

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Sociology Department, Faculty Publications

Sociology, Department of

---

2013

# Justice League? Depictions of Justice in Children's Superhero Cartoons

Lisa A. Kort-Butler

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, lkortbutler2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub>



Part of the [Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons](#)

---

Kort-Butler, Lisa A., "Justice League? Depictions of Justice in Children's Superhero Cartoons" (2013). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 204.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/204>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## Justice League? Depictions of Justice in Children's Superhero Cartoons

Lisa A. Kort-Butler

Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska–Lincoln,  
711 Oldfather Hall, P.O. Box 880324, Lincoln, NE 68588, USA;  
email [lkortbutler2@unl.edu](mailto:lkortbutler2@unl.edu)

### Abstract

The literature argues that media depictions of criminal justice present messages that conform to and promote the dominant ideology about the crime problem and how to solve it. Research has focused on television news and adult programs, but little research has examined messages about justice present in children's shows. To fill this gap, an ethnographic content analysis of children's cartoons was conducted, using a sample of episodes from *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Spider-Man*, and *Justice League Unlimited*. Several themes emerged. First, the justice system is often depicted as ill equipped to handle serious crime. Second, story lines suggested that the justice system is relatively weak, plagued by corruption or ineffectiveness. Third, heroes are driven by their notions of justice, recognizing that only they can stop the worst criminals and are morally obligated to do so. Fourth, heroes are willing to use force to capture offenders, but they also use brain power. Finally, although heroes work largely outside the law, they are supportive of the efforts of honest justice system actors. In sum, these shows provide messages about justice that are consistent with and supportive of the dominant ideology that derides rehabilitation and emphasizes incapacitation. They are also congruent with messages, images, and frames presented in adult-oriented media. By drawing on moral elements and the problem frame, they act as cultural primers by which young people may interpret subsequent imagery of crime and justice. The consistency across genres contributes to the social reality of crime and control.

**Keywords:** media and crime, media and justice, cartoons, superheroes, cultural criminology

The literature argues that media depictions of justice generally present messages that conform to and promote the dominant ideology about "the crime problem" and how to manage it. In particular, television has become a primary medium through which cultural ideas about justice are disseminated and reinforced and through which justice-related policy debates are shaped (Barlow, Barlow, & Chiricos, 1995). Most research focuses on television news and adult programming, while few studies have explored the images and messages about justice present in children's programming. Particularly for children, who have limited nonmedia sources

of information about justice issues, television may be even more significant for defining the socially constructed reality of criminal justice (Surette, 2003).

Research on children's programming often concentrates on the level of violent content to which children may be exposed or how depictions of violence may translate into behavior by the child (Blumberg, Bierwirth, & Schwartz, 2008). Research remains equivocal regarding the effects of television viewing on behavior, but studies suggest that young people's programming includes large levels of broadly defined violence. For example, data from National Television Violence Study revealed that 97% of superhero shows depicted violence (Wilson et al., 2002). In these shows, "good" characters were compelled to use violence to protect or save others. Relative to other types of children's shows, the characters' use of violence was often portrayed as justified or morally correct.

Many superhero shows draw their characters from comic books. The depictions of justice in comics tend to conform to dominant ideologies about justice and support vigilantism so long as the ends justify the means (Adkinson, 2008; Coogan, 2006; Fingerroth, 2004). Although print media like comics and electronic visual media like cartoons are similar in their constructed images, television provides a much wider diffusion of those images (Surette, 1998). Children who have never read a comic are nonetheless familiar with popular heroes like Batman and Spider-Man (Fingerroth, 2004). Indeed, with the merchandising machine that accompanies every new movie blockbuster, heroes would be difficult to avoid.

A casual review of superhero shows reveals that they regularly deal with criminal justice issues. Despite the popularity of the superhero genre in comics and film, few scholars interested in mediated constructions of justice have analyzed the images and meanings associated with televised superhero cartoons. A more systematic analysis is warranted in order to reveal how these children's shows construct ideas about criminal justice for two reasons. First, if cultural criminologists are correct in asserting that "mediated processes of visual production and cultural exchange now constitute the experience of crime, self, and society" (Hayward, 2010, p. 1), then children's shows contribute to the infusion of crime images into a cultural environment where such images are as "real" as crime and justice practices themselves. Second, if the ideas and imagery in children's shows are similar to those scholars have noted in adult-oriented media, then children's shows act as cultural primers for understanding later messages about crime control.

In this article, I first describe the dominant ideology surrounding criminal justice, particularly its emphasis on punitive punishment philosophies. Next, I review the role of the television media and comic books in promoting this ideology. Then, I present the results of an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) of three popular superhero cartoons, focusing on representations of the criminal justice system and messages regarding justice and control. Finally, I examine the images and meanings of social control revealed in these cartoons vis-à-vis the dominant ideology of criminal justice.

## Literature Review

### The Dominant Ideology of Crime and Control

Since the mid-1970s and accelerating during Reagan-Bush years, the dominant ideological position has coalesced around a decidedly neoclassical (in terms of revisiting the "rational" offender) and conservative orientation, which has continued to shape the rhetoric and policy of conservatives, centrists, and liberals alike (Hagan, 2010; Melossi, 2000). This shift in the state of Americans' ideas about crime and social control has been variously described as changing "sensibilities" about penal culture (Tonry, 2004), the new "culture of control" (Garland, 2001), and a "culture of fear" (Simon, 2007).

According to Unnever and Cullen (2010), each of these theoretical arguments reveals two essential components of the dominant ideology of crime and control associated with the shift. First, the ideology rejects the social welfare paradigm and its associated emphasis on addressing the root causes of crime and rehabilitating offenders. Second, the ideology advocates for harsh punishment of offenders to protect potential individual victims and society at large. The resulting policies, as illustrated by the Sentencing Reform Act, patently rejected the rehabilitation model and revived punishment philosophies centered on deterrence, just desserts, and incapacitation (Nagel, 1990).

### Television, Comics, and the Ideology of Crime and Control

In telling stories, the media usually follow the established narrative about crime and control, thus reproducing and reinforcing the assumptions that legitimate the present criminal justice system (Lofquist, 1997). The media, particularly television, is the public's primary frame of reference for issues related to the control and punishment of crime, focusing attention on certain kinds of situations and offering interpretations for how to understand them (Barak, 1994; Eschholz, 1997). Research confirms that such programming is informed by the conservative ideologies that underlie modern crime control policies (Cavender & Fishman, 1998).

The principal theme of adult crime-related television programming—dramas and reality shows—is justice, that is, the capture and punishment of offenders (Cavender, 1998; Eschholz, 2003). The focus of these shows on arrest and conviction, to the exclusion or derision of options like treatment, probation, or parole, implies that incarceration is *the* option (Eschholz, Mallard, & Flynn, 2004). Moreover, the discourse of fear surrounding crime coverage and corresponding prominence of tough-on-crime rhetoric in both news and other programming not only encourages public reliance on punitive formal social control, but also makes it appear to be common sense (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999; Cavender, 2004).

In the comics, the superhero mythos reinforces the notion that the status quo is positive, but it is constantly under attack (Coogan, 2006). Superhero comic narratives generally offer tacit approval for conservative models of crime and justice (Stoddart, 2006). For example, Batman comics experienced a reinvention in the 1980s, most notably in Frank Miller's portrayal of Batman as a "right-wing moralist" (Wright, 2001, p. 267), which coincided with upward shifts in the crime rate and more punitive approaches to justice (Adkinson, 2008). In these comics, Batman's acts of violence are seen morally "good" because only "good" violence can save the weakness of liberalism from the strength of evil criminals (Newman, 1993). In an analysis of a contemporary sample of Superman and Batman comics, Reynolds and Henson (2010) found that story lines in 87% of the sample focused on crime control, compared to 13% that focused on due process. Moreover, justified use of force was about one and half times more common than unjustified use of force. Vollum and Adkinson (2003) concluded from their analysis of the Superman and Batman titles that the representations of crime and justice within these narratives are closely aligned with the conservative orientation to criminal justice.

