

Chapter 7

African Americans

The Social Construction of the African American Criminal Stereotype

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Dennis M. Rome presents a schema to illustrate how the African American male criminal stereotype has come to be redefined as a general definition of crime. Depictions of African Americans as drug-users and criminals have become standard images across media outlets. Rome discusses how negative stereotypes of African American males are used to justify the more punitive treatment of African Americans. Further, the greater the number of criminal definitions formulated and applied to African American men, the greater the amount of crime attributed to African Americans.

In this chapter, I will present a schema that illustrates how the African American male criminal stereotype is created in people's minds and subsequently becomes their definition of crime—the world of crime they believe exists based on their individual knowl-

edge, the knowledge gained from social interactions with other people, and the knowledge they gain from mass media, ultimately providing the context for them to act in accordance with their constructed view of crime. It is important to point out here that although concepts serve a number of important functions in everyday communication and discourse, treating concepts as though they were concrete phenomena leads to the fallacy of reification—the error of regarding abstractions as real rather than as the outcome of thinking.¹ For example, it is erroneous to regard a concept such as *authority* as having drives, needs, or instincts, despite the tendency of some people to speak, or write, as if it did. Hence, there is a cyclical effect in constructing the concept of crime in that once people perceive concepts to be real, they go out and look for examples of these concepts.

Mass media have played and will continue to play a crucial role in the way white Americans perceive African Americans. As a result of the overwhelming media focus on crime, drug use, gang violence, and other forms of anti-social behavior among African Americans, the media have fostered distorted and insidious public perceptions of African Americans.² Among these stereotypes, the stereotype of the African American male as a criminal element in society continues to be a major obstacle to greater racial harmony and the elimination of discrimination and racism on all levels. Often, this criminal stereotype is internalized by African American youth, so they are made to feel as though delinquent behavior is expected from them, and many fall into this trap. In this article, the African American male criminal stereotype is examined to illustrate how much of the blame for its perpetuation comes from the U.S. mass media's negative depictions of African American males. These distorted images foster the myths that help to deepen and strengthen the stereotypes that have plagued the African American community since colonial times.

A common stereotype about African American men is that they engage in drug abuse in disproportionate numbers. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Health and

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Human Services illustrate that although 8 percent of African American males have used cocaine, 11 percent of whites have used the same drug.³ This is, however, not the impression one gets from watching the evening news or even an episode of the television program *COPS*. This is especially detrimental to African American youth, both male and female—they see a litany of people who have done things wrong. They seldom see African Americans, particularly males, who are achievers. It is a dangerous tendency for them to think the only way black men can achieve or earn enough is by being involved in the illegal economy.

The window into crime that is gazed through by mass media is usually "street crime" that is obtained from police reports and other sources used to compile the *Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)*. Since 1930, the U.S. Department of Justice has compiled national crime statistics, the *UCR*, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) assuming responsibility as the clearinghouse and publisher. Although participation in the *UCR* program by local police departments is purely voluntary, the comprehensiveness of the information has steadily improved over the years, with police departments from large metropolitan areas historically being the best participants.⁴

Historically, the *UCR* has been divided into two parts. Part I crimes consist of the index crimes, major felonies that are believed to be serious, to occur frequently, and to have a greater likelihood of being reported to the police. These felonies include murder, rape, robbery, burglary, and motor theft. Part II offenses include fraud, embezzlement, forgery and counterfeiting, and run-aways.

It is important to understand from the start that the crime index is not approvingly blind to race. This does not suggest that the crime index is necessarily biased by conscious social intent; rather, it is biased by everyday social life. This view is based on an understanding of race-related opportunities in contemporary America. The present *Uniform Crime Reports* index lists street crime and excludes white-collar and probably most middle-class-related crimes. Because

African Americans are underrepresented and whites overrepresented in white-collar occupations, the set of crimes called index crimes is therefore skewed away from criminal opportunities in which whites are overrepresented. This does not imply that the crime index is biased against lower-class black street crime per se, but rather that it is biased away from middle-class and elite whites' "suite" crimes. This type of crime includes such crimes as stock market fraud, price-fixing and product misrepresentation, corporate tax evasion, industrial pollution, the maintenance of unsafe working conditions, and illegal intervention in the political process.

