Is Orange the New Black?: Investigating Fictional Character Portrayals

and Real World Prison Reform Perceptions

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Abstract

The following research was conducted in order to investigate the effects that fictional media has on real world perceptions. An experiment involving stereotypical character portrayals and counterstereotypical character portrayals from the Netflix prison show *Orange is the New Black* was utilized in order to gain an understanding of how representations of a fictional female inmate character influence the perceptions of participants in the experiment of the actual criminal justice system and prison reform. Participants in this study were placed into 3 conditions and viewed either a scene of a character portraying a stereotypical woman inmate (stereotype group), that same character portraying a counterstereotypical woman inmate (counterstereotype group), or a photographic head shot of that character (control group). Results were significant and concluded that stereotypical and counterstereotypical portrayals of a woman inmate character in *Orange the New Black* affected participants' attitudes and perceptions of real world prison systems and reform. This experiment supports previous studies concluding that fictional media does affect people's perceptions of the real world and their attitudes towards public policy.

Introduction

Many Americans are captivated by films and television programs that relate to crime and the criminal justice system, particularly shows about prisons. However, most Americans do not have firsthand experience with a real prison or access to information pertaining to the lives of incarcerated inmates. The point of reference for most Americans is often based upon depictions of prison life on television and in movies. Most crime shows are fictional, dramatized, and contain stereotypes about the prisoners. Even though the shows are fictional, it can have a profound influence on people's perceptions of the real world, especially regarding topics to which most people do not have adequate personal access (Vandebosch & Van den Bulck, 2003). This study aims to examine how stereotypical and counterstereotypical portrayals of a fictional character in the Netflix women's prison show, *Orange is the New Black*, affect people's attitudes towards female inmates, the criminal justice system and prison reform policy.

Incarceration in the United States and Public Opinions

In the United States, incarceration rates have increased 500% over the past 40 years, primarily due to policy changes in the 1980s that involve law enforcement and criminal sentencing with a focus being tough on crime (The Sentencing Project, 2019). The United States currently has the highest rate of incarceration in the world with 2.2 million people currently behind bars (The Sentencing Project, 2019). Approximately 219,000 women are in prison and, despite the much larger number of men behind bars, the lock up rate for women has grown to twice as much as that of men (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). Even though there is high rate of incarceration, crime has actually decreased in the past two decades. However, most Americans believe that crime has increased nationally (Gramlich, 2019).

Despite the perception of high crime rates, many Americans do not support mass incarceration. In a survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, many Americans believe that the current criminal justice system is not an effective crime deterrent. The survey found that construction of prisons and jails was the lowest priority for public spending and that education was the highest priority (Vera institute of Justice, 2018). A 2017 phone interview poll conducted across the United States revealed that 91 percent of respondents felt that "the criminal justice system has problems that need fixing" and that 68 percent of respondents would be more inclined to vote for a candidate that "supported reducing the prison population and using the savings to reinvest in drug treatment and mental health programs" (ACLU, 2017).

Stereotypes of Female Inmates

Television shows about prison usually contain stereotypical portrayals of female inmates. Female prisoners are often depicted as "damaged" women and failed mothers (Talvi, 2007, pp. 11). Prison shows often focus on women's gender and sexuality as a reason for their deviance. A common trope in shows that involve female prisoners is the "prison lesbian," which depicts women as aggressive, masculine, and "predatory" (Gordy & Jackson, 2019, pp. 15). Other tropes include the "crack ho" and "gold digger" and are often used on reality television shows (Talvi, 2007, pp. 13). Dramas such as *Snapped* and *Women Who Kill* create the narrative that female criminals are "ruthless" and "heartless" (Talvi, 2007, pp. 13).

Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*

Orange is the New Black is a comedic drama that consists of seven seasons and was first released in 2013. The show is one of the most watched original series on Netflix. Based on Piper Kerman's memoir, *Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*, the show follows main character Piper Chapman as she serves time in Litchfield Penitentiary, a women's federal

prison. The show also features the lives of other inmates and often uses flashbacks to reveal the prisoners' lives before they were imprisoned. The show tackles issues and themes such as gender, sexuality, race, class, and prison conditions.

