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Level: Grades 7-12

About the Author

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Lesson Plan

Perceptions of Race and Crime

Overview

This lesson makes students aware how the media's portrayals of race and crime can affect our attitudes towards various visible minority groups in our society. Students begin by deconstructing a poster of a black police officer that challenges racial stereotypes and respond to news articles about racial identification in crime reporting. As a class, students will follow news stories about crime for one month, analyzing and sorting the data according to how race is integrated into the stories. When the results have been tallied and discussed, students will complete a short paper on racial identification in stories about crime.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- develop an awareness of how media bias contributes to negative depictions of visible minorities in the media
- Understand the media's influence on society's perceptions of visible minorities

Preparation and Materials

For background information or other lessons about perceptions of race or perceptions of race and crime, read the selected resources on the right sidebar of this page.

- Create the [Policeman PSA](#) transparency

Photocopy student handouts:

- ["Crime Has No Culture or Race"](#)
- ["Crime Not Black and White"](#)
- [Five Angles on the Crime-Race Maze](#)

Procedure

Class Discussion

Place the [Policeman PSA](#) transparency onto the overhead projector. Ask your students:

- What is the message of this public service campaign?
- What stereotypes and assumptions does this ad rely on in order to be effective? How does it counteract them?
- Is this an effective ad? Why or why not?
- In his book *Mass Media and Popular Culture*, Barry Duncan uses the term "dangerous other" to describe our perceptions of certain individuals in society. Can you identify groups of people who might be stereotyped as "dangerous"? (*This list might include immigrants, teenagers, non-whites, motorcyclists and First Nation Peoples.*)
- From where do we get these beliefs? (*Environment, friends, family, churches, schools and the media all play a role in molding these attitudes.*)

Write the following on the chalkboard:

"Police said the suspect was described as a black man in his 20s..."

"Indian Found Murdered in New Town"

"Detectives are investigating the death of an Asian employee of a brokerage firm whose body was found by the company's owner yesterday...."

Ask your students:

- What do these news stories have in common?
- When is race an appropriate element in a story?
- Are the racial identifications used in these stories relevant? Why or why not?
- What are the problems surrounding unwarranted use of racial identity in crime-related stories?
- How much do you think the media contributes to public attitudes and beliefs about people from different cultures and races?

In 2000, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation conducted a study of racist reporting in Canadian English print media. Their findings raised many concerns about media bias and discrimination in the news. They discovered

- people of colour underrepresented and largely invisible in the media;
- misrepresentation and stereotyping of those people of colour who appeared in media coverage;

They concluded that "The media articulates and transmits powerful and negative narratives, images and ideas about ethno-racial minorities that can have a significant influence on the collective belief system of Canadian society" and voiced particular

concern over news coverage that continually links specific groups with criminal or dangerous activity. They called this the "racialization of crime reporting" and the "the language of otherness" that pervades the media.

But they did note that colour-coded news is not necessarily intentional on the part of the press, and that many factors contribute to racially biased or limited news reporting.

- ◆ Can you think what some of these factors might be?

First, there's the lack of diversity in the news industry. This is reflected in both ownership of mainstream media outlets and the producers, editors and journalists who select and report stories. (At last count, in 2000, 97.3 per cent of Canadian journalists were white.)

Also, Canadian media has become increasingly mainstream and concentrated – which is bad news for ethnic and visible minorities.

Add to this mix the increasing pressure to treat news reporting as another form of entertainment media, and you end up with a news industry that spends little time on issues that matter to visible minorities – such as immigration, integration, equality, race relations and cross-cultural understanding – in favour of more sensational stories

Unwarranted use of racial identity is hardly limited to crime stories. One way for reporters to check whether race or ethnicity is a proper identification factor in a story might be to ask whether the individual's race would be relevant if he or she were white. Would the headlines above have identified these people as 'white'?

Distribute "Crime Has No Culture or Race" to students.

- In her article, Susan Riley makes the distinction between "Asian crime" and "crime within the Asian community." What is the difference between these two terms?
- Why are we so quick to label crime with terms like "Asian crime," "Black crime," "Youth crime," etc.?
- What role does culture play in our perceptions of race and crime?

Distribute "Crime Not Black and White" to students.

