

Investigating CSI: Ideology And Crime Scene Drama

*Robert W. Pineda-Volk, Kimberly C. Philbin
Shippensburg University*

In 2000, the first CSI: Crime Scene Investigation came on the scene. Taking its cue from the 1980's television drama *Quincy, M.E.*, this show's focus on forensic science launched a genre that stretched across fictional (e.g. *Crossing Jordan*, *Medical Investigation*, *Bones*), nonfictional (e.g. *48 Hours Mystery*, *Forensic Files*), and even quasi nonfictional (e.g. *Psychic Detectives*) programming. Further invigorated by the two spin-offs – *CSI: Miami*, beginning in 2002, and *CSI: NY* two years later - forensic shows provide the grist for several cable networks, most notably *TRU* (formerly *Court TV*) and *ID* (*Investigation Discovery*). Other crime dramas, though generally not considered part of this television category, such as *NCIS* and *Criminal Minds*, also emphasize laboratory analysis of collected evidence. Thus, the influence of the CSI shows extend deep into the popular culture, and affect public perceptions accordingly.

The CSI series expertly uses music, images, characters, and subjects to convey the impression that the show is trendy and cutting edge. Thus, rock music from *The Who* opens each episode, and tedious laboratory work is made to look exciting through the clever use of contemporary music, lighting, camera shots, and attractive technicians. Set on the stage of Las Vegas, the original CSI uses the excesses of tourism, as well as unusual characters and stories, to explore and expose complex human behavior, ostensibly through objective lenses. *CSI: Miami*, with its splashy, almost cartoonish, colors revels in “exotic” scenes, complete with a Latin flavor, beach scenes, bikini-clad women, and party-goers. Against the backdrop of a somewhat darker city, *CSI: NY* uses science to unravel complex riddles in highly unusual situations. These shows combine the images of contemporary culture with the objective perspective of science to present the impression of being non-judgmental and modern.

This paper goes beneath these surface images of tolerance and objectivity by examining ways that the CSIs are reactionary. To be clear, the position taken here is that these shows do more than merely portray individual crusaders in search of justice. They also work to legitimize the criminal justice system and reinforce social hierarchies. Given its longevity, influence, and sustained popularity, the original CSI will be the primary focus of this study. However, the additional series allow patterns to be identified that go beyond single program idiosyncrasy, especially in regard to gender and ethnic depictions. The example of marginalized women certainly stands out.

Legitimizing the Criminal Justice System

The O.J. Simpson murder trial of 1997 helped expose serious flaws in the collection, processing, and reporting of evidence in criminal cases. Followed by other well-publicized cases, the very integrity of the criminal justice system, including the forensic laboratories, which had until this time avoided public scrutiny, was called into question. The stakes were very high, indeed. The loss of public confidence could affect juries throughout the nation, and call into question a significant portion of cases where forensic evidence, and accompanying testimony, was significant in securing convictions. If not crisis, the criminal justice system certainly was in a state of turmoil and uncertainty.

It is within this social context that CSI appeared on television. Crime scene investigators become detectives (see Ramsland 2006). A reassuring white patriarch, Gil Grissom, oversees a team of committed, competent investigators who follow procedures, at least when dealing with evidence. When crime scenes produce evidence that is outside the usual, which happens frequently, innovation occurs with

insight and certainty. The agents are objective processors of evidence, committed to the science of forensics.

In time this image of objective forensic science expands to a plethora of television shows and networks. In this world, fingerprints don't lie, a single hair leads to an evil perpetrator, and teeth bites are routinely processed according to established protocol. Corrupted police and compromised, if not fabricated, evidence disappear from public view as confidence is restored.

Yet during this period evidence was mounting that the public should very well be concerned about the veracity of prosecutorial evidence. Scandals have been exposed in hundreds of cases involving FBI facilities, and police agencies in Michigan, Texas, and West Virginia (Moore 2009b). The Innocence Project cites 137 convictions overturned by DNA evidence alone, the majority (60%) involving the reporting of forensic evidence (Moore, 2009a). Problems associated with fingerprints, virtually always portrayed as infallible in the CSIs, were brought to light in the rather sensational case of Brandon Mayfield, a Portland, OR lawyer who was wrongfully arrested after U.S. forensics analysts erroneously matched his fingerprints to the Madrid train bombings in 2004 (Moore 2009a). Interagency rivalry also illuminates some of the weaknesses in crime forensics. In 2007, the FBI was criticized strongly by a Secret Service forensics expert for techniques developed "on an ad-hoc basis without proper research" (Moore 2009a).