The Importance of Fictional Prison Shows

Fictional shows are readily accessible. Online streaming platforms, such as Netflix and Hulu, provide people with hours of online streaming that are readily available on their phones, computers, tablets, and television sets. As of the third quarter of 2019, Netflix had over 60 million U.S. paying accounts (Watson, 2019). Needless to say, people can easily access fictional shows, which can help shape their attitudes about the real world. This influence can be especially important with regard to how their public policy opinions are formed. Criminal justice and prison reform is an important issue in American society. It is valuable to discover whether people are affected by prison shows and if the resulting effects influences their attitude towards prison policy and the manner in which they vote. This paper is broken into the following sections: A Literature Review that discusses previous work conducted on fictional effects on reality, crime and prison media effects on attitudes towards the criminal justice system and prison, and persuasive narrative and stereotypes. The methodology section will explain how the experiment was conducted and the results will detail the finding of the experiment. The paper will conclude with a discussion section that will convey and explain the results, a section regarding the limitations of the study, and a conclusion focused on the study's possible implications and future exploration of fictional prison shows and attitude affects.

Literature Review

Fictional Effects on Reality

      Most research concludes that fictional media affects people's perceptions of the real world. The mere exposure to images can greatly influence a person's viewpoint. In 2003, Adaval and Wyer conducted an experiment to test how exposure to aggressive acts influence people's reactions to rape cases. The results found that exposure to the negative outcomes of aggression (such as image of a lynching episode) increased perceptions of the victim's responsibility and that the defendant "got what he deserved" (Adaval & Wyer, 2003, pp. 14). Adaval and Wyer discovered that attitudes towards rape victims are influenced by the media's objectifying portrayals of women (2003, pp. 142).

      Fiction can especially influence people who lack real world experience or information about the given topic, even if the fiction is inaccurate or not realistic. In 2003, Vandebosch and Van den Bulck interviewed 33 inmates in five Flemish prisons. Participants were asked about their perceptions of prisons before incarceration and whether their views aligned with their experiences in prison (Vandebosch & Van den Bulck, 2003, pp. 107). Overall, most participants found that depictions of prison in fictional television shows and films were drastically different from their actual experiences in prison (Vandebosch & Van den Bulck, 2003, pp. 111). A Habel and Mulligan (2013) study found that fiction has implications on people's perceptions of the government. In their experiment, some participants watched the film *Wag the Dog*, which is about the United States government creating a fictional war to draw attention away from a presidential scandal (Habel & Mulligan, 2013, pp. 128). The results found that participants who viewed the movie *Wag the Dog* adopted the film's conspiratorial views toward the government even though the film was completely fictional (Habel & Mulligan, 2013, pp. 132).

Fiction, particularly television dramas, can influence people's opinions on public policies, regardless of their political ideologies. Such influence was discovered in a 2006 experiment conducted by Long and Slater involving participants who were required to answer questions after watching one of two programs: a drama that involves gay rights and one that involves the enforcement of the death penalty (Long & Slater, 2006, pp. 241). The results found that participants' liberal/conservative views of public policy were weaker after exposure "to a television drama with content consistent with that policy than after exposure to a control drama" (Long & Slater, 2006, pp. 245). People's support for controversial public policies can be influenced by television dramas.

Based on the results and research in the above section, Hypothesis 1 was formed:

H1: Fictional character portrayals in *Orange is the New Black* will affect

participants' attitudes and opinions about the American prison system.

Crime and Prison Media Effects on Attitudes Towards Criminal Justice System and Prison

Most of the previously conducted media effects research that regard crime and prison media focuses predominately on shows that are from the perspective of law enforcement. The bias towards law enforcement in such programs usually cause people to view criminals more harshly. In a survey study, Callanan and Rosenberger asked participants questions such as demographic information, the criminal justice system, and the amount of media they consume. (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011, pp. 441). The results of their survey found that the likelihood of the participant to choose incapacitation over rehabilitation was raised with the consumption of crime dramas and that the consumption of crime-related media decreases support of rehabilitation as the purpose of sentencing a criminal (Callan & Rosenberger, 2011, pp. 446).