At the same time, comics lend support to the leading cultural view on crime and justice, they must also contend with the vigilante and often violent nature of hero justice. After all, both vigilantism and violence involve illegal behavior. Superman never has time for the regular, due process procedures of criminal justice (Newman, 1990), and the violence with which Superman and Batman carry out their missions is often unrelenting (Newman, 1993). As Newman (1993) described

Batman does not appeal to a higher authority for justice. Batman is justice. The police of Gotham City know this .... A fair trial, sentencing, and subsequent punishment of crooks are of peripheral importance. Rather, the punishment and judgment are mete out at once, through Batman's violence (p. 307).

Adkinson (2008) argued that the superhero story line represents a "hegemonic paradox," be-

cause the hero almost always works outside the recognized legal system in order to maintain the legitimacy of that same system (p. 249). For heroes, devotion to justice prevails over devotion to law, yet they maintain loyalty to the state. Heroes are thus both vigilantes and symbols of the dominant cultural attitudes about justice (Adkinson, 2008). And the symbolism is clear: When enacting justice, the end justifies the means, so long as in the end what is morally right prevails (Adkinson, 2008). In short, "The hero must be on the right side of the moral equation, but not necessarily on the right side of the law" (Phillips & Strobl, 2006, p. 325).

In comics, justice and morality are intricately intertwined. In carrying out their missions, superheroes ultimately selflessly serve the status quo by tempering their powers with moral and social responsibility (Coogan, 2006). Although what they symbolize changes over time, superheroes do the "right thing" and know what the right thing is (Fingerroth, 2004). They also know how to manage crime. Batman's justice may involve violence, but he knows who the guilty party is and just how much fear and force are necessary to bring him or her down, without going so far as to do irreversible physical harm (Fingerroth, 2004).

Scholars have also examined the media portrayal of the agents of the criminal justice system. Crime dramas, through the formatting of programs and depictions of characters, usually present police officers and prosecutors as the good guys who are protecting society from evil doers (Cavender & Deutch, 2007; Eschholz et al., 2004). News tabloids represent police in a similar fashion, although the mainstream news media tend to portray criminal justice officials as ineffective or inept (Barak, 1994). Non-fictional documentary style programs also depict this dichotomy. Agents of the justice system are personally portrayed in positive light, but in their investigations they seem to be unable to stop or catch the perpetrators (Kort-Butler & Sittner Hartshorn, 2011). In contrast to the generally positive portrayals of criminal justice personnel in television crime dramas, the criminal justice system in comic books is depicted as incompetent, corrupt, or lacking the resources to properly fight crime (Newman, 1990; Phillips & Strobl, 2006). In comics, the heroes' extra-legal forms of justice are deemed necessary to overcome these deficiencies (Adkinson, 2008; Phillips & Strobl, 2006; Reyns & Henson, 2010). As described above, heroes have the moral authority to act extra-legally.

## The Current Study

**Insights from cultural criminology.** Following Adkinson (2008) and Phillips and Strobl (2006), the current study uses insights from the perspective of cultural criminology to explore how images and messages about justice and control are displayed in superhero cartoons. Cultural criminology implicates the media in producing and reproducing image and meaning at the intersection of crime and culture (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995). In turn, mediated images, meanings, and representations are crucial in shaping and sustaining socially shared understandings of crime and social control (Yar, 2010). Unpacking images and representations of criminal justice through research is a means to unveil the "cultural raw material" that "interacts with and feeds into public attitudes and perspectives," fuels political rhetoric, and validates the dominant ideology of crime and control (Phillips & Strobl, 2006, p. 307).

As the media constructs crime and control as both social problems and political issues, they also construct the processes of criminal justice as entertainment (Ferrell, 1999). The images and narratives used to tell stories about crime, whether emerging from ostensibly factual or fictional sources, are merged into the story of crime (Hayward, 2010). Media constructions thus function to "trivialize and dramatize the meaning of crime and control" (Ferrell, 1999, p. 408). Crime and control are stripped of sociocultural context and served up as spectacle (Presdee, 2000). The story of crime becomes a commodity for communicating information and entertaining consumers in ways that reproduce ideological content (Dotter, 2002).

Historically, one practice through which children learn and internalize cultural messages is the telling of traditional tales (Meyer & Bogdan, 1999). Mediated storytelling about crime, whether nightly news, TV dramas, or comic books, reflects similar traditional moral themes

in which a predatory or evil criminal is pursued by the forces of good (Kooistra & Mahoney, 1999; Surette 1994). Yet, in an increasingly media-saturated culture, the processes of constructing and reconstructing image and meaning has contributed to an image of crime and control—consumed by children and adults—that is iconic and ideologically powerful (Surette, 1994).

**Children and the Problem Frame.** Despite the negative behavioral outcomes that are frequently attributed to children's television viewing, children are often nonetheless considered passive viewers, simply absorbing images without discerning their meaning. However, even the passive consumption of media may have an active role in shaping viewers' beliefs and attitudes about crime and justice (Phillips & Strobl, 2006). Altheide (1997) argued that television acts as a primer by providing information that viewers can use to interpret events. This discourse or problem frame becomes a resource that the audience can use to interpret later information. In this process, the media informs the audience that some situation is undesirable, many people are affected by it, and the main contributing factors are identifiable. Further, the media suggests the "problem" can be changed, mechanisms exist to change it, and we (as a society) already have an agent and process in place to fix the problem. On one hand, the problem frame surrounding crime produces (and reproduces) public fears and the broader perception that society is dangerous (Altheide, 2009). On the other hand, storytelling within the problem frame dovetails with traditional morality tales, which lends moral authority to the established means of addressing concerns about crime and other social dangers (Cavender & Deutch, 2007).

Perhaps one reason research has been slow to analyze children's programming from a "problem frame" point of view is an assumption that the messages about crime and justice in these shows are over children's heads. However, research indicates that children's moral reasoning is sophisticated enough to detect and interpret moral meanings. When presented with both hypothetical and real-life situations, children can differentiate moral transgressions from social-conventional transgressions, and they identify moral transgressions as more deserving of punishment (Peters & Blumberg, 2002). Further, even in viewing animation, children can use context to understand why acts are moral transgressions and what punishment is appropriate (Blumberg et al., 2008).

Research also suggests that children identify with mediated cultural representations. The "positive moral qualities" of superheroes may be more important than their negative aggressive qualities for their status as young people's role models (Zehnder & Calvert, 2004, p. 133). In a study of 9- to 11-year olds, Martin (2007) found a positive association between children's self-reported moral values and their assessment of superheroes' moral values. Ideas about morality and justice are often intertwined in the superhero genre, so it is likely that children can also understand and identify with messages about justice and social control present in these television programs.

Particularly for young viewers, few nonmediated sources of information about justice issues are readily available. Television media can therefore play a large part in shaping their early cultural understandings about crime and control. Although the superhero genre has a long-standing presence in children's television programming, little research has explored what messages about crime and control are conveyed. To address this gap in the literature in both cultural criminology and media analysis, an analysis of three superhero cartoons was undertaken.

## Method

Traditional content analyses tend to be quantitative in nature, coding and counting occurrences of predesignated elements (Maxfield & Babbie, 1995). This approach, while useful to many forms of media analysis, can fall victim to the "forces of quantification" that removes content from context (Muzzatti, 2006, p. 76). An ECA (Altheide, 1987) was therefore con-

ducted to examine what narratives about crime and justice were evident in children's superhero shows. This approach is more qualitative in nature and is conducive to thematic analysis (Welsh, Fleming, & Dowler, 2011).