Because race is strongly correlated with the occupancy of white-collar positions, and because the conventional *UCR* crime index is intrinsically biased away from white-collar crime, the *UCR* crime index plainly is intrinsically biased away from the arrest of mostly white-collar criminals and toward blacks and blue-collar offenders. Thus, the public's beliefs about crime, such as what types of people are more likely to commit crime, where crime is most likely to occur, and who is most likely to become a victim, are directly related to the social construction of crime. For example, consider how poor and rich communities are policed and the social origins of crime to explain the differences in criminal behavior among groups. Police have wide latitude in deciding when to enforce laws and make arrests. Their decision is greatest when dealing with minor offenses, such as disorderly conduct. Sociological research has shown that police discretion is strongly influenced by class and race judgments. The police are more likely to arrest persons they perceive as troublemakers, and they are more likely to make arrests when the complainant is white. They are less likely to arrest middle-class, white, and prominent citizens.⁵ In addition, minority communities are policed much more intensively, which leads to more frequent arrests of those who live there.

In addition, a recent report on juvenile offenders demonstrates that black and Latino youths with no prior record of crime are treated far more severely in the juvenile jus-

tice system than whites, also with no prior criminal record, of comparable social class. Minority youths are more likely to be arrested, held in jail, sent to juvenile or adult court for trial, convicted, and given longer prison terms. The racial disparities in the juvenile court system are magnified with each additional step into the justice system. In some cases, the racial disparities are stunning. For example, the report notes that although 25 percent of arrested white youths are sent to adult prison, nearly 60 percent of arrested black youths are. That is truly a wide racial disparity. The report concludes that these racial disparities lie not so much in overt discrimination on the part of prosecutors, judges, and other court personnel, but instead in the stereotypes that these decision makers rely on at each point of the juvenile justice system. Being black, wearing low-hung baggy pants, and sporting dreadlocks or a "do-rag" is likely to get a person quickly through the various stages of the juvenile justice system and into prison. The report concludes that race, as distinct from the effect of social class, is "undeniably" a major factor in the dispensation of juvenile justice.⁶

Just as Frederick Douglass' legendary argument points out how the "myth of the black rapist" was created to legitimize lynchings, the criminal image of the black male is continuously evoked today to perpetuate the dominant society's continued fear and subjugation of African Americans. Case in point: In 1995, Maryrose Posner claimed that she was robbed by a black man with a gun while she and her 2-year-old daughter stood at a Chemical Bank cash machine. She claimed that the man put a gun to her child's head and laughed. She alleged that the black assailant then sped away with three other black men. Posner later admitted in court that her story was a total lie, fabricated to gain attention from her busy doctor husband. Although she subsequently recanted her confession, claiming that police had coerced it by throwing lit cigarettes and hot water at her, Posner ultimately pled guilty to a second-degree charge of filing a false statement.

During the same year, Matthew Gayle told detectives in Florida that a black man had shot and killed his 20-year-old wife in their car as they were returning from a prayer service. The day after the shooting, the police were informed that Gayle had long been seeking help to kill his wife. Three months later, Gayle was charged with the murder, along with another white man. Gayle's brother was charged with threatening to kill a witness in the case.

Yet another example is that of Kendra Gillis, who claimed that a black man attacked her with a razor in her dormitory at the State University of New York at Albany. A bizarre series of revelations and allegations followed. A police investigation revealed that Gillis had torn her own clothing and scratched herself in an effort to show that she had been attacked. Gillis admitted that the allegations were false and stated that she had actually been beaten by her abusive father, David Gillis, who was arrested for the assault. Her mother, however, later reported another alleged incident: Kendra stated that a black man had shoved her against a wall and beaten her three weeks before her father's assault. Campus police had no record of this incident. Kendra later refused to sign a statement implicating her father in her assault and would not cooperate with prosecutors. Similarly, three weeks later, three teenagers also in the Albany area admitted they had fabricated a story that a black man, armed with a semiautomatic handgun, had demanded the receipts from the car wash where two of them worked. The three teenagers themselves had taken \$3,559 from the car wash.