However, some research has found that crime shows have caused a dissatisfaction with police effectiveness. Dowler conducted interviews from a sample of people who took the 1995 National Opinion Survey on Crime and Justice via telephone. Participants were asked about their attitudes towards various crime and justice issues, the amount of television they watch, types of crime shows they view, and their source of crime news (Dowler, 2003, pp. 112). The survey found a significant relationship between watching crime shows and fear of crime and perceived police effectiveness (Dowler, 2003, pp. 116). Participants who regularly consumed crime shows had a higher fear of crime (Dowler, 2003, pp.119). Dirikx, Gelders, and Van den Bulck found differing results among adolescences who viewed fictional crime shows and their view of police effectiveness. In Flanders, Belgium, 156 high school students were randomly administered surveys (Dirikx, Gelders, & Van den Bulck, 2013, pp. 119). The results found fictional crime shows did not have significant impact on adolescence's views of police performance, procedural justice, or distributive justice beliefs. However, regular consumption of reality police shows had a negative impact on adolescents' perception of police procedural justice (Dirikx, Van den Bulck, 2013, pp. 123).

Little research has been conducted in regard to how the effects of watching prison drama influences people's views. What little research that has been conducted focuses on cultivation and how it affects people's perceptions of real world prison life. Gray conducted a 2016 survey with 70 participating women who attended Elizabeth City State University. The requirement for participation was that the women must have watched at least one episode of the Netflix show *Orange is the New Black* (Gray, 2018, pp.13). The survey found that there was no significance difference between the number of episodes watched and stronger attitudes towards the treatment and behavior of women inmates, thus, cultivation did not explain college women's sense of

reality about incarcerated women based on watching the fictional show (Gray, 2018, pp. 16).

However, the results did show that watching *Orange is the New Black* had an influence on

participants' perception of real life prison (Gray, 2018).

Persuasive Narrative and Stereotypes

The manner in which fictional narratives are written can have a profound effect on how

people view an issue. In an experiment conducted by Beentjes, De Graaf, Hoeken, and Sanders, a

narrative about a job interview that involves an interviewer and a man in a wheelchair as the

interviewee was used to test narrative persuasion (2012). One condition had participants read the

narrative from the interviewer's perspective and then answered a questionnaire; another

condition had participants read the interviewee's perspective and then answer a questionnaire

(Beentjes, et al., 2003, pp. 807). Beentjes et al., conducted a second experiment, which was

similar to their first persuasive narrative experiment except the narrative used consisted of two

sisters that must decide what to do with their terminally ill mother - one favored euthanasia and

the other was against euthanasia (Beentjes, et al., 2003, pp. 812). Both experiment results found

that participants did indeed identify more with the character whose narrative they read and found

similar attitudes and thoughts about the situation that supported the viewpoint. Identification can

be a strong factor in the effectiveness of narrative persuasion (Beentjes, et. al, 2003).

Crime and prison show depictions have significant implications on the manner in which a

person views the world. Positive and negative portrayals of characters and the criminal justice

system can influence the way people view criminals, police, and the criminal justice system. An

experiment conducted by Mutz and Nir explored the concept of positive and negative portrayals

of the criminal justice system (2010). The experiment results found that participants had positive

attitudes towards the criminal justice system after watching the episode that portrayed the

criminal justice system positively. The negative portrayal of the criminal justice system caused participants to view the system as not as fair or not working fairly (Mutz & Nir, 2010, pp. 208). Storylines were most effective for participants with high levels of empathy for the "target character" (Mutz & Nir, 2010, pp. 208). The concept extends to stereotypes and positive and negative portrayals of characters. Ramasubramanian conducted an experiment to see how stereotypes of African Americans affect people's attitudes towards Affirmative Action. The experiment results found that positive counterstereotypical African American characters were favored more often than negative stereotypical African American characters. Participants that were exposed to counterstereotypical characters expressed a higher level of support for Affirmative Action than those exposed to stereotypical characters (Ramasubramanian, 2011, pp. 507). Even a small amounts of exposure to stereotypical and counterstereotypical characters from various media can change people's beliefs about specific groups and affect people's attitudes and support for public policies that aim to help those groups (Ramasubramanian, 2011, pp. 509).