### Sample Selection

A purposive sample was drawn from three programs: *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992–1995), *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* (1994–1998), and *Justice League of America/Justice League Unlimited* (2001–2006). These particular shows were chosen for several reasons. First, their original airdates were over a 15-year span, covering a high point in United States' violent crime rates in the early 1990s, the increasing emphasis on punitive policies, and the post-9/11 period. As noted above, ideological shifts accompanying these historical trends are hypothetically reflected in contemporary programming. Second, the shows themselves represented a style shift. *Batman* was a critically acclaimed series and generally regarded as a reinvention of the superhero cartoon genre (Misiroglu & Roach, 2004). The artwork was more refined, the plots more elaborate, and the themes psychologically deeper than its forerunners. The shows that followed it, including *Spider-Man* and *Justice League* also took this more sophisticated approach. Third, although other superhero series aired during the same time period, notably *Superman* and *X-Men*, the three shows selected more regularly dealt with crime and crime-fighting.

Fourth, to capture potential variation in perspectives, these programs originated from different comic lines and television networks. Whereas the justice league and *Batman* are characters from the DC Comics line, *Spider-Man* is from the Marvel Comics line. The former show aired on Turner Broadcasting's Cartoon Network, and the latter two shows originally aired in syndication on Fox Kids Network. Finally, the three shows selected were consistently on-air as reruns when the data collection period began. Indeed, as of this writing, all three series continue to be aired on cable/satellite networks marketed to young viewers, including Hub, DisneyXD, and Boomerang, which speaks to their continuing relevance. In addition, all series were available on DVD and many episodes were viewable on the Internet, which facilitated data collection.

### Data Collection Procedures

Following Altheide's (1987) ECA approach, I first viewed several on-air episodes of each show to guide both sample selection and the thematic protocol. To begin sample selection, episode synopses were reviewed to eliminate episodes with nonhuman antagonists (i.e., aliens, paranormal entities). Then, episodes were selected with two purposes in mind. First, to observe potential variation by antagonist or crime, attention was given to selecting episodes with different primary villains. Second, episodes were chosen so that there was representative coverage for all seasons of each show. If one part of a multipart episode was selected, both parts were included in the sample in order to view the entire story line. Fifteen to sixteen episodes of each show were selected, with a final sample size of 47 individual episodes. At this point, the data collection had reached saturation.

In ECA, the procedures for data collection, analysis, and interpretation are designed to be reflexive (Altheide, 1987). Although theoretically derived categories guide initial stages of a study, other categories are expected and allowed to arise during the study. To facilitate this process, an open-ended protocol was utilized to guide data collection. The initial form of the protocol was developed from my viewing of on-air episodes. After familiarizing a research assistant with this initial protocol, the assistant and I independently watched several of the same episodes, meeting to compare observations and revise the protocol as necessary. Although the open-ended format of the protocol precluded the use of standard metrics to assess interrater reliability, in accordance with the reflexive nature of ECA, the research assistant and I regularly met during the data collection process to discuss both recurrent and emergent themes. This also facilitated consistency across our observations.

Appendix displays the finalized protocol used by the research assistant and I for data collection. Coding included observations of the main and supporting characters, their dialogue, and their actions as well as the narrative and audiovisual context of the story line. Observations about the superheroes revolved around their motives for crime fighting, their orientation to justice (i.e., their role in the social process of justice), and their attitudes or actions regarding how to handle those who break the law. Observations about police, attorneys, and judges as actors representative of the criminal justice system centered on their portrayal and purpose in the story line, such as their function in the justice process relative to the heroes, and their attitudes or actions regarding law violators, whether hero or villain. Finally, attention was given to the presence of justice-oriented messages (e.g., support for a particular philosophy of punishment) and the presence of moral messages (e.g., moral creed of hero).

### Analytical Focus

In another article (Kort-Butler, 2012), I utilized these data to analyze how superhero cartoons construct deviance and criminality. For the purposes of this article, my analytical focus was on portrayals of the justice process, such as how the process operated, how justice was ultimately meted out to the antagonists, and the social reaction of the characters to this process. Using the data gathered via the protocol as a starting point, I analyzed the narrative patterns that emerged from observations throughout the sample (Cavender & Deutch, 2007; Welsh et al., 2011). Four broad themes were identified: (1) the criminal justice system as unequipped for the task of crime fighting; (2) the heroes' motivations for crime fighting, which had undertones of moral authority; (3) the heroes' orientation to "doing" justice; and (4) the heroes in league with the criminal justice system, supporting both rule of law and legitimate forms of punishment. Each of these themes is explored in further detail below.

### Results

#### The Criminal Justice System: "We're Professionals. We Know how to Deal with These Situations."

Spider-Man's New York, Batman's Gotham, and the world guarded by the Justice League were replete with social deviants who threatened crime and mayhem.<sup>1</sup> Despite their claim in *Spider-Man* about knowing how to deal with crime-related situations, the cartoon agents of the criminal justice system could not. Agents of justice were often hostile toward heroes and their actions as shown in derisive names. Spider-Man is called a "glory hog" and a "wall-crawling slime bucket."<sup>2</sup> The Justice League is accused of being "aloof ... put[ting] themselves above ... mere mortals" and "loose cannons."<sup>3</sup> Batman is deemed an "outlaw"<sup>4</sup> and a "grand standing psycho."<sup>5</sup> Police agents would also make sarcastic comments when confronted with their ineptitude. For example, when the Justice League questions why officials tried to move Lex Luthor (who subsequently escaped) without help, the federal agent quips "Maybe because we thought we could do our jobs without help from the mighty League."<sup>6</sup> Beyond these tense interactions, episodes of each show also featured agents accusing heroes of conspiring with the villains, as well as actual attempts at arresting heroes.

Despite their verbal protests, police were depicted as easily overcome and lacking sufficient resources to fight serious crime. They were often left in a state of confusion about how to stop criminals, particularly the primary antagonists. One thing the police did know how to do was fire weapons in excess. Across all shows, for the most part, only the police or military had guns but never the heroes. Occasionally the villains or their accomplices used guns, primarily for intimidation. For the police, however, guns were routine. Criminals were often shown be-



ing cornered by or escaping from the police with guns drawn. They would release massive fire power at the criminals, their vehicles, or hideouts, to little avail. The use of guns by the police never led to the capture of the primary villain. Little to no commentary was provided by other characters regarding police use of force. As a plot device, gun play added to the action. As an image, it seemed representative of police ineffectiveness, despite the tools in their proverbial arsenals.

Story lines also suggested that the justice system is relatively weak. Both heroes and antagonists tended to make cynical comments about this state of affairs. One source of weakness was the power of money to influence the process. For example, after being captured by the League, Lex Luthor rants that what he confessed "won't stand up in court. I'll get the best lawyers, the best witnesses."<sup>7</sup> A second source of weakness was releasing people who were obviously villains from police custody or prison, sometimes on so-called technicalities. These characters then committed more crime. Heroes were sometimes baffled by this state of affairs. After confronting Dr. Octopus, Spider-Man wonders (for himself and the viewer): "I don't understand why they can't keep a creep like him in jail."<sup>8</sup> With a more cynical evaluation, Justice League's Green Arrow, regarding federal agents who offered an organized crime boss immunity, opines, "That's how it goes. They let a bad guy go free, he rats out dozens of others. It's not perfect."<sup>9</sup>

A third source of weakness was the corruption of justice or government agents. A story arc in *Justice League* detailed the plans and actions of a shadowy government organization designed to undermine and dismantle the League. The government agents went to extreme ends of both science and violence in an attempt to achieve this end. Most poignantly, two story arcs in *Batman* confronted the downward spiral of corruption. "Two Face" follows the demise of the prominent and dedicated District Attorney Dent. Blackmail (and a vat of acid) leads to his transformation into the unpredictable villain Two-Face and a shaky alliance with organized crime. "Shadow of the Bat" deals with the seemingly incorruptible District Attorney Mason, whose desire for power and status is funded by organized crime and an association with Two-Face. In these story arcs, and in spite of the other weakness of the system, the heroes and their brand of justice triumphed.