The Reverend Thomas Spisak, a Roman Catholic priest in Warren, Ohio, told police that two black men attacked him when in fact he had actually stabbed himself 88 times in a suicide attempt! The Associated Press reported that Spisak, 56, also told police that the intruders forced him to swallow peroxide and pain pills. Spisak later confessed that the story was false. During a statement in court, Spisak apologized to the black community. He pleaded guilty to a falsification charge and was ordered to serve a two-day sentence in jail or at a privately run facility

where prisoners perform community service.

The criminal depictions often provided by the mass media and sustained by the general public's belief that most African American males are criminals, provide good examples of the damaging effects of negative stereotypes. In a 2000 survey, whites were asked to evaluate, on a scale of 1 to 7, how violence-prone blacks were. Fifty-one percent chose the violent end of the spectrum (ranks 1–3). When asked the same question about whites, only 16 percent placed whites as a group in the same rank.⁷

Black Stereotyping as Historical

The following historical analysis of African Americans will serve to illustrate the origin and extent to which dominant society members have used and still use negative stereotypes to keep African Americans as second-class citizens. When European colonialists settled in what became the United States of America, they did so in a fashion that helped chart the course of U.S. history for the next 250 to 300 years. They established a pattern of European domination of indigenous groups and transported Africans to the New World as chattel slaves, a degradation that lasts well into the twenty-first century. Chattel slaves were owned by plantation barons such as Senator James Hammond, who said,

In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. . . . Fortunately for the South we have found a race adapted to that purpose. . . . We do not think that whites should be slaves either by law or necessity. Our slaves are black, of another, inferior race. The status in which we have placed them is an elevation. They are elevated from the condition in which God first created them by being made our slaves.⁸

This earlier belief of African American slaves as inferior to whites is important to understanding stereotypes because it shapes

the ways in which African Americans are perceived today. The experience of African Americans is unique in American history. No other ethnic minority group entered the country as slaves, and, just as important, no other group was victimized across centuries the way African Americans were because of their original slave status. The fallout from all this is that African American–white relationships have always been characterized by intense conflicts as African Americans have tried to adjust to the dictates of living in a predominantly white society.⁹ In fact, the relationship has been one-sided in terms of which group has attempted to blend into the world of the other and which group has maintained a superior status.¹⁰ Media expert Douglas Kellner reminds us,

Radio, television, film and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of “us” and “them.” Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories provide the symbols, myths and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture. Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the power of the forces that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places or be destroyed.¹¹

Kellner is suggesting that African Americans are often depicted as criminals because such negative stereotypes are used as tools to imply that the subordinate group is deserving of such treatment or status. Along these same lines, assimilation is difficult when white and “light” skin-based privileges exist—this preference for a lighter or fairer skin tone in our society may be traced back as far as enslavement, when an African’s dark color was singled out as unusual or ugly. By 1800 blackness was seen as a critical means of sorting out people; the terms *black* and

Negro underscored the importance of color. By the mid-1800s, advocates of slavery were arguing for acceptance of the supposed ape-like characteristics of the African American. In fact, in a famous article published in the 1850s, Samuel Cartwright wrote that Africans were a different species than Europeans "because the head and face are anatomically constructed more after the fashion of the simiadae [apes]."¹²

By the turn of the twentieth century, this way of insulting African Americans had taken on ludicrous forms. A low point was probably reached in 1906 when the New York Zoological Society put a small African, Ota Benga, in a cage in the monkey house of the Bronx Park Zoo as part of an exhibit. Thousands came to view the African's new home. Some African American ministers protested the degrading exhibition, but white officials as well as the white populace thought it quite entertaining.¹³

