. The overemphasis on relatively rare incidents of violent crime such as murder may be attributed to the escapist nature of entertainment television (Sacco and Kennedy 1998), which is fueled by the tendency to dramatize crime shows by presenting extraordinary rather than ordinary events. It is precisely because murder is *not* the stuff of everyday life that it finds itself a prominent feature of entertainment television. Violent crime, especially murder, strikes at the very core of our humanity and is therefore fascinating, dramatic and entertaining. It is no surprise, then, that murder remains the most marketable crime in the entertainment television industry.

The demands of entertainment in television may also account for the divergence of other portrayals. For example, the overemphasis on planned murders may be attributed to the need for dramatic effect. Likewise, the under-representation of knives as murder weapons may indicate a belief among writers and producers that guns have more dramatic appeal than knives or that shootings are viewed as more dramatic than stabbings. In any event, it is important to keep in mind that the aims of television are centered around creating drama and ensuring entertainment. It is likely, then, where murder presentations depart from real-life murder, the intent is geared toward entertainment rather than deliberate disillusion.

Despite incidents of divergence, there was plenty of convergence between the murder presentations and real-life murder. This might be partially explained by the increasing complexity and sophistication of contemporary television programming. Indeed, Selby and

Cowdery (1995) contend that television programming has become much more complex and sophisticated such that producers are striving for more "realistic" portrayals which do not sacrifice entertainment value. It may be also that as television programming becomes more sophisticated, so do television viewers; viewers, then may be an important force in demanding more realistic television presentations, which may account, to some degree, for the convergence of the mediate presentations and real-life murders revealed in the analysis. In addition, contemporary entertainment television has witnessed a wave of "reality TV" programming in recent years. To keep pace with so-called "reality shows", fictional entertainment television may be attempting to incorporate a modicum of "fact" within fictional settings in order to create the illusion of "reality" that seems to be so popular as an entertainment format in contemporary television.

Sophistication and reality show competition aside, however, convergence between mediated murder presentations and real-life murder may simply be coincidental rather than intentional. Where factors enhance the drama or advance the storyline, they may be readily incorporated. For example, it may be argued that having relationships between offenders and victims might advance the overall plot, contribute to character development, and increase the dramatic effect of the storyline. Thus, rather than trying to portray murder more realistically, the depiction of relationships between murderers and their victims may simply be a way of meeting the demands of dramatic and entertaining television production.

Television presentations may be an important force in shaping viewer conceptions and attitudes and thus potential implications of the murder presentations analyzed should be discussed. An obvious consequence of the overrepresentation of violent crime in prime-time justice programs is that it may lead the viewing audience to overestimate the amount of violent crime, especially murder, in society. To be fair, however, it must be noted that the three entertainment justice programs analyzed do center around specialized themes in their overall storylines. For example, the detectives on *Law and Order* are part of a specialized homicide unit and thus it is expected that murder would play a central role in the criminal case depictions. Similarly, the detectives on *NYPD Blue* are part of a special investigations unit, which handles major cases so that murder would inevitably surface as the majority of major case investigations presented. In addition, the Donnell firm of *The Practice* has built a considerable reputation for defending clients accused of murder; it would therefore be likely that many of the cases handled by the defense attorneys in this show would be murder or attempted murder cases. It can be argued that regular viewers of these justice programs may be subtly aware of and are able to appreciate the specialized nature of these programs and therefore come to expect some exaggeration of violent crime, especially murder. While it is true that these justice programs exaggerate violent crimes, especially murder, it does not follow that viewers are not sophisticated enough to realize the overrepresentation of violent crime compared to the real world they live in. In fact, many people are acutely aware of the distortions of crime presented by the media (Surette 1992) and may actively discount media images and messages (Howitt 1998). Nevertheless, viewers may still overestimate the amount of violent crime based on distortions presented by these popular television justice programs. Indeed, it is well noted that the public often has a distorted view of the nature and extent of crime in society and tend to overestimate the amount of violent crime in both the United States and Canada (Roberts and Doob 1990).

With the exception of the focus on planned murders, the three contemporary justice programs revealed portrayals of murder that more closely resemble official portrayals than analyses of previous justice programs have revealed. Therefore, viewers of *Law and Order, The Practice,* and *NYPD Blue* are able to get a glimpse of the overall nature of murder through these fictional presentations. Furthermore, although the murder incidents depicted on the three entertainment justice programs highlight the real-life rarity of mass and serial murder as well as murder-for-hire, they tend to mask the more common-place murders that are drug-related and tend to somewhat sensationalize spouse murder. Nevertheless, the fictional murder incidents do emphasize the real-life danger that women often face from male spouses and lovers, calling attention to an important gender-specific social problem.

It should also be noted that all of the murders presented were interpersonal in nature – people killing people. What is not highlighted, in presenting murder in such a manner, is the irony that more people are killed not by the hands of other people but through corporate wrongdoing such as pollution, industrial accidents and unsafe working conditions (Reiman 1998). By neglecting any focus on corporate crimes that kill, television presentations reinforce the popular and legal definitions of what constitutes "murder". This not only serves to legitimize legal definitions of murder but keeps corporate wrongdoing leading to death outside the scope of legal sanction. The neglect of corporate crime in murder presentations is not surprising since mass media may have a vested interest in keeping corporate crime swept under the rug, so to speak. Nevertheless, the neglect of corporate crimes that kill may inadvertently influence viewer conceptions of corporate crime and of murder.

Prime-time explanations for murder still tend to be overly individualistic. The consequences of these usually individualistic and rather simplistic explanations of crime, is the subtle deflection away from more complex social-structural causes of crime and criminality. Indeed, Barrile (1984) contends that individualistic explanations of crime reduce crime to "a personal trouble", thereby successfully avoiding the sociological causes of crime such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, judicial bias, classism and racism. These structural explanations are not only more complex, but they may be better predictors of individual criminality.

Even more importantly, prime-time television's failure to consider distinctly sociological explanations of crime has consequences for public understanding of crime and for policy initiatives. For students of criminology, who are exposed to the individualistic explanations of crime offered by entertainment television, it may take several intensive sociological courses to counteract these media-created impressions. It has been the researcher's experience, for example, in teaching both second-year and third-year criminology courses that students tend to offer individualistic explanations of crime and criminality more often and more readily than social structural explanations. In addition, policies created to solve the problem of violence may be inadequate if they reflect media-inspired individualistic explanations, which advance the solution to crime as a matter of adjusting individual personalities rather than altering the social structure.

CONCLUSION

The over-representation of violent crime, especially murder, in contemporary prime-time television justice programs may lead viewers to overestimate the amount of violence that occurs in the world around them. Nevertheless, in presenting murders that closely resemble real-life murders, television justice programs may serve to broaden viewer understanding of violence and murder as a whole, though one can only speculate, without thoroughly investigating the relationship between television viewing and viewer knowledge, the effect such presentations may have on viewers.

Although portrayals of murder by prime-time justice programs keep pace with official patterns concerning the circumstances surrounding real-life murder, explanations provided for murder via prime-time television are somewhat inadequate, over-emphasizing individualistic motives and downplaying important social-structural factors. Thus, while viewers may gain a fairly good understanding of murder and the circumstances in which murder occurs by watching shows like *Law and Order, The Practice,* and *NYPD Blue*, they are not likely to achieve a comprehensive understanding of why murder is committed. Rather, viewers will need to seek out other sources if such an understanding is to be obtained.

ENDNOTE

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