Based on the research on narratives, positive portrayals, and negative portrayals, Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 were formed:

H2: Participants that watch the counterstereotypical portrayals of an inmate in *Orange is the New Black* will view inmates more favorably and view the criminal justice system as too harsh and in need of reform.

H3: Participants that watch the stereotypical portrayals of an inmate in *Orange is the New Black* will view inmates less favorably and view the criminal justice system as fair (or not harsh enough) and not in need of reform.

Methods

To test the effects of prison character portrayals on people's attitudes towards criminal justice reform, an experiment was conducted utilizing scenes from the popular Netflix women's prison show, *Orange is the New Black*. The show was selected based on its popularity and that the characters perform both stereotypical and counterstereotypical portrayals of female prisoners.

Clip Selection

To select the clips for the experiment, a focus group of twenty people were supposed to watch four of eight scenes selected from *Orange is the New Black* that reference stereotypical and counterstereotypical portrayals of prisoners. This would allow for the best clips to be selected and utilized. However, due to time restraints, a focus group was not utilized. Instead, stereotypical and counterstereotypical depictions of the four characters, Piper Chapman, Maria Ruiz, Rosa Cisneros, and Suzanne 'Crazy Eyes' Warren were examined. Two clips of Maria were chosen for the experiment based on how closely they depict stereotypical and counterstereotypical portrayals of a female inmate.

Participants

The sample size consisted of 119 randomly selected University of Michigan Undergraduate students enrolled in Communications 102 Winter 2020. Predominantly, the participants were female. The participant gender breakdown was that 78.2% self-identified as female and 13.4% self-identified as male. Gender was not indicated by 10 participants. The majority of participants were white with the following ethnic breakdown: 76.1% white, 11.9% Asian, 3.7% Black or African American, 3.7% other, 2.8% Hispanic/Latinx, and 1.8% American Indian or Alaska Native. Race was not indicated by 10 participants. The median age of participants was 19 years old. The age breakdown is as followed: 36.6% were 19 years old,

25.7% were 18 years old, 24.8% were 20 years old, 6.9% were 21 years old, 2% were 22 years

old, 4% were over the age of 25. Only 106 participants recorded their grade level and 50% of

those participants were sophomores. The other half of participants were 39.6% freshmen, 5.7%

juniors, 2.8% seniors, and 1.9% second year seniors. In terms of family income as of last year,

the participant pool had a mean of 5.99 and a 1.78 standard deviation. Family income was

indicated by 103 participants. Political party affiliation was indicated by 110 participants. A little

more than half (56.4%) self-identified as Democrat (34 as not very strong Democrat, and 28 as

Strong Democrat). The remaining breakdown is as follows: 19.1% Independent, 15.5% as

Republican (10 as not very strong Republican, 6 as strong Republican), and 9.1% as Other. In

regards to political views, 109 participants responded. The participant pool consisted of a range

of ideologies: 29.4% liberal, 22% slight liberal, 20.2% moderate, middle of the road (if had to

choose 12 considered to be liberal and 10 considered to be conservative), 8.3% Don't know;

haven't thought much about it, 7.3% conservative, 6.4% extremely liberal, and 6.4% slightly

conservative. All participants had to confirm that they were at least eighteen years old and gave

their consent to participate in the experiment. Participants did so by selecting "yes" when asked

for confirmation and consent. Any participant that selected "no" was not allowed to proceed and

were prohibited from participating.

Experiment

The experiment was created using the online survey software, QualtricsXM and was

conducted online through the University of Michigan's Communication Participant Pool.