### Motives for Crime Fighting: "My Obsession is with Justice."

In a world where crime seems to be everywhere and the justice system seems helpless to stop it, others must step in to uphold the moral order and maintain social control.<sup>10</sup> In these cartoon worlds, heroes filled that role. Yet heroes did not come to that role lightly. These shows made clear that heroes often confront injustices in their pasts that serve as catalysts for their role taking. Heroes were also cognizant that their special talents or skills allowed and obligated them to do what others who wished to protect the society from criminals simply could not do.

**Daddy Issues.** Reflecting a common comic book narrative, for several heroes, something in their personal backgrounds drove them to seek a society safe from crime. The loss of loved ones was an especially powerful motive. A life of vigilantism was the common result. Although less visually graphic than their comic counterparts, the television shows did not veil the harshness of these events. Visually, the scenes were in shadow or reflection, but they were accompanied by sounds of arguing, fighting, or gunfire. In each case, it was very clear what had happened.

For example, several episodes of *Batman* dealt with the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents. After recalling this in the episode "Nothing to Fear," Batman avows, "I am not a disgrace. I am vengeance. I am the night" and pursues the villain with renewed vigor. After his uncle's murder, Peter Parker (a.k.a. Spider-Man) feels himself to blame for the crime. Like Batman, he overcomes this guilt and accepts his hero role in order to protect others from crime. As a child, Justice League's Huntress saw her parents murdered by the mob. Although she has commit-

ted her life to crime fighting, she seeks to kill the man responsible for her parents' murder. After tracking the man down and contemplating killing him, she ultimately decides to turn him over to federal agents. For these heroes, despite their pasts, their powers, and their desire for justice, vigilantism was limited by their sense of morality, which prevented them from taking actions similar to the criminals who murdered their families.

**"Mine are Bigger Than Yours."**<sup>11</sup> In a showdown between the Justice League and a government team led by the sly Amanda Waller, Waller gives the order to raise weapons against the League. Dramatically, Batman leans in and threatens, "Mine are bigger than yours," as the animation pans to the heroes with muscles flexed and powers at ready. Waller instructs her team to stand down. Double entendre aside, the scene points to a key motive for crime fighting: Heroes pursued the villains and criminals because no one else could.

In some cases, the antagonists were deemed too smart or too powerful for ordinary law enforcement. Heroes may initially serve as support for regular law enforcement, such as the Justice League providing assistance to federal agents who are holding crime lord Steve Mandragora in "Double Date," or Batman assisting in the police in a stakeout and capture of the Jazzman in "I am the Night." However, when these kinds of situations ultimately erupted, the heroes promptly took over. After a prison escape, Flash (a police crime scene analyst in his day job) tells police agents, "Your people are good. Luthor is better."<sup>12</sup> Another prison break also requires Justice League intervention, when guards, despite showing force with riot gear and gas, are overcome by violently rioting prisoners. Police manage to corner two escapees, but the League steps in when the escapees attempt an offensive. Later in the episode, Superman is shown reading a paper whose headline is "Justice League Captures Convicts."<sup>13</sup>

In other cases, pursuit of the villains technically meant breaking the law, so police could not act. In addition to their powers and reputations, heroes had greater access to technological resources. The Justice League's headquarters, the Watchtower, was a large space station orbiting Earth. From this perch, the League could monitor activities and deploy their assets. Batman's well-known Batcave, computer, and gadgets assisted him in detecting problems and solving crimes. The familiarity between Batman and Commissioner Gordon resulted in Batman assisting in the investigation of crimes and the apprehension of the offenders. As he tells Batman during one such request for assistance, "I guess if anyone can pin something on him and make it stick, you can."<sup>14</sup> These activities were generally outside the restraints of the rule of law, such as the use of listening devices, manipulating or manhandling people for information, and entrapment. It was only by operating outside the law that heroes could provide the support the weakened or hampered justice system needed.

**Moral Obligation: "It Takes More Than a Costume and an Attitude to Do This Work."**<sup>15</sup> Heroes' actions, though sometimes outside the law, stood in stark contrast to their opponents. Heroes were not motivated by personal gain, in contrast to most of the villains they encountered. Heroes also embodied selflessness, compared to villains' selfishness, a point brought into sharp relief by heroes who sometimes struggled against their moral obligations. For example, throughout *Spider-Man*, Peter Parker wrestles with feelings of selfishness, but his sense of altruism always prevails: "I hate being in this suit again, but there are a lot of dangerous creeps out there now."<sup>16</sup> Like Spider-Man's creed "with great power comes great responsibility," heroes were most often depicted as standing up for what was right and for the common good, even if it meant personal sacrifice. Other heroes expressed this as a sense of duty. In discussing the purpose of the Justice League, Batman explains to Green Arrow, "Each of us is willing to make the sacrifices a hero needs to make, even the ultimate one."<sup>17</sup>

To illustrate their moral sense of duty, heroes were persistent in their efforts to bring criminals to justice. In "Enter the Green Goblin," Spider-Man refuses to leave the scene until he captures the Goblin; in fact, he rescues the Goblin. In an episode of *Justice League*, the villain Dr. Destiny, in trying to elude Batman, points out that he's not like other heroes because he does not have special powers. Batman tersely replies, "I have one. I never give up."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this theme ran through several episodes of *Batman*. Pointedly, in "I am the Night," after his friend, mentor, and father-figure Commissioner Gordon is shot, Bruce Wayne contemplates ending Batman's career (and on a deeper level, perhaps suicide, as he is literally on the edge of a cliff in one scene). Dick Grayson (a.k.a. Robin) reminds him that "the most important lesson" Bruce taught him about crime fighting was to never give up, a sentiment later echoed by Gordon during his recovery: "got to keeping fighting, never stop, what I try to live by."

As if to underscore the importance of the moral high ground in enacting extra-legal justice, a few shows contrasted the principled, selfless protagonists with characters who had other motives for crime fighting. For example, in *Justice League* "Ultimatum" businessman Maxwell Lord conspires with Amanda Waller's government group to create a group of heroes they can control. As these created heroes grow in popularity, Lord engages in a marketing campaign that includes television coverage and action figures. After all, he argues, the money is funneled back to the group, including royalty checks to the heroes, because "fighting crime isn't cheap and even superheroes have to eat." Even group members comment on the loss of integrity, but as one puts it, he just started "wanting stuff." In the end, these created heroes acknowledge the importance of just being a hero, without the glory or profit. In another episode, Superman reminds Captain Marvel that as part of the Justice League, he is "more than just a hero"; he is also a "symbol." Superman continues, "We don't play favorites, we don't sell deodorant on television, and we don't get involved in politics, and we certainly don't endorse supervillains for the presidency!"<sup>19</sup> In short, in their persistent pursuit of criminals, heroes did what was selfless and morally right.

### Orientation to Justice: "Come and Get Some!"

Secure on the moral high ground, heroes can enact their brand of social control. In its barest form in the three cartoons, social control equaled bodily control: criminals must be physically stopped, by almost any means. The heroes recognized the rule of law but also implied that it is sometimes necessary to play the criminals' games to beat them. To accomplish this end, heroes used their physical prowess or powers as well as their superior mental abilities. There was a line heroes would not cross—most commonly, excessive or physically damaging violence to antagonists—an indication of their loyalty to the moral order. Heroes, despite their difficulties with the justice system, also remained loyal to the established social order and rule of law.

**Might Makes Right: "Hit it 'til it Breaks."**<sup>20</sup> In keeping with their comic book counterparts, heroes often used force or threat of force to gain information and compliance from the antagonists and their accomplices. A display of force was usually required to capture the main antagonist in each of the shows. For example, Justice League's Orion, discussing how to find the four villains attempting to kill Flash, ponders, "If there was some way to hunt them down, we could eliminate these dogs before they strike again."<sup>21</sup> During an apprehension scene in *Batman*, Commissioner Gordon cries out "I may not be able to stop you but I know someone who will."<sup>22</sup> As a final example, in an episode of *Spider-Man* that brought two heroes together, Daredevil rescues Peter Parker, beating up several people in the process. Peter asks Daredevil "What happened to all these guys?" Daredevil simply replies, "Me."<sup>23</sup> Although the threat or use of bodily force took various forms across programs and within episodes of each program, it was a key element in the heroes' form of justice.