The most serious challenge to the integrity of forensic evidence to date, however, appeared in the recently published National Academy of Science Research Council's *Strengthening Forensic Sciences in the United States* (2009). Citing systematic problems facing the nation's 389 publically funded crime laboratories, including a disparity and shortage of resources, understaffing, and inadequate training, the study takes aim at the techniques used in collecting evidence – fingerprints, firearms examination, bloodstain pattern analysis, bite marks, hair, fire and explosive analysis, handwriting – concluding "With the exception of nuclear DNA analysis, however, no forensic method has been rigorously shown to have the capacity to consistently, and with a high degree of certainty, demonstrate a connection between evidence and a specific individual or source" (S-5). In the absence of national standards, the very methods highlighted by forensic shows lack reliability and validity.

The suggestion here is that the CSIs, and the television genre it spawned, constitute the ideological antidote to a reality wrought with compromised evidence.

CSI's Fetish Fetish

The early French sociologist Emile Durkheim observed that one of the functions of deviance is to define normative behavior, that is, to draw boundaries between what is acceptable and unacceptable to a society or group. In a similar vein, marginalized groups may be stigmatized, in this case serving to define who is normal by identifying who is not. The contention here is that CSI's frequent foray into behavior considered unusual and extreme by the mainstream society, as well as episodes centered on unfamiliar and stigmatized groups, fulfills this function. While ostensibly these behaviors and groups are observed through the perspective of objective science, the fascination with the margins of society reveals a sensational, expose, and voyeuristic quality. This quality reinforces the negativity associated with these persons and behaviors, while the tragic consequences connected to homicide issues a warning about them.

Specific sexual fetishes are many. Examples include clowns ("Getting Off"), vampires ("Suckers," "Lucky Strike"), animals ("Fur and Loathing," "The Theory of Everything"), infant role-playing ("King Baby"), children ("Burn Out"), obese women ("Big Middle"), and sadomasochism. Other subjects of obsession intertwined in murder include cannibalism ("Fallen Idols"), violent pornography ("Snuff," "The Chick Chop Flick Shop"), aliens ("Viva Las Vegas," "Iced," "Leaping Lizards"), food ("Dog Eat Dog"), spouse swapping ("Swap Meet") and reenactment ("Who Shot Sherlock").

Sadomasochism is the most striking example of this theme. Encompassing many episodes spread over the entire run of seasons, this subplot traces supervisor Gil Grissom's relationship with Lady Heather, an S and M expert and club owner. Grissom's infatuation with this independent, smart, and mysterious "dominatrix" is tempered by her club's association with murder. Ultimately, Lady Heather pays a tragic price for her activities when her only daughter, from whom she has hidden her professional life, is murdered and left in the middle of the desert ("Pirates of the Third Reich"). Toward the end of his stint

on CSI, distraught over the murder of his protégé CSI agent Warrick Brown, a disillusioned Grissom turns to her for comfort and bed.

Marginalized and stigmatized groups make frequent appearance on CSI. While some of these groups could be considered above (e.g., food obsession caused by disability), there are many other examples that deserve attention. For example, transgendered persons (“Getting Off,” “Ch-Ch-Changes,” “The Case of the Cross-Dressing Carp”), religious cults (“Shooting Stars,” “Go to Hell”) obese people (“Big Middle”), people of short stature (“A Little Murder”), people with congenital hypertrichosis (excessive body hair) (“Werewolves”), and mental patients (“Committed”) have all been subject to the CSI writers.

An interesting parallel can be drawn between some of these subjects and the “tragic mulatto” stereotype historically found in films (see Pineda-Volk 2007). While these films expressed a level of empathy with people of mixed ancestry, their focus on “passing” and its disastrous results, issued a warning against interracial relationships. Similarly, tragic results occurred when a person of short stature sought to marry the normal-sized daughter of a short-statured couple. Similar consequences occurred when a man with congenital hypertrichosis tried to marry his friend’s sister. While CSI agents may have treated the individuals involved with respect and compassion, the negative consequences were clear, as well as the message that certain boundaries must not be crossed.