In this article Randall Denley satirizes the media's use of racial identity when reporting on crime. To make his point, he has condensed a number of journalistic tools and techniques commonly used by reporters. (*For example, the use of police estimates of the percentage of crimes committed by whites, to validate concerns over this "white crime wave."*) Denley also uses satire to address some of the more serious issues surrounding race-identification and crime reporting.

- Ask students to identify the journalistic tools and techniques in this article.
- What are some of the more serious issues that are addressed?

Distribute Five Angles on the Crime-Race Maze to students.

Review the article's main points regarding how statistics on race and crime can be misrepresented in the media.

Activity

Over the next month, students are to collect newspaper and magazine stories relating to crime. As these articles are brought to class, students will analyze and sort them under the following categories:

- No racial identification
- Relevant racial identification
- Unnecessary racial identification

Where racial identification occurs, they will also take note of:

- Tools and techniques used in reporting the story
- The tone and perspective of the story
- The overall effect on the reader

At the end of the month, students will tally and post their total figures.

Once the total figures are tallied, students will complete a short paper that explores the issues associated with racial identification in stories about crime. Included in this paper will be what was learned from the month of monitoring stories relating to crime and a list of ethical guidelines for journalists.

Taking Charge — Students can send their results to the magazines and newspapers they surveyed. For articles that contained unnecessary racial identification, students may wish to contact the editor responsible, to request an explanation of the newspaper or magazine's rationale for making this distinction.

Evaluation

Short paper about racial identification in crime reporting.

Crime Has No Culture or Race



by Susan Riley
The Ottawa Citizen
January 12, 1993
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OPINION

If racism was always stark, violent and overt, it would be easy to recognize and easier to deal with. But unfortunately, racism can be mild and unremarkable, part of the daily texture of our lives.

Over the holiday, for example, three men were stabbed in a late-night brawl in the Saigon Capital restaurant on Somerset Street. The restaurant is Vietnamese: those involved in the fracas were of Asian origin.

Does this make it "Asian crime" as headlines in our newspaper and elsewhere suggested? Does the fact that some extortion was involved make the crime particularly Asian? And what Asians? Vietnamese? Chinese? Indonesian?

Or was it merely crime? Is any attempt to define it further careless prejudice or is it a vital aspect of competent police work? Last fall, when Ottawa high school students were involved in a drunken encounter with Hull police, no one talked about "white crime."

To be fair, a story in the Citizen concluded that there is no crime wave within Ottawa's Asian community. It also documented real concerns in Asian communities in Toronto and Vancouver, where thugs and drug-peddlers prey on their own kind and the larger society.

But this still isn't Asian crime. It is crime within the Asian community. The distinction is critical.

The Citizen story also quoted a Vietnamese-born lawyer, Nhung Thuy Hoang, who defends Asian-Canadians accused of various crimes. The most common charges according to her? Theft and wife assault.

These don't sound like Asian crimes: on the contrary, they are common to almost every culture. Imagine the uproar if we started referring to wife abuse as "male crime".

For all that, the Asian community does pose a special challenge to police forces, not because Asians are more mendacious by nature, but because their language and culture is so foreign.

In Vancouver and Toronto, police have had special Asian investigative units since the '70s. Newspapers occasionally feature lurid accounts of their struggles with "Asian

youth gangs" that operate protection rackets, smuggle drugs and manage prostitutes.

(Again the language is loaded. If a group of Asian boys wearing leather, chains and aggressive attitude shoves you of the sidewalk, is it an Asian youth gang or just a bunch of punks?)

Ottawa, too, has an Asian unit, formed in 1987, the only squad devoted to one ethnic community. Its professed aim is to assist, rather than target, Asian-Canadians.

Nhung Thuy Hoang applauds this approach, noting that "a lot of police are not very familiar with our culture."

She recalls one client, a Vietnamese woman, who was charged when she burned dry leaves in a city park – a common practice in her native country. Other Vietnamese are charged with abandonment when they let their children wander at large, as they used to in refugee camps.

Still others are mortified when their custom of showing children physical affection is interpreted by non-Asian neighbors as child abuse.

There is, says the lawyer, no need for protection from youth gangs within Ottawa's Asian community. But there is need for educated, sensitive policing.

What she is talking about, of course, is the other side of racism: a respectful recognition of difference. Only when we – the police and society at large – achieve that will "Asian crime" disappear.