African Americans were also charged with being mentally and morally inferior. Early discussions of their alleged inferiority assumed that African Americans had a smaller brain and a lower mental capacity than Europeans. Southern apologists for slavery embraced views of racial inferiority, views routinely legitimized by the "scientific racism" of nineteenth-century writers in Europe. Further, African American women were seen as immoral and African American men were viewed as oversexed and potential rapists. This absurd fear of African American sexuality cannot be viewed apart from the widespread miscegenation between white men and African American women slaves. Sexual coercion was, rather, an essential dimension of the social relations between master and slave. In other words, the right claimed by slave owners and their agents over the bodies of female slaves was a direct expression of their presumed property rights over African American people as a whole. The license to rape emanated from and facilitated the ruthless economic domination that was the gruesome hallmark of slavery. Intermixing in the South had become a permanent feature of the sexual landscape, a point testified to by the lighter skin color of some African Americans.¹⁴

Maintaining the Stereotypes

A common contemporary way of stereotyping African American males as criminals is by the use of "mug shots." In fact, mug shots have become commonplace in the media thanks to the programs that feature dramatizations of the crimes of *America's Most Wanted*, or those like *COPS*, *Super Cops*, *Stories From the Highway Patrol*, and *Tough Cops* that allow the public to observe actual arrests. The theme song from *COPS* poses the question: "Bad boys, bad boys, what'cha gonna do?" to a reggae beat. The "bad boys" who are shown are overwhelmingly young and black. These television programs, not unlike mug shots, depict black men as untrustworthy, dangerous, and not very intelligent. The case of the Washington, D.C., snipers as discussed by professor and syndicated columnist Patricia Williams will serve to bring this assertion home:

One thing that struck me as I listened to CNN's [winded], all-sniper-all-the-time commentary was the prevalence of precisely such romanticized cowboy vocabulary. Before the arrests, most experts assumed there was a single sniper, most probably "a lone Caucasian man" in his 20s or 30s, someone very "smart," very "calculating," very "cool," "precise," and "controlled." We heard hypotheses about the "pleasure" he was getting from the shootings, the "game" he was playing, the "mysterious," even "superhuman" dimension of his escape artistry and the probability that he had done time with some "elite" branch of the military. It was chilling, all right, but it was also romantic. One could almost envision Bruce Willis in the role.

This script was disrupted right after the arrests, however, when "one Caucasian man" was transmogrified into "a pair of African American males." CNN devoted long hours to revisionist discussions of how "dumb" the suspects had been, about how many clues they'd left, about how "stupid" they were for phoning police, how "idiotic" for demanding money. It was a very polite version of the rampaging-savage narrative, one that doesn't glorify dark culprits, but one that was still undergirded by the perceived social necessity of "good" lone rangers and

their well-stocked gun racks as the last bastion of decency, home and hearth.¹⁵

The public relies heavily on the mass media for information about crime, law, and criminal justice. Crime is a prevalent topic in virtually every type of media source, including television, radio, newspapers, books, music, comics, and movies. Research indicates that public perceptions of crime are formed on the basis of information appearing in various forms of media. For example, some researchers have found that 95 percent of those polled cited the mass media as their primary source of information about crime.¹⁶ The public is fascinated by crime and attends closely to what is presented.¹⁷ Research indicates that crime is among the most frequently read newspaper categories, providing details that enable readers to discuss the causes and solutions to the crime problem.¹⁸ Criminologist Richard Quinney suggests that a conception of crime is presented in the mass media; that conception, diffused throughout the society, becomes the basis for the public's view of reality.¹⁹

A contemporary example of Quinney's proposition, and yet another example of the "darkening of crime" by dominant society, is the story of Robert Sandifer Jr. Sandifer was the 11-year-old Chicago boy whose stray gunfire killed a 14-year-old girl instead of the boy whom gang members had ordered "hit." Robert, or "Yummy" as he was called, was then allegedly murdered by his teenage compadres. Sandifer's body was discovered by Chicago police on September 1, 1994, four days after a burst from the semiautomatic pistol he was carrying had struck and killed Shavon Dean. Reporters, columnists, and many of the sociologists, psychologists, politicians, educators, and others quoted in the media invoked the darkest "mean streets of the ghetto" prose as they sifted through the details of the boy's brief, tragic life and the poor and dangerous environment in which he lived, killed, and died.