Sociobiology

The goal of sociobiology is to, in proponent’s E.O. Wilson’s word, “biologize” all social behavior (Wilson 1975). Couched in evolutionary language and theory, efforts are made to explain human behavior by identifying parallel behaviors in the nonhuman world (e.g. fish, insects, birds), exploring their conditions and expression, and reasoning back to humans. Fausto-Sterling (1995) has criticized this approach for ignoring the differences between learned (human) and instinctual (nonhuman) behavior, as well as the “biological storytelling” that invariably occurs when inferring back to human behavior. Another problem is the nonrandom basis on which species are selected to observe, undermining any attempt to generalize across species. The sociobiological model, despite its promise of simple and definite answers to complex questions, is inherently conservative due to its premise that all social behavior and institutions are explained primarily through biological factors. Thus, intentional efforts to change existing behaviors and social arrangements clash with the forces of natural selection that have been at work for millennia.

In the original *CSI*, allusions to sociobiological thinking come from the observations made by Dr. Gil Grissom, the show’s leading star. Grissom is not only the crime laboratory supervisor and recognized genius, but he is the resident expert on insects, the “bug man.” On several occasions Grissom makes reference to the sociobiological literature or makes observations based on its assumptions. In one episode (“Down the Drain”), when an agent is contemplating on how a mother could cover up and protect her son’s murderous behavior, Grissom notes that a parent’s unconditional love of offspring serves to perpetuate the species. Another time, drawing from clams which have the ability to change sexes, he comforts a transgendered person by suggesting that perhaps having two sexes is the result of mutation, and thus abnormal. In all of these cases the underlying message, reinforced by Grissom’s status, is that social behavior is biologically driven, and thus, not subject to fundamental change.

Bureaucracy and Internal Affairs

The social upheaval in the United States that began in the 1950s Civil Rights Movement and accelerated during the 1960s drew attention to the abuses of the criminal justice system. Institutional changes were implemented with the intention of curbing police misconduct and bolstering the civil and constitutional rights of the public. Police and prosecutorial procedures were more clearly defined, as evidenced by *Miranda*, which provided arresting officers with a list of rights to be read and understood by persons subject to arrest and questioning. To counter police misconduct, especially brutality, and to ensure that proper procedures are followed, major police department across the nation established offices, usually called Internal Affairs Divisions, to investigate complaints and potential violations. In some cases, civilian participation and control have been mandated to investigate complaints due to the public perception that police departments have an inherent conflict of interest in policing themselves.

The CSIs have conformed to the conventional depiction of Internal Affairs Divisions, and bureaucratic procedures in general, found in crime dramas (e.g. *Third Watch*, *Law & Order*, *The Shield*, *NYPD Blue*, *The Wire*), both in television and film (e.g. *Lethal Weapon*, *Internal Affairs*, *The Negotiator*), as hampering the work of dedicated police departments. In this world, criminals are released on technicalities and Internal Affairs officers are snakes out to bring good cops down, and whose actions violate and undermine the “code,” the unwritten rules found in police culture that demand that police officers support one another.

While occasionally recognizing the importance of following procedures, especially when processing evidence, internal affairs is cast in a negative light. Perhaps the best example involves a subplot played out across several episodes where CSI agent Greg Sanders’ actions are called into question at a commission hearing. The incident involved Sanders coming to the rescue of a person being viciously attacked by a group of youths, who had been implicated in a rash of brutal assaults in Las Vegas. Rather than waiting for backup, and at great risk to his personal safety, Sanders drives his SUV into the dark alley in an attempt to chase them off. When the group turns on him, he accelerates into the crowd, fatally injuring an African-American college student, Demetrius James. Then Sanders is attacked, and is seriously injured himself.

Despite saving the life of the man, who testifies to the facts of the case, as well as his eternal gratitude, family members of the deceased youth and the commission challenge Sanders’ motivation, character, and actions, with race providing an undercurrent. Despite additional evidence from the crime scene found by his colleagues at CSI, the commission fails to exonerate him completely. Under these circumstances, and bowing to political pressure, the City settles a wrongful death lawsuit, and the mother of the dead attacker is awarded a handsome sum.

Reinforcing Gender and Racial Hierarchies

The subplot sketched above is played out along racial lines. Even a college student of good standing, joins a cult-like gang that preys on innocent and vulnerable individuals who stray from the pack. In a subsequent episode, agents go to the James family’s home while investigating the death of a woman in which the younger brother, Aaron, is implicated. What they find is a luxurious house, which was presumably purchased with settlement money. The door is opened by Marlena James, a single mother, drink in hand, still belligerent, in partying mode. Thus, the black family is painted as pathological, fostered by stereotypical depictions of African Americans as violent, lazy, alcoholic, and irresponsible.