Crime Not Black and White



COMMENT

by **Randall Denley**
The Ottawa Citizen

July 28, 1994

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Sometimes to see an issue right way up, you need to stand it on its head. Imagine a story that read like this:

Ottawa police are swamped in their attempts to stem a wave of crime that ranges from fraud, to dealing drugs, to murder.

"There's one common thread in all of this," says Ottawa Police Chief Brian Ford. "In each case, the criminals are white."

While statistics on crime are not recorded by race, Ottawa police estimate that fully 90 per cent of crimes committed locally are by whites.

Police are calling for the hiring of more white officers, to help them better understand the customs of the white criminals.

Ford, who is white, is frank about the racial element in the crime spree. "Some of these families have been in Canada for generations. The scary part is, the criminals look just like you or me."

Police sources say that white criminals often wear sports gear or even business suits, but there is no distinctive dress code that could alert potential victims to the presence of a white criminal.

Spokesmen for local whites were shocked by the numbers, but defensive.

Jacquelin Holzman is a member of Ottawa City Council, an all white group that is believed to exert considerable influence within the white community. She goes by the street name The Mayor.

"Certainly the white people I know are the exception here," Holzman said.

"Land developers, lobbyists, people like that. All fine citizens. We sometimes forget about them when the media write another story about white crime."

The figures on white crime are "stunning, spectacular, stupendous" said Counsellor Richard Cannings. Cannings, who is white, is proposing a series of one-way streets and road closings to keep white criminals out of his ward.

Some criminologists question whether race is the dominating factor in determining criminal activity, pointing to poverty and lack of jobs.

"If government could find a way to put white people to work, many wouldn't need to turn to crime," says Prof. John Smith.

Spokesmen for Canada's native peoples were relieved that the white crime problem has finally been brought out into the open.

"We want genealogical testing done on these people so they can be deported to their homelands. Let England and Ireland deal with their own problems," said one.

Sounds silly when you put it that way doesn't it? Almost as silly as having to seriously discuss the notion that because some blacks are criminals, all blacks are no good.

We have read in the last few days about Jamaican posses, the latest ethnic crime threat. Now Jamaican-Canadians have to defend themselves again. Like when Ben Johnson, the famous Canadian runner became a Jamaican again after he used steroids. Like when Clinton Gayle, accused of murdering a Toronto police officer, became a Jamaican although he has lived in this country since he was eight.

One has to feel sorry for Jamaican-Canadians coping with the exaggerated publicity and no doubt fearing the white crime wave too.

Five Angles on the Crime-Race Maze: What's Wrong With These Numbers?

The facilitators distributed copies of the chart, **Five Angles on the Crime-Race Maze: What's Wrong With These Numbers?** They then walked participants through a discussion of the points rigorously brought out by journalist Gay Abbate in the highlighted boxes and commentary of the chart, as well as in the accompanying article that was published with it in The Globe and Mail, June 11, 1994.

This is a good illustration of the need for great vigilance when linking data on criminal activity and other factors, such as skin colour: it is a complex "intellectual minefield".

It is also a good example of the positive contribution solid investigative journalists can make to the clarification of issues important for accurate community understanding, and more effective action on the real problems to which we must attend.

Five angles on the crime-race maze

What's Wrong With These Numbers?

We tend to invest statistics with tremendous authority. But like any other information, how useful they are depends on how and why they are collected.

These numbers were compiled from records collected and distributed every day to the media by the Metropolitan Toronto Police. *Globe and Mail* reporter Gay Abbate sifted through each day's records for 1992 and 1993 and picked out robberies and attempted robberies and the victims description of each robber. She then sorted the suspected robbers into groups according to the race the police had recorded each.

(Toronto police are not allowed to compile such data themselves)

The *Globe and Mail* attempted this exercise to show the difficulties in collecting statistics by race. While the chart conveys some information, the overwhelming number of caveats show how unreliable such numbers can be.

Many people think any attempt to link crime with the skin colour of a suspect is spurious. Other believe that if the method of collecting them were improved, they could say a great deal about discrimination against a particular group.

REPORTED ROBBERIES AND ATTEMPTED ROBBERIES IN TORONTO							
Compiled from the Metropolitan Police major occurrence reports							
Year	Black	White	Oriental	South Asian	Aboriginal	Unknown	TOTAL
1992	2,720	1,835	314	99	22	516	5,506
1993	2,867	1,612	229	106	24	384	5,222
TOTAL	5,587	3,447	543	205	46	900	10,728
% of total robberies	52.1	32.1	5.1	1.9	0.4	8.4	100

"Reported" - Only about one-third of robberies are reported to police.