But at the same time that the larger society was bestowing so much attention on Robert Sandifer, a spasm of violent acts committed by other children gushed through American society, stunning communities from coast to coast. In Wenatchee, Washing-

ton, police arrested two 12-year-old boys, Manuel Sanchez and John Duncan, for shooting to death a migrant worker. Police said the boys shot the 50-year-old man 18 times—continuing to shoot him after he was dead—apparently because the man had yelled at them for firing a gun too close to his house. On the same day that Sandifer's body was found, in High Bridge, New Jersey, a 13-year-old boy shot and killed his 11-year-old friend, Jacob Tracy, because Jacob would not accept an apology from a third boy. In the Bronx, New York, also on that same day, a 13-year-old boy, Moises Prado, was charged as an adult with four counts of murder in connection with the firebombing of a grocery store in which four people died.

All of these incidents seemed equally made to order for sensationalist coverage as the Robert Sandifer case. But none of them drew anything close to that attention. Why? Because in these other cases, the young killers were not African Americans, nor were they "products" of the black ghetto, and therefore not eligible to be neatly boxed in the "mean streets" frame-up that is used to implicitly declare the problems of the ghettos a manifestation of blacks' pathological attitudes—a "black problem"—that has nothing to do with mainstream American society.

Conceptual Entrapment by Media Imagery

In the first step of conceptual entrapment by media imagery, many of our observations about crime have something in common (see Box 7.1). For the present discussion, the similarities include the dissemination of images of street crime involving a disproportionate number of African American males. These observations are disseminated through newspaper articles, television reporting, articles on the Internet, speeches made by public officials, films, radio, books, and music. The crimes depicted include mostly robberies, burglaries, and homicides. Furthermore, law enforcement is concentrated in lower-income and minority areas. People who are better off are further removed from

Box 7.1***The Process of Conceptual Entrapment
by Media Imagery*****Step 1.**

The media bombard us with their definitions of crime and more specifically they present to us what a criminal looks like. These images have something in common, namely they mostly consist of street crimes where poor whites and especially blacks are depicted as the perpetrators (criminals). Thus, we find it useful when we communicate about crime to communicate about the general depictions we observe.

Step 2.

We make up conceptual summaries of media's depictions because the summaries are convenient. They prove to be so convenient, however, that we begin to think that they are real and thus give a name to the general concept—crime.

Step 3.

As we communicate about the general concept—crime—we begin to believe that the concept really exists.

Step 4.

Once the concept is real in our minds, we seek indicators based on depictions found in the media.

police scrutiny and better able to hide their crimes. Although white-collar and elite crime costs society more than street crime, it often goes undetected and is rarely disseminated in mass media. Even when news about white-collar crimes is presented, white-collar offenders are rarely prosecuted and, if they are, they usually receive light sentences—often a fine or community service instead of imprisonment. Thus, the image depicted in mass media of middle- and upper-middle-income people may be perceived as less in need of imprisonment because they likely have a job and high-status people to testify for their good character. On the other hand, when minorities and poor people are accused of a crime, they are more likely to be prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced to prison. Minorities constitute 25 percent of the population of the United States but constitute 33 percent of those people arrested for property crimes and nearly 40 percent of those arrested for violent offenses.²⁰ Hence, we begin to find it more convenient to communicate about the gen-

eral concept of "crime" based on the aforementioned constructions, rather than about the simple content of any single depiction we observe.

The second step of conceptual entrapment by media imagery involves creating a name for the phenomena we have generalized from our specific observations. Because it is inconvenient to keep describing all the specific media depictions, whenever we want to communicate about the general concept they seem to have in common, we give a name to the general concept, in this case *crime*, to stand for whatever the specific observations have in common.

In the third step of conceptual entrapment by media imagery, we communicate about the general concept, *crime*, and we begin to believe that the concept is something that really exists, not just a summary of several depictions in the media. Thus, when the media refer to "crime" or current "crime reports," we think of the definition we formulated in step 2 and, thus, "crime" becomes real (it matters not that our definition is limited to the general summaries presented by the media in step 1).