Similarly, in another episode (“Burn Out”) a convicted pedophile is a suspect in a case involving two missing boys. While eventually cleared of the crime, he is filmed in way that makes him look particularly menacing (dark, eyes glowing), and circumstantial evidence is collected from his home with details implying sinister acts. There is an unmistakable association with evil and animal-like predation of children with blackness.

The three CSI series conform to a pattern that reinforces white patriarchy. While they have different personalities and approaches – Grissom as the aloof intellectual who refuses to carry a gun; Horatio Cain as the great protector of women, children, and the heterosexual family in his Miami; and Mac Taylor, as the less expressive, ex-military and straight-arrow patriot - they are all white, somewhat older men with an uncanny knack for figuring out complex crimes. They are supported in their crime fighting missions by attractive white women, who are second in command: Catherine Willows, Calleigh Duquesne, and Stella Bonasera, respectively. They remain loyal at all times. While Willows eventually is promoted to daytime supervisor, there is no doubt that Grissom remains in charge, and the person who others look to for guidance and expertise.

The women of CSI fit a particular profile – young, white, heterosexual, and attractive (according to mainstream cultural standards). All three of these women, and most of the regular female characters, are highly sexualized. For example, Catherine Willows is a former nightclub stripper, who is not above using a little tease to acquire evidence in an effort to solve a case (see, e.g. “Leaving Las Vegas”). Frequently, CSI agents are shot in provocative positions while examining evidence, typically with music, lighting and camera shots adding to the effect. Perhaps most unsettling are scenes displaying cleavage over dead bodies.

Gender and Ethnic Representation among CSI Characters

The representation of different groups in media sources has long been used as a barometer to measure inclusion and marginalization in mainstream culture. Content analysis was used to identify the gender and ethnic backgrounds of two groups from each series; the main characters and the regular characters. Main crime scene investigation agents, medical examiners, as well as “stars” identified at the beginning of a show were included in this category. Regular characters were identified as those persons who appeared in at least ten episodes. Biographical sketches posted on the internet were used to identify ethnic background in cases of uncertainty. For purposes of analysis, Latinos were excluded from “whites” (“white, non-Hispanic”).

Table 1 presents the results of this analysis for gender. Male characters are overrepresented among main characters (61%), regular characters (56%) and overall (59%). Only CSI: Miami depicts gender equity among main characters, while CSI: NY had no regular male roles, making this the only category where females outnumbered males.

Table 2 breaks down CSI roles by ethnicity. White characters, both main and regular, outnumbered African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans in all three series. Whites were found in 81% of all main characters, 77% of regular characters, and 79% of all roles. African American women and are in particular short supply with only one main character (CSI: Miami’s Alexx Woods) and two regular roles in all shows. There also is only one Asian American male (CSI’s Archie Johnson), and no females.

Table 3 allows us to compare their proportional representation with the actual populations of Las Vegas, Miami/Dade County, and New York City. The results are striking, as no ethnic group was represented at levels proportionate to their numbers in their respective urban areas. Findings also found that CSI: NY was an extreme. Despite having proportionately large African American (19.8%) and Latino (27.4%) populations, this show has only one African American role and no Latinos.

Victim and Perpetrator Representation

Another question that emerges in this analysis concerns the gender and ethnic background of victims and perpetrators in the CSI series. To address this issue, one episode was randomly chosen from each complete season for each of the three series. At this point, results were tabulated from nineteen episodes.

Overall, and perhaps against expectations, the results show an over-representation of females, and an under-representation of ethnic minorities among victims. Out of 35 victims, 22 (67%) were male, 10 (30%) female, with one transgendered person. In terms of ethnicity, 30 (86%) were white, 2 (6%) were African American, 1 (3%) Latino, and one being unidentifiable. By comparison, according to national crime statistics for 2007, and excluding unknown cases, 79% of victims were male, 48% white, 50% black, and 2% other.

Perpetrators were similarly distributed. Excluding self-inflicted deaths, 23 (79%) of perpetrators were male and 6 (21%) were female. In terms of ethnicity, 26 (90%) of perpetrators were white, 2 (7%) African American, and one Latino. Again, based on national crime data for 2007, and excluding a large number of unknown cases, 90% of murder offenders were male, 44% white, 54% black, and 2% other. Thus, the number of female perpetrators was more than double the number expected based on evidence, while the number of African-American perpetrators was a mere fraction of what would be expected.