"Robberies" - Robbery is one hundreds of offences in the Criminal Code. Some studies have shown that crimes such as robbery are linked to socio-economic status.

"Toronto" - These numbers are from Metropolitan Toronto alone, and are not representative of Canada.

"Occurrence" - Only about half of reported robberies make it to the occurrence sheets. Which police officers are making this decision? What criteria are they using?

"Suspects" - Only about one third of the suspects are eventually charged. Even fewer are convicted.

"Black" - Who decided what category the suspect fits into? Are dark skinned, non-black suspects included here? Are victims' perceptions reliable?

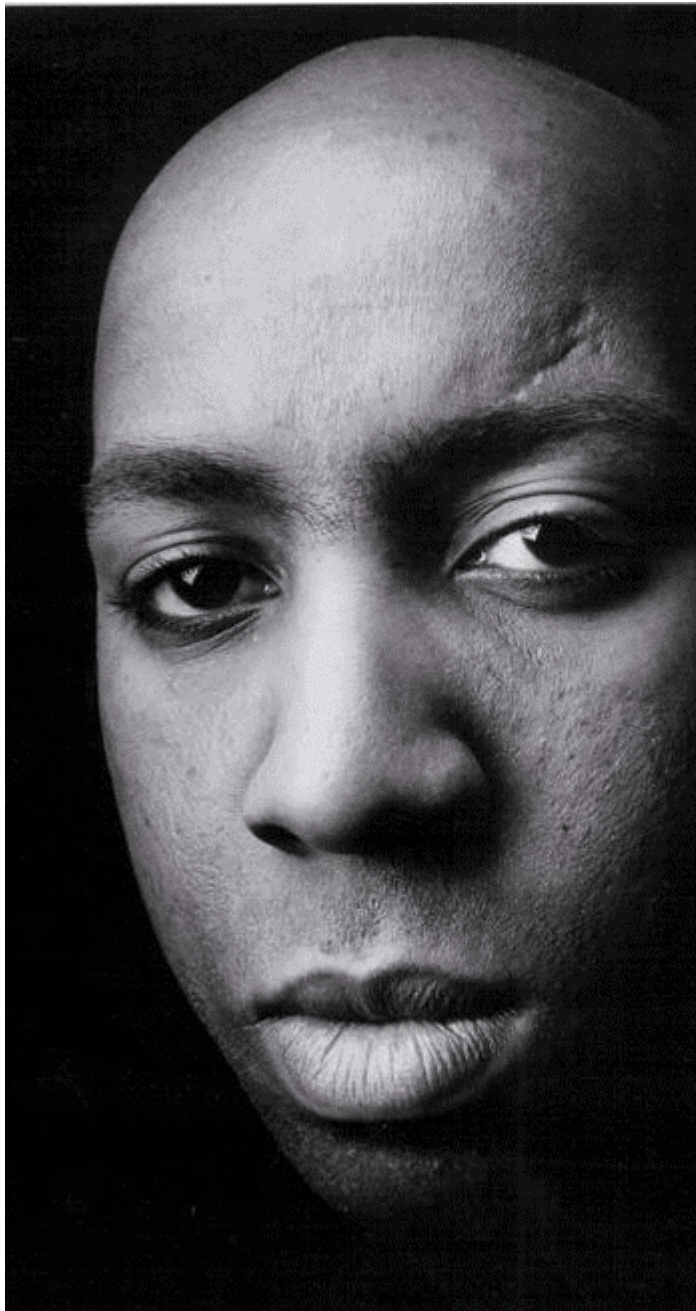
"Oriental" - A suspect has a black mother and a Chinese father. Which category does he fit into?

"5,587" - Are these 5, 500 individual suspects, or 550 who may have robbed 10 times each?

"10,728" - Because many robberies are committed by more than one person, more than one person, there are many more suspects than incidents. In 1992, 2,700 reported robberies appeared on the sheets. In 1993, the figure was 2,719.

Overhead #1

Policeman PSA



Michael Conrad.
Male. Age 28.
Trafficking.
Armed Robbery.
Assault and Battery.
Extortion.
Rape.
Murder.
Apprehended
January 1994 by
Joseph Cruthers,
shown here.
Urban Alliance
on Race Relations