Participants were encouraged and expected to be in a quiet room and to wear headphones when

they participated. Participants were randomly placed into one of three groups; stereotype group,

counterstereotype group, or the control group. Participants were asked to fill out demographic

information that was the same for all groups. Demographic questions inquired about gender, race, age, grade level, family income, political party, and political ideology. Previous exposure to *Orange is the New Black* was not asked. As Gray (2018) discovered, the amount of episodes participants viewed of *Orange is the New Black* did not affect their opinions and attitudes regarding the criminal justice system. Therefore, it is assumed that for the purpose of this experiment, previous exposure to *Orange is the New Black* would not affect participants' viewpoints.

After filling out demographic information, participants viewed the stereotypical clip, the counterstereotypical clip, or the control photograph. In the stereotype group, participants watched a scene from *Orange is the New Black* where the character, Maria Ruiz, engaged in stereotypical prisoner behavior. In the clip, Maria leads a group of prisoners to abduct fellow prisoner, Piper Chapman, and burn a Swastika into her arm, visibly hurting Chapman. This clip plays into the stereotype that female prisoners are mean, heartless, and aggressive. In the counterstereotype group, participants watched a different scene with Maria, where the character engaged in counterstereotypical prisoner behavior. In the clip, Maria is seen doting on her child and getting emotional when the father informs her that she will no longer be allowed to visit with her daughter. This counters the stereotype that female prisoners are bad mothers and not vulnerable. Participants in the control group were shown a headshot picture of Maria, but participants were not shown any of the scenes. After viewing the clips or photo, participants filled out a questionnaire that asked questions about their attitudes towards the character, the criminal justice system, and prison reform.

The Questionnaire

      The questionnaire was broken up into two sections. The first section consisted of eleven statements. Students were asked to indicate if they "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," or "strongly disagree." The statements *I felt empathic towards the character*, *I believe that the character is relatable*, and *I did not feel any empathy towards the character* were used to test for character relatability and likability. To test for the character's portrayal on participants' real inmate perceptions, the following statements were used: *I believe the character is representative of most women inmates*; *I believe the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged*; *I do not believe that the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged.* The statements, *I believe that the character deserves a lesser punishment or reduced sentence*, *I am glad that the character is in prison*, and *I believe the character should not be incarcerated and should have a different form of punishment* were used to test for character portrayal on policy attitudes. Finally, the statements *I believe the character is attractive* and *I believe the character is intelligent* were used as filler statements to help mask the intentions of the experiment. Filler statements were not used in the analysis or results of the experiment.

      Statement order was mixed so that statements testing for similar concepts were not near each other. This insured that participants were not influenced to make a certain decision based on statement order (e.g., *I felt empathic towards the character* and *I did not feel any empathy towards the character* did not appear near each other). Overall, these statements were testing to see if the character's portrayal influenced participants' opinions of the character and actual prisoners.

      The second section contained four fill in the blank slider statements in which students were required to move the slider toward the direction and to indicate the degree in which they

agree with the fill in the blank statement. These statements focused on character portrayal effects on participants' attitudes toward prison policy and prison reform. For the first statement *I believe that the character deserves a sentence that is__*, participants were given the option to slide in favor of *harsher and longer* or *lenient and shorter*. In the second statement *I feel compelled to vote for a political candidate that supports prison reform that will make prison sentences__*, participants had the option to slide toward *harsher* or *more lenient*. The third statement regarded American prison conditions and participants had the option of sliding towards *fine and in need of no improvement* or *poor and in need of improvement*. The fourth and final fill in the blank slider statement regarded U.S. funding of state and federal prisons. Participants could slide toward *increase* or *decrease*. Each sliding tick was given a number 0 to 100, therefore, participants' slide answers were given a numeric value. However, participants were not made aware of this. Numbers were only used to help more accurately interpret and compare data between the experiment's participant groups.

After completing the fill in the blank slider statement section, participants were sent to a debriefing page where they were informed about the intentions of the experiment and given a breakdown of each section. Participants were provided with two references if they wanted to learn more about fictional effects on real world perceptions. The debriefing page also contained contact information of the experimenter, the experimenter's advisor, and University of Michigan Experimental Review Board. Upon hitting the "next" button, participants were directed to a page to thank them for their participation and to record their results.

