



Sandy Calleja Portelli

TITLE

Mapping the Discourses Surrounding the Gendered Portrayals in Contemporary Popular Television Programming: A Comparative Case Study of Crime Drama Series

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

This study explores the portrayal of gender in crime drama series broadcast on prime-time television (TV). It does so by comparing two long-running, crime drama series in the United States to highlight best practices in terms of gendered discourse as portrayed in this genre.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the discourses surrounding gender portrayal in TV crime drama series?
2. How may these gendered discourses impact society's view of men and women?
3. Do the gendered portrayals mirror gender roles prevalent in today's Western society?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was deemed to provide the best opportunity for focusing on the subtle use of language, narratives and types of information. A comparative analysis of two popular TV series through discourse analysis

enabled a focused and detailed approach to coding and analysis including consensual and thematic procedures.

CHOICE OF TV SERIES

The programmes analysed needed to be comparable over a long term viewing and the relative uniform narrative and structure of crime drama made this genre ideal. The shows needed to originate from the same country at around the same time and had to offer similar but opposing gender portrayals, be series that have been on air for a considerable length of time, with a relatively stable core of main characters providing viewers with a three dimensional perception of the characters.

The dramas chosen for comparison also needed to use similar methods to solve crime thus avoiding difficulties that could arise when comparing investigators who employed different investigative techniques. The two chosen series – *Bones* and *Criminal Minds* – depicted American police procedures, portrayed mixed gender investigative teams, and utilised scientific investigative techniques.



Photo credit: FOX



Photo credit: CBS

DATA ANALYSIS

To build an in-depth understanding of both shows, I watched several episodes starting from Episode One of each series, through to the episodes being broadcast when the study was conducted. However, I conducted critical discourse analysis (CDA) only on the final episode of the last complete season of each drama namely Season 10, Episode 22 of *Bones* and Season 10, Episode 23 of *Criminal Minds*.

I searched each episode for instances of power and dominance in the text, then analysed each instance using semiotics to analyse the discourse, later interpreting my findings using thematic analyses in accordance to Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

KEY FINDINGS

The comparison highlighted numerous differences in the portrayal of individual team members throughout the two shows.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The series *Criminal Minds* appears to portray gender in a more balanced, nuanced manner than the series *Bones*. *Criminal Minds* does not conform to the stereotypical portrayal of successful women needing to sacrifice their femininity, although warmth and affection appear to be connoted as a weakness in the hard-nosed world of the FBI. In contrast, the naiveté and lack of emotion displayed by *Bones*'s Brennan perpetuates the stereotype of the successful woman deficient in feminine aspects of her character.

Relationships

The two shows portray interpersonal relationships within the teams very differently. Whilst *Criminal Minds*, depicts men and women successfully conducting platonic relationships, *Bones* cements the theory that friendships between single men and single women are eventually destined to morph into romances.

Both programmes emphasise the close, almost familial, ties between team members; ties which are shown as being important to people irrespective of gender. However male and female characters acknowledge these ties differently meaning that, according to these shows, family ties carry different connotations for men and women.

Gender roles

Both *Bones* and *Criminal Minds* show pregnancy as posing a temporary physical liability on women without diminishing their value or ability to contribute to the work at hand. In *Bones* domesticity is consigned to the realm of female responsibility whilst *Criminal Minds* does not feature domesticity for either gender.

Parenthood

The parents in *Criminal Minds* share childcare responsibilities with their partners or paid carers, possibly due to the team's frequent travel whilst in *Bones* parenthood is primarily the mother's responsibility. Nevertheless, both series presents expectant mothers and fathers as being equally anxious about parenthood.

The maternal instinct appears in both programmes as Callahan and Brennan take decisions with their children in mind. *Criminal Minds* accepts the individual woman's decision without imposing an 'acceptable' term of maternity leave.

Physical appearance

Physical appearance goes a long way to determine gendered portrayals in the media as it speaks to the level of sexual attractiveness expected of the characters.

The profilers in *Criminal Minds* are generally portrayed dressed in 'office wear' and it would be reasonable to conclude that the women of *Criminal Minds* are not overtly sexualised. *Bones* appears to sexualise its lead female characters more. Brennan's chin and neck are emphasised with dangly earrings whilst Sorayan and Angela's clothes emphasise their beauty and physical attractiveness. Interestingly, *Criminal Minds*'s Morgan wears sweatshirts emphasising his physique and attractiveness which is unusual in this genre.

Dealing with suspects - Criminal Minds

A key feature of *Criminal Minds* is the team's direct involvement in apprehending and questioning the suspect at the end of the episode. The show depicts both male and female investigators involved in the hunt, taking risks and being injured in the line of duty. They all seem to take their injuries in their stride, although Morgan appears to list his injuries proudly.

The series portrays the female characters as consciously using their femininity to apprehend suspects and to establish a rapport with female suspects during interviews.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated a shift in gender portrayals from those of previous series of the same genre. The modern crime drama features strong, assertive men and women who juggle their work and family commitments. Female investigators are accepted and respected by their male colleagues on the basis of their expertise and professionalism. However, the genre still has some way to go to portray complete gender equality; the appearance of female lead characters is still a major part of their on-screen persona and women are still more likely to be assigned 'caring' roles.