Underscoring the theme of antagonists “going down hard”<sup>24</sup> was a sense of just desserts. For instance, while apprehending bank robbers in one scene, Wonder Woman grabs a robber by the collar, picks him up, throws him against a car, and pins him down, intent on hitting him again, until interrupted. When confronted by Martian Manhunter regarding her tactics, she emphasizes, “Those thugs got exactly what they had coming!”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Wildcat emphasizes to Black Canary that he “only fights guys who have it coming.”<sup>26</sup> For the viewer, a distinction was thus made between wanton use of violence and the use of force for stopping deserving criminals.

**Brains Over Brawn: “You Can’t Fix Everything by Hitting It.”**<sup>27</sup> In addition to crime fighting by force, heroes also displayed brainpower, generally falling into three categories. First, scientific or technical knowledge and skills were marshaled to overcome the villains’ plans or their powers. Particularly in *Spider-Man*, where villains were often people mutated or transformed by science-gone-wrong, Peter Parker’s own knowledge helped him deal with antagonists. For instance, in the episode “Rocket Racer,” Spider-Man uses his scientific know-how to disable a destructive device. Other characters point out the importance of education, discovering that “it pays to know science stuff after all.”

Second, some heroes would attempt to reason with antagonists or try to talk them down in order to ease their apprehension. The contrast between physical force and reason was illustrated clearly in “Flash and Substance,” a *Justice League* episode. In an attempt to gain information from the antagonist, Orion grabs him by the collar and demands that he “talk while he still has a jaw.” Flash intervenes, sits down with the antagonist, addresses him by his real name, discusses his mental health, easily gains the information, and then calmly tells him, “Dude, as soon as you finish your drink, turn yourself in.”

Third, heroes often outwitted and outsmarted antagonists. As Batman responds to Dr. Destiny’s taunts, “My brain is not a very nice place to be.”<sup>28</sup> Several episodes of each cartoon depicted the hero-as-detective, uncovering plots, and orchestrating methods by which to foil these plots and capture the characters responsible. Here, too, the ultimate goal was to physically stop the offenders. For example, in one of his encounters with Doctor Octopus, Spider-Man confronts Doc Ock, talks to him, and appeals to his vanity regarding his inventions, then uses the opportunity to immobilize him. Regardless of the ability of the heroes to talk and think their way around the villains, force was ultimately an element of the capture, particularly of the main antagonists.

### **What Would Superman Do?**

As Captain Marvel pronounces: “Whenever I was out there facing down the bad guys, I would think, ‘What would Superman do?’ ... I believe in fair play. I believe in taking people at their word and giving them the benefit of the doubt ... I’ve come up against my share of pretty nasty bad guys, but I never had to act the way they do to win a fight. I always found another way.”<sup>29</sup>

Superman, as the comics and movies remind us, stands for truth, justice, and the American way. In this context, the viewer was reminded that heroes sit at the top of the moral and social order. From this vantage point, heroes occasionally expressed the importance of not stooping to the level (of violence and mayhem) of the villains. For example, after the encounter with two bank robbers in which Wonder Woman loses her temper and gets too rough, Martian Manhunter reminds her, “It’s important that we keep ourselves in check.” Later, she reminds the younger heroes, “Sometimes it takes more strength not to fight.”<sup>30</sup>

In some situations, story lines also portrayed justice tempered by mercy. Even though he hates the Green Goblin, Spider-Man tries to save him for the sake of the person he once was, reminding the viewer that “revenge is never an option.”<sup>31</sup> In a more elaborate demonstration of this theme, during the final capture scene of *Justice League* “Double Date,” Huntress faces the de-

cision to kill the crime lord she has been tracking and had previously tried to assassinate. The audience sees through the sights of her crossbow, experiences a flashback to the murder of her parents by the crime lord, and sees her begin to squeeze the trigger. Yet, when she fires, it is not at the crime lord, but at the netting above him, which traps him. Along with Huntress, the audience learns that the violence used by heroes is qualitatively different from criminal violence, that criminals must be stopped, but that justice must triumph over vengeance.

Justice League: "We Took Care of the Bad Guys and Everything's Okay Now."

**"Support your local police."**<sup>32</sup> Across all three cartoons, antagonists and their accomplices, when captured by heroes, were almost always turned over to the police or other authorities.<sup>33</sup> Offenders, who were always handcuffed or restrained, were escorted, often under heavily armed guard, to police vehicles, armored trucks, or ambulances. Heroes generally acknowledged their working relationships with honest police agents and expressed respect for law enforcement, even if the compliment was not returned. For example, in one episode of Justice League, several of the nonpowered heroes, including Green Arrow, Vigilante, and Shining Knight, participate in a Metropolis parade. On their float, labeled "Heroes One and All," ride police officers, firefighters, and other first responders. A police officer thanks the League members for joining in the parade and extends his hand to Green Arrow who promptly shakes and replies, "We can't thank you enough. You're the real heroes."<sup>34</sup>

Yet, as noted by analysts of comic books, these cartoons must also address the tense balance between vigilantism and the rule of law. In *Batman*, Commissioner Gordon refers to Gotham as a "war zone" and to Batman as the city's "best weapon." Other characters, including judges and prosecutors, do not initially recognize Batman's moral authority; rather, they view him as an impediment to the rule of law. In the end, these characters reconcile the situation. The prosecutor tells Batman "I see now there's a need for the things you do," and they both agree to work for a city that does not need a Batman.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in *Spider-Man*, Robbie Robertson defends Spider-Man, arguing he does what he thinks is right and is a "good man at heart . . . He's exactly what this city—this world—needs right now. I hope he never gives up."<sup>36</sup>

In short, the message is: when crime is bad, we need more tools for law enforcement and restraint of offenders. Extra-legal efforts may be required, but only by those with the moral authority to do so. Moreover, although the superheroes were sometimes hampered or even targeted by the police, the heroes ultimately deferred to the existing social order. For example, Daredevil, a lawyer by day, captures several villains and turns them over, commenting, "I'm a big believer in the Constitution and the law."<sup>37</sup> Despite the flaws depicted in the criminal justice system, the viewer was reminded that it ultimately has the moral authority to enforce and maintain social order by incapacitating offenders.

**Philosophies of Punishment: "They Got Enough on Me to Play the Funeral March."**<sup>38</sup> Across the three shows, incapacitation via incarceration was clearly the preferred mode of punishment, as illustrated by this message from Commissioner Gordon and Batman to a recently imprisoned offender, "Confinement will speed your reform but long cold nights will be the norm."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the prisons and institutions were depicted as shadowy, forlorn, imposing, and isolated. Occasionally, they were also portrayed as dangerous, such as the prison riot in *Justice League* "Only a Dream, Part 1." Depending on the shows' plot lines, institutional employees were variously sympathetic, harsh and demeaning, easily manipulated, or corrupt. Regardless, prison was not a pleasant place.

Interestingly, in contrast to the superheroes' actions of incapacitation, characters other than the heroes verbally espoused the need for incapacitation. As Harvey Dent professes to Bruce Wayne, if we want our communities to be safe, we have to "come down hard" on criminals.<sup>40</sup> Commissioner Gordon, taking custody of the Riddler, tells him his recorded conversation "ought to be enough to prove a parole violation. You're going away for good this time."<sup>41</sup> In *Spi-*

*der-Man*, newspaper editor Jonah Jameson exclaims to Doc Ock, "You should be put away for the rest of your life!"<sup>42</sup> The words of other characters thus reinforced the deeds of the heroes.