The preliminary findings, then, indicate that whites are over-represented among victims of homicides, as well as perpetrators. This representation deviates from official crime reports which show that ethnic minorities are over-represented among victims and perpetrators of homicide. Females also are overrepresented.

Beyond Tokenism

The dearth of ethnic minority members, especially African Americans, in the CSI series magnifies the significance of the few roles that are present. The character of Warrick Brown, as the longest running role of any African American in these shows, deserves further examination.

Brown is portrayed as someone who is constantly struggling with past demons from a troubled background. Beginning with the pilot, he is painted as irresponsible. Here he leaves a new CSI agent (white, female) alone at a crime scene. He faces suspension after the murderer returns to the scene and attacks her, inflicting wounds from which she subsequently dies. In another episode (“Random Acts of

Violence”, Brown enables a youth center director, and mentor from his past, to track a suspect implicated in a drive-by shooting that killed his sleeping daughter. The youth director beats him badly in an act of vigilante justice, only to learn later of his innocence. In later episodes, Brown rushes into a short-lived marriage.

Brown is depicted as having addictions, including gambling (see “Sex, Lies, and Larvae”) and drugs (see “Cockroaches”). He also is implicated in two murders, one of an “exotic” dancer (“Lying Down with Dogs”) and a mob figure (“For Gedda”).

Again, we find the stereotypical depictions of African Americans as violent, alcoholic, drug addicted, and irresponsible, common in U.S. popular culture historically, being perpetuated in the Warrick Brown character.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the CSI crime dramas from a critical perspective. This examination found a number of ways in which, following most police dramas, these television programs work to legitimize the criminal justice system in the United States. They portray police agents as being objective experts who collect and process evidence in face of challenges from bureaucratic procedures, internal affairs divisions, and civil rights protections. In addition, this analysis found multiple ways in which gender and ethnic hierarchies were reinforced. These methods ranged from filming techniques which objectify women and demonize people of color to character development. Finally, content analysis revealed women and ethnic minorities were under-represented among main and regular characters, and females were overrepresented among victims and perpetrators. At the same time, ethnic minorities were under-represented among victims and offenders. This finding leads to the conclusion that the CSIs operate in a very white world, where ethnic minority members provide window dressing.

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Table 1: CSI Cast* Representation by Gender, All Seasons (2000-2008)

	Main		Regular		Total	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Las Vegas	8 (67%)	4 (33%)	14 (61%)	9 (39%)	22 (63%)	13 (37%)
Miami	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	8 (62%)	5 (38%)	13 (56%)	10 (43%)
New York	6 (67%)	3 (33%)	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	6 (50%)	6 (50%)
Total	19 (61%)	12 (39%)	22 (56%)	17 (45%)	41 (59%)	29 (41%)

Table 2: CSI Cast Representation by Ethnicity, All Seasons (2000-2008)

	Regular			
	White (%)	African American (%)	Latino (%)	Asian (%)
Las Vegas	19 (83%)	1 (4%)	2 (9%)	0 (0%)
Miami	8 (60%)	1 (8%)	4 (31%)	0 (0%)
New York	3 (89%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	30 (77%)	2 (5%)	6 (15%)	0 (0%)

	Main			
	White (%)	African American (%)	Latino (%)	Asian (%)
Las Vegas	11 (92%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Miami	6 (60%)	1 (10%)	3 (30%)	0 (0%)
New York	8 (89%)	1 (11%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	25 (81%)	3 (10%)	3 (10%)	0 (0%)

Total			
White (%)	African American (%)	Latino (%)	Asian (%)
30 (86%)	2 (6%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)
14 (61%)	2 (9%)	7 (31%)	0 (0%)
11 (92%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
55 (79%)	5 (7%)	9 (13%)	1 (1%)

* Main characters were defined as CSI field agents, Medical Examiners, and those appearing in a show's introduction. Regular characters appeared in at least 10 episodes.

Table 3: Actual Ethnic Composition (2005 – 2007, U.S. Census Bureau)

	White, Non- Hispanic (%)	African American (%)	Latino (%)	Asian (%)
Las Vegas	74.1%	12.4%	14.7%	4.3%
Miami / Dade County	17.9%	19.8%	62.0%	1.5%
New York	44.1%	25.2%	27.4%	4.3%