The fourth step of conceptual entrapment by media imagery, now that our concept has become real in our minds, is that we go out in the real world to seek indicators of our term. We write about them, debate them, and discuss them; ironically, our indicators are based on depictions we have observed in mass media.

It is important to point out that by presenting the schema above, I am in no way attempting to downplay the importance of concepts in our daily lives; to the contrary, concepts serve important functions not just in everyday life but in social science as well. Concepts are the foundation of communication: thinking involves the use of language. Language itself is a system of communication composed of symbols and a set of rules permitting various combinations of these symbols. One of the most significant symbols in a language is the concept. A *concept* is an abstraction, a symbol, a representation of an object or one of its properties, or of a behavioral phenomenon. However, it is important to realize that concepts are abstracted

Conclusion

Stereotyping African Americans as criminals feeds into denials of racism, with the parallel assumption that any problems faced by African Americans (or Hispanic Americans, American Indians, or Asian Americans) are their own fault. One way to address this problem is to change the way in which we think about crime. Drawing back to the schema: we must begin to question the people who are defining to the larger society what crime is. In fact, Quinney suggests that crime is created: "Crime is a definition of human conduct that is created by authorized agents in a politically organized society."²¹

Jerome Miller, executive director of the National Center for Institutions and Alternatives, maintains that crime is not only created, but also overstated. What, then, is crime, and why is it overstated? Each semester, I ask students to write down a definition of crime. Almost always, they give definitions that describe street crimes such as homicides, rapes, burglaries, and thefts. Rarely do students give definitions that describe white-collar crimes. These crimes include embezzlement, bank fraud, credit card fraud, knowingly polluting the air and water supplies, and so on. Where, then, do students and the public in general obtain these distorted conceptions? Quinney suggests that "authorized agents" are sources of this misinformation. Authorized agents include the mass media, schools, religious leaders, and, of course, government officials.²² Following Quinney, we see that most media attention focuses on street crime. Ironically, it is estimated that the total national loss for all street crimes is \$11 billion a year compared to \$175 to \$231 billion a year for white-collar crime.²³ Quinney argues thusly,

Crime is not inherent in behavior; but is a judgment made by some about the actions and characteristics of others. . . . Crime is seen as a result of a process which culminates in the defining of persons and behaviors as criminal. It follows, then, that the greater the number of criminal definitions formulated and applied, the greater the amount of crime.²⁴

from perceptions and are used to convey and transmit information. Concepts do not actually exist as empirical phenomena—they are symbols of phenomena, not the phenomena themselves. In short, then, an important merit of the conceptual entrapment by media imagery schema is that it helps elucidate the connectedness of crime and its control with the society from which it is conceptually and institutionally constructed by human agents. Through it, media and crime scholars are able to recognize, as a fundamental assumption, that crime is both in and of society. My wish is that this schema is a first step in abandoning the futile research for causes of crime because such research simply complicates the distinctions that maintain crime as a separate reality while failing to address how it is that crime is constructed as a part of society. Enlightened criminologists are concerned, instead, with the ways in which human agents actively co-produce that which they take to be crime. For instance, this perspective directs attention to the way that crime is constituted as an expansive and permeating mode of discourse, a continuously growing script—a text, narrative—whose writers are human agents, obsessed with what we produce, amazed that it is produced, denying that it is created by us, claiming that it grows independently before us, but yet worshipping the very alienating, hierarchical creations that are our own. A direct consequence of such an approach is that any "frontward analysis" from crime requires that criminologists, law enforcement, media personnel and executives, and criminal practitioners alike deconstruct crime as a separate entity, cease recording it, stop dramatizing it, withdraw energy from it, and deny it status as an independent entity. Through this vision, the present schema may be useful when criminologists begin to record a new ideology, a replacement discourse that connects human agents and our product back to the whole of which we are a part. The conceptual entrapment by media imagery schema, then, is a step in the deconstruction of crime.