Support for a rehabilitation or reform perspective was limited. Rehabilitation was only possible for worthy characters, typically defined by the youth of a character or the character's personal relationship with the hero. Young people who had somehow become entangled with crime were often literally and figuratively saved by the hero. For example, in *Spider-Man* "Tombstone," Randy Robinson (son of Peter Parker's friend Robbie), despite joining a gang and some minor involvement in delinquency, comes to accept the consequences of his actions, is reconciled to his family, and apparently goes back to being a good kid. In *Batman*, Bruce Wayne's personal relationships with Harvey Dent (a.k.a Two-Face) and Selina Kyle (a.k.a. Catwoman) lead him to reach out to these characters, although he eventually has to apprehend them. Besides these exceptions, villains and other antagonists were not candidates for reform. Although *Spider-Man* regularly dealt with the moral fall of characters, these episodes did not deal with them after their capture. In *Batman's* Gotham, captured villains were frequently sent to Arkham Asylum for the criminally insane, which was visually depicted as a dark prison rather than a hospital.

In fact, the three cartoons tended to cast doubt on the possibility of rehabilitation. In separate episodes of *Batman*,<sup>43</sup> both the Riddler and the Penguin are released from confinement (Arkham Asylum and prison, respectively). The Riddler is released for good behavior (and by his own admission because he fooled everyone), while the Penguin is freed because he "learned his lesson" and "paid his debt to society." Batman, of course, doubts they will stay straight and confronts each of them to remind them he is watching. Both villains paint the veneer of legitimacy but quickly turn to crime again, are captured by Batman, and returned to the justice system. Similarly, in *Justice League* "Clash" when Lex Luthor makes an attempt at reform, building homes and a playground for low-income families and running for president, Captain Marvel lauds his change of character. The rest of the Justice League reprimands Captain Marvel for his naivety, as they are all doubtful of Lex's change. They are right: Lex, as the viewer learns, has had no change of heart and is instead plotting against the League once again. For serious criminals, reform was nearly impossible and largely unthinkable.

The twin themes—the improbability of reform and the merits of incapacitation—came together in *Justice League* "Task Force X." In the opening scene, following an exterior shot of an Alcatraz-like prison, a shackled inmate (the assassin Deadshot) is being escorted by a guard and a priest down a shadowed corridor. In response to the priest's offer of prayer, Deadshot smirkingly quips, "[I]f it comforts you Padre, by all means." At this point, it is clear that the offender has not changed, despite his time in prison. When they enter the execution chamber, someone is sitting in the middle of the room, and Deadshot comments "my chair's already taken." This mystery military man offers Deadshot a deal, a role in a top secret task force to subvert the League, but when he balks, the man plainly tells him "then you can go and take your seat tough guy." Later, after the initial mission is completed, Deadshot resists further involvement but is told "if you don't like, there's a warm seat waiting" back in prison. Despite his utility in the operation, his actions during the mission indicate he is still a dangerous criminal, so Deadshot cannot be redeemed. Like the other criminals of the cartoon worlds, he cannot be reformed, thus he must be physically controlled.

## Discussion

The analysis revealed representations of crime and justice within three superhero shows that were closely aligned with a conservative orientation to criminal justice, consistent with other analyses of the superhero genre (Vollum & Adkinson, 2003). Likewise, within these programs, justice and morality were intricately intertwined. Superheroes portrayed in the three programs

were the edited versions of their comic book counterparts. Whereas comic books more freely delve into the dark side of the Dark Knight (Newman, 1993) or the socially conscious, antiheroic qualities of Spider-Man (Adkinson, 2008), the television programs, for the most part, presented more limited versions of the heroes. The heroes maintained their trademark characteristics, personalities, and, importantly, their moral authority but were less developed as characters. Similarly, the story lines in the programs were generally less provocative and more simplified than comics, as one might expect for shows targeted to young people. Two exceptions stand out. First, in detailing the personal histories of some of the heroes, physical images were veiled but the crimes were not. The second exception was the more sophisticated story arcs in *Justice League*, which dealt with looming government conspiracy to undermine, dismantle, and destroy the League. Although the subversive nature of this plot line in the post-9/11 context may be apparent to adults, it is unclear whether younger viewers could discern such detail.

The ECA uncovered several key themes. First, law enforcement agents and the criminal justice system were ineffective at best and corruptible at worst. Second, the heroes' motives for crime fighting revolved around a feeling of obligation to their own sense of justice, to the innocent and well-intentioned who are unable to fight crime, and to the moral order. Third, the orientation to justice presented in the shows suggested that powerful bodies, powerful brains, and a powerful moral compass can subdue criminals and villains. Finally, despite its flaws, in these shows the criminal justice system still represented the highest form of order. Consistent with Kappeler and Potter's (2005) assertion that the mythologies of crime and justice function to reinforce the status quo even in the face of contrary evidence, heroes deferred to a justice system that was depicted as incapable and incompetent. In doing so, these superhero cartoons legitimated the current justice system. Like other forms of crime-related media, the story lines in the cartoons were front-end loaded, focusing primarily on the commission of the crime, the investigation, and the crime's resolution, usually by the forcible apprehension of the villain (Surette, 2003). In other words, the goal was capture; what happens after that was less relevant.

Superhero shows, like other media genres, forwarded messages consistent with the punishment philosophy that has dominated the U.S. justice system in recent decades. Rehabilitation was tacitly rejected, and punishment was actively promoted (Hagan, 2010; Unnever & Cullen, 2010). Heroes, and to a less effective extent justice system officials, worked to protect society from all "bad guys": supervillains, crime lords, and common criminals alike. A just desserts orientation was also evident but usually implied. A few episodes dealt with the possibility of reform but only for worthy characters. In other cases, story lines tended to cast doubt on a rehabilitation model. Instead, evildoers were banished from society, usually via incarceration or institutionalization, which is consistent with Garland's (2001) description of the current penal culture that centers on the concepts of risk and retribution. Incapacitation via extensive prison sentences "punishes and protects, condemns and controls" (Garland, 2001, p. 199). Imprisonment allows society to express its retribution while managing the risk posed by people deemed dangerous by physically confining them. Together, the three superhero cartoons promoted a model of incapacitation shared by both vigilantism and the justice system, a model that has come to represent what is morally right and simple common sense.

The analysis also revealed that superhero cartoons can be mapped with Altheide's (1997) description of the process of problem framing in the adult-oriented crime media. First, the villain and his or her cohorts, and their evolving plans, are undesirable. Second, individual citizens and the city (or world) at large are affected by the dangerous situation posed by the villain. Third, the viewer knows who is responsible. The villain is easily identifiable, if not by costume or appearance, then by the darker nature of the animation or soundtrack. Fourth, the problem posed by the villain can be changed. When law enforcement fails, the heroes have the moral authority act. Fifth, the mechanism for fixing the problem is the vigilante justice provided by the morally upright heroes. Lastly, the ultimate agent or process of repair is also

known: the heroes generally turn their captured foes over to the criminal justice system for final disposition. Thus, superhero shows mirror the messages embedded in adult programming regarding crime and social control. The intertwining of morality and justice in superhero cartoons lend further weight to these messages.

## Limitations

As with any content analysis, there were certain limitations to this study. First, the open-ended, reflexive approach to data collection precluded the use of standard metrics to rate inter-rater reliability common to quantitative content analyses (Maxfield & Babbie, 1995). Although the efforts to maintain reliability across two coders was similar to that employed by others (e.g., Phillips & Strobl, 2006), there nonetheless may be a degree of error that could temper the results. Second, we cannot be sure how an actual viewer may process the images and messages they perceive (Websdale & Ferrell, 1999). Third, it was beyond the scope of this study to detail other factors related to crime and justice issues, such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender. Future research may consider, for example, how an antagonist's socioeconomic status influences both the portrayal of criminal behavior and the criminal justice response.

Fourth, the cartoons covered a 15-year time span, the first half of which parallels an historical period in which severe responses to crime (e.g., three strikes, truth-in-sentencing, lowering the maximum age of the juvenile court) were politically and socially popular across the United States. An analysis of more recent programs may point to different conclusions. Finally, the history of superheroes in the comics, movies, and on television demonstrates that heroes change with their artists and with their times. Again, an analysis of more recent cartoons may indicate a shift in the depiction of heroes and their modes of justice.

## Conclusions

As cultural criminology suggests, children's shows can contribute to the infusion of crime ideas and imagery into a cultural environment where such images have become more real than the actual processes of crime and justice. In doing so, children's shows, by drawing on both traditional morality tales and the problem frame, also act as cultural primers. At issue here is not whether such storytelling cultivates fear of crime among young viewers but rather the consistency with which the story is produced and reproduced across media genres (Cavender & Deutsch, 2007). The story line becomes a resource on which the young audience can draw when interpreting subsequent imagery of crime and justice. Consistency across media sources, coupled with the restricted flow of information about criminal justice issues and the production of fear, serves to unify the social reality of crime and control (Altheide, 1997; Kappeler & Potter, 2005).

In the fantasy worlds of superhero cartoons and in our present mediated social reality, criminal justice equals incapacitation, punishment prevails over rehabilitation, and those in the position to influence the processes of justice have the moral authority to do so. However, two key issues should be addressed in future research. First, although the superhero genre may be the most obvious site for justice-related imagery, other popular genres should be investigated to gain a fuller picture of what young people consume. This should include not only other television shows but also mediums like video games, many of which are now plot driven. Additionally, researchers should consider how children interpret the media images and messages to which they are exposed to determine whether they are receiving the same messages about crime and control detected by adult analysts (see Tobin, 2000).

Second, the study described herein was time bound; the ideological tides may be shifting. For example, in 1994 Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich advocated that "we should build as many stockades as necessary" (Berk, 1994, p. A9). Yet in 2011, he asserted, "If our prison poli-



cies are failing ... and we know that there are more humane, effective alternatives, it is time to fundamentally rethink how we treat and rehabilitate our prisoners" (Gingrich & Nolan, 2011). At the same time, the superhero genre is as popular as ever, as is adult crime-related media that relies on iconic imagery and a discourse of fear. Moreover, in the digital age, older media sources are available alongside newer sources, potentially broadening consumption while allowing people to be more selective. Analysts should be sensitive to such complexities as they continue to unmask the messages and imagery of contemporary media and how these contribute to the production/reproduction of ideology regarding crime and justice.

In conclusion, the study reported here suggests that children's superhero cartoons provide children introductory lessons about crime and control that are consistent with the dominant ideology in the United States. They are also congruent with messages, images, and frames presented in adult-oriented media, including news reporting, political coverage, adult dramas, reality shows, and nonfictional programs. In this sense, early mediated messages about crime and control are reinforced by later messages. The dominant ideology of criminal justice is thereby produced and reproduced within the ongoing interaction between audience and media.

## Appendix

### Coding Rubric for Superhero Cartoon Project

Title of Episode, year originally aired, current source (DVD or online):

Major Themes: (1) Moral authority; (2) Portrayals of justice/justice process; (3) Explanations for crime/criminality

#### Characters

- Superhero
  - Motive for "crime fighting"
  - Orientation to justice (how do they see their role in the justice process?)
  - Their position on criminal behavior (how do they explain it?)
  - Their position on how to handle those who break the law
- Police and other actors (attorneys, judges) in the justice system
  - Portrayal (e.g., good/bad, effective/weak)
  - Role or function in process relative to hero and villain
  - How they are viewed by hero, villain, other actors?
- Other human "good guys"
  - Role in story line
  - Orientation to justice
  - Their position on criminal behavior
- Main antagonist or villain
  - Origins (e.g., accident)
  - Motive for criminal event
  - Explanations offered for criminal behavior
  - Reaction to hero or justice intervention
- Other "bad guys"
  - Role relative to main antagonist (e.g., sidekick, flunky)
  - Motive for criminal event
  - Explanations offered for criminal behavior
  - Reaction to hero or justice intervention

## Context

- Portrayal of justice process:
  - How does the justice process operate (e.g., inside or outside the rule of law)? Does this vary by protagonist or antagonist?
  - How is justice “served” (e.g., what happens at the end of the episode between hero and villain)?
  - How is the hero and his or her brand of justice ultimately viewed by the public, the law, or other key characters?
  - How is the villain ultimately viewed by the public, the law, or other key characters?
- Justice-oriented messages in overall narrative, dialogue, or action
  - Support for philosophies of punishment (retribution, incapacitation, deterrence, rehabilitation, restorative)
  - Support for rule of law vs. vigilantism
- Messages about cause of crime/criminality in overall narrative, dialogue, or action
  - Portrayal of “difference” and reactions to it
- Moral messages in overall narrative, dialogue, or action
  - Is there a mantra/creed to support hero’s authority?
  - Is there a moral to the story (e.g., crime issues are black-and-white, justice is good vs. evil)? Or are there social complexities?
- Setting of events, visual cues, and musical score

## Other issues and observations (e.g., additional themes to consider?)

**Acknowledgments** — The author thanks Kayla Pritchard for her assistance on this project. Support for this research was provided by the Haas Faculty Award, Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

## Quoted Episodes

1. Section heading from *Spider-Man*: “Doctor Octopus: Armed and Dangerous”
2. *Spider-Man*: “Make a Wish”
3. *Justice League*: “Ultimatum”
4. *Batman*: “I am the Night”
5. *Batman*: “Shadow of the Bat, Part 1”
6. *Justice League*: “I am Legion”
7. *Justice League*: “Injustice for All, Part 1”
8. *Spider-Man*: “The Cat”
9. *Justice League*: “Double Date”
10. Section headings “My obsession is with justice. Come and get some.” from *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*
11. *Justice League*: “Ultimatum”
12. *Justice League*: “I am Legion”
13. *Justice League*: “Only a Dream, Part 1”
14. *Batman*: “The Cape and Cowl Conspiracy”
15. *Batman*: “Shadow of the Bat, Part 2”
16. *Spider-Man*: “Guilty”
17. *Justice League*: “Initiation”

18. *Justice League*: "Only a Dream, Part 2"
19. *Justice League*: "Clash"
20. *Justice League*: "Hawk and Dove"
21. *Justice League*: "Flash and Substance"
22. *Batman*: "Shadow of the Bat, Part 2"
23. *Spider-Man*: "Framed"
24. *Justice League*: "Injustice for All, Part 1"
25. *Justice League*: "Hawk and Dove"
26. *Justice League*: "The Cat and the Canary"
27. *Justice League*: "I am Legion"
28. *Justice League*: "Only a Dream, Part 2"
29. *Justice League*: "Clash"
30. *Justice League*: "Hawk and Dove"
31. *Spider-Man*: "Turning Point"
32. *Spider-Man*: "The Ultimate Slayer"
33. Section heading from *Justice League*: "Flash and Substance"
34. *Justice League*: "Patriot Act"
35. *Batman*: "Trial"
36. *Spider-Man*: "Guilty"
37. *Spider-Man*: "The Man Without Fear"
38. *Batman*: "I am the Night"
39. *Batman*: "The Cape and Cowl Conspiracy"
40. *Batman*: "Two Face, Part 1"
41. *Batman*: "Riddler's Reform"
42. *Spider-Man*: "Doctor Octopus: Armed and Dangerous"
43. *Batman*: "Riddler's Reform" and "Birds of a Feather"

## References

- Adkinson, C. D. (2008). The amazing spider-man and the evolution of the comics code: A case study in cultural criminology. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 15, 241-261.
- Altheide, D. L. (1987). Ethnographic content analysis. *Qualitative Sociology*, 10, 65-77.
- Altheide, D. L. (1997). The news media, the problem frame, and the production of fear. *Sociological Quarterly*, 38, 647-668.
- Altheide, D. L. (2009). Moral panic: From sociological concept to public discourse. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 5, 79-99.
- Altheide, D. L., & Michalowski, R. S. (1999). Fear in the news: A discourse in control. *Sociological Quarterly*, 40, 475-503.
- Barak, G. (1994). Media, society, and criminology. In G. Barak (ed.), *Media, process, and the social construction of crime: Studies in newsmaking criminology* (pp. 3-48). New York, NY: Garland.
- Barlow, M. H., Barlow, D. E., & Chiricos, T. G. (1995). Mobilizing support for social control in a declining economy: Exploring ideologies of crime within crime news. *Crime and Delinquency*, 41, 191-204.
- Berk, R. (1994, January). G.O.P. sees crime as a major issue. *The New York Times*, p. A9.
- Blumberg, F. C., Bierwirth, K. P., & Schwartz, A. J. (2008). Does cartoon violence beget aggressive behavior in real life? An opposing view. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 36, 101-104.
- Cavender, G. (1998). In "The shadow of shadows": Television reality crime programming. In M. Fishman & G. Cavender (Eds.), *Entertaining crime* (pp. 79-94). New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

- Cavender, G. (2004). Media and crime policy: A reconsideration of David Garland's *The Culture of Control. Punishment and Society*, 6, 335-348.
- Cavender, G., & Deutch, S. K. (2007). CSI and moral authority: The police and science. *Crime, Media, Culture* 3, 67-81.
- Cavender, G., & Fishman, M. (1998). Television reality crime programs: Context and history. In M. Fishman & G. Cavender (Eds.), *Entertaining crime* (pp. 1-15). New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Coogan, P. (2006). *Superhero: Secret origin of a genre*. Austin, TX: MonkeyBrain Books.
- Dotter, D. (2002). Creating deviance: Scenarios of stigmatization in postmodern media culture. *Deviant Behavior*, 23, 419-448.
- Eschholz, S. (1997). The media and fear of crime: A survey of the research. *Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 9, 37-59.
- Eschholz, S. (2003). Crime on television: Issues in criminal justice. *Journal of the Instituted of Justice and International Studies*, 2, 9-18.
- Eschholz, S., Mallard, M., & Flynn, S. (2004). Images of prime time justice: A content analysis of "NYPD Blue" and "Law and Order". *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 10, 161-180.
- Ferrell, J. (1999). Cultural criminology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 395-418.
- Ferrell, J., & Sanders, C. R. (1995). *Cultural criminology*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Fingerroth, D. (2004). *Superman on the couch: What superheroes really tell us about ourselves and our society*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Garland, D. (2001). *The cultural of control: Crime and social order in contemporary society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gingrich, N., & Nolan, P. (2011, January). Prison reform: A smart way for states to save money and lives. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-wyn/content/article/2011/01/06/AR2011010604386.html>
- Hagan, J. (2010). *Who are the criminals? The politics of crime policy from the age of Roosevelt to the age of Reagan*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hayward, K. J. (2010). Opening the lens: Cultural criminology and the image. In K. J. Hayward & M. Presdee (Eds.), *Framing crime: Cultural criminology and the image* (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kappeler, V. E., & Potter, G. W. (2005). *The mythology of crime and criminal justice* (4th ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Kooistra, P. G., & Mahoney, J. S., Jr. (1999). The historical roots of tabloid TV crime. In J. Ferrell & N. Websdale (Eds.), *Making trouble: Cultural constructions of crime, deviance, and control* (pp. 47-71). New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Kort-Butler, L. A. (2012). Rotten, vile, and depraved! Depictions of criminality in superhero cartoons. *Deviant Behavior*, 33, 566-581.
- Kort-Butler, L. A., & Sittner Hartshorn, K. J. (2011). Watching the detectives: Crime programming, fear of crime, and attitudes about the criminal justice system. *Sociological Quarterly*, 52, 36-55.
- Lofquist, W. S. (1997). Constructing "crime": Media coverage of individual and organizational wrongdoing. *Justice Quarterly*, 14, 243-263.
- Martin, J. J. (2007). Children's attitudes toward superheroes as a potential indicator of their moral understanding. *Journal of Moral Education*, 36, 239-250.
- Maxfield, M. G., & Babbie, E. (1995). *Research methods for criminal justice and criminology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Melossi, D. (2000). Changing representations of the criminal. *British Journal of Criminology*, 40, 296-320.
- Meyer, J. F., & Bogdan, G. (1999). The elders were our textbooks: The importance of traditional stories in social control. In J. Ferrell & N. Websdale (Eds.), *Making trouble: Cultural constructions of crime, deviance, and control* (pp. 25-46). New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Misiroglu, G., & Roach, D. A. (2004). *The superhero book: The ultimate encyclopedia of comic book icons and Hollywood icons*. Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press.

- Muzzatti, S. L. (2006). Cultural criminology: A decade and counting of criminological chaos. In W. S. DeKeseredy & B. Perry (Eds.), *Advancing critical criminology: Theory and application* (pp. 63–82). Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Nagel, I. (1990). Structured sentencing discretion: The new federal sentencing guidelines. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 80, 883–943.
- Newman, G. R. (1990). Popular culture and criminal justice: A preliminary analysis. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 18, 261–274.
- Newman, G. R. (1993). Batman and justice: The true story. *Humanity and Society*, 17, 297–320.
- Peters, K. M., & Blumberg, F. C. (2002). Cartoon violence: Is it as detrimental to preschoolers as we think? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 29, 143–148.
- Phillips, N. D., & Strobl, S. (2006). Cultural criminology and kryptonite: Apocalyptic and retributive constructions of crime and justice in comic books. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 2, 304–331.
- Presdee, M. (2000). *Cultural criminology and the carnival of crime*. London, England: Routledge.
- Reyns, B. W., & Henson, B. (2010). Superhero justice: The depiction of crime and justice in modern-age comic books and graphic novels. *Sociology of Crime, Law, and Deviance*, 14, 45–66.
- Simon, J. (2007). *Governing through crime: How the war on crime transformed American democracy and created a culture of fear*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Stoddart, M. C. J. (2006). "They say it'll kill me. . . but they won't say when!" drug narratives in comic books. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 13, 66–95.
- Surette, R. (1994). Predator criminals as media icons. In G. Barak (Ed.), *Media, process, and the social construction of crime: Studies in newsmaking criminology* (pp. 131–158). New York, NY: Garland.
- Surette, R. (1998). *Media, crime, and criminal justice: Images and realities*. Belmont, CA: West/Wadsworth.
- Surette, R. (2003). The media, the public, and criminal justice policy. *Journal of the Institute of Justice and International Studies*, 2, 39–52.
- Tobin, J. (2000). "Good guys don't wear hats." *Children's talk about the media*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Tonry, M. (2004). *Thinking about crime: Sense and sensibility in American penal culture*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Unnever, J. D., & Cullen, F. T. (2010). The social sources of Americans' punitiveness: A test of three competing models." *Criminology*, 48, 99–129.
- Vollum, S., & Adkinson, C. D. (2003). The portrayal of crime and justice in the comic book superhero mythos. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 10, 96–108.
- Websdale, N., & Ferrell, J. (1999). Taking the trouble: Concluding remarks and future directions. In J. Ferrell & N. Websdale (Eds.), *Making trouble: Cultural constructions of crime, deviance, and control* (pp. 349–364). New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Welsh, A., Fleming, T., & Dowler, K. (2011). Constructing crime and justice on film: Meaning and message in cinema. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 14, 457–476.
- Wilson, B. J., Smith, S. L., Potter, W. J., Kunkel, D., Linz, D., Colvin, C. M., & Donnerstein, E. (2002). Violence in children's television programming: Assessing the risks. *Journal of Communication*, 52, 5–35.
- Wright, B. W. (2001). *Comic book nation: The transformation of youth culture in America*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Yar, M. (2010). Screening crime: Cultural criminology goes to the movies. In K. J. Hayward & M. Presdee (Eds.), *Framing crime: Cultural criminology and the image* (pp. 68–82). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Zehnder, S. M., & Calvert, S. L. (2004). Between the hero and the shadow: Developmental differences in adolescents' perceptions and understanding of mythic themes in film. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 28, 122–137.