Results

SPSS Statistics was used to analyze the data from the experiment. Linear regressions were run to test for statement significance and to compare the stereotypical group and

counterstereotypical group to the control group. P-value and beta-value results for the

regressions from each statement are in Table 1. P-value and beta value results for regressions

from fill in the blank slide statements are in Table 2.

Character Relatability and Likability

In regard to the statement, *I felt empathic towards the character*, the counterstereotypical

group was statistically significant (β = .557, p = .000) and the stereotypical group was not

significant (β = -.007, p = .937). The counterstereotype clip had a positive causal effect on

participants to answer more in the direction of empathic towards the character. The statement, *I

did not feel any empathy towards the character*, had a statistically significant stereotype group (β

= .351, p = .000) and an insignificant counterstereotype group (β = -.169, p = .075). The

stereotype clip had a positive causal effect on participants to answer more in the direction of *I

did not feel any empathy towards the character*. For the statement, *I believe the character is

relatable*, only the counterstereotypical group was statistically significant (β =.444, p =.000).

The counterstereotype clip is statically significant and had a positive casual effect on participants

answering in the direction of *I believe that the character is relatable*.

Character's Portrayal on Real Inmate Perceptions

Results from the linear regression, *I believe the character is representative of most women

inmates,* found that the counterstereotype clip was statistically significant (β = .376, p =.000) and

had a positive causal effect on participants to answer more in the direction of the character is

representative of most women inmates. The stereotype group was not statistically significant (β =

.059, p =.543).

Table 1: Stereotype and Counterstereotype Beta Value and P-value Results for Linear Regressions for Experiment Statements

Statement	Stereotype		Counter stereotype	
	β	p	β	p
I felt empathic towards the character.	-.007	.937	.557	.000
I believe the character is representative of most women inmates.	.059	.543	.376	.000
I believe the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged.	.274	.008	.203	.048
I believe that the character deserves a lesser punishment or reduced sentence.	.086	.388	.345	.001
I am glad that the character is in prison.	.529	.000	.138	.136
I believe that the character is relatable.	-.077	.403	.444	.000
I did not feel any empathy towards the character.	.351	.000	-.169	.075
I do not believe that the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged.	.225	.029	.273	.008
I believe the character should not be incarcerated and should have a different form of punishment.	.127	.209	.318	.002

Table 2: Stereotype and Counterstereotype Beta Value and P-value Results for Fill in the Blank Slider Experiment Statements

Statement	Stereotype		Counter stereotype	
	β	p	β	p
I believe that the character deserves a sentence that is __.	.213	.014	.582	.000
I feel compelled to vote for a political candidate that supports prison reform that will make prison sentences __.	.415	.000	.445	.000
The conditions in American prisons are __.	.386	.000	.312	.002
The U.S. should __ funding for state and federal prisons.	.359	.000	.323	.001

The statement, *I believe the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged,* resulted in both the stereotype group (β = .374, p = .008) and the counterstereotype group (β = .203, p =.048) being statically significant. Both the stereotype clip and counterstereotype clip caused participants to answer more in the direction of the average woman inmate is violent, heartless and damaged. However, the stereotype clip had a greater magnitude of effect than the counterstereotype clip (β =.274 > β=.203). In regards to the statement, *I do not believe that the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged,* both the counterstereotype group (β = .273, p = .008) and stereotype group (β = .225, p = .029) were statistically significant. The counterstereotype clip and the stereotype clip caused participants to answer more in the direction

of the average woman inmate is not violent, heartless, and damaged. However, the

counterstereotype clip had a greater magnitude of effect than the stereotype group (β = .273 > β

= .225). Although the stereotype groups and the counterstereotype groups were significant for *I*

believe the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged and *I do not believe that*

the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged, the magnitude of effects for the

stereotype group in the first statement and the counterstereotype group for the latter statement

were greater in the direction of each corresponding statement.

Character Portrayal on Policy Attitudes

The statement, *I believe that the character deserves a lesser punishment or reduced*

sentence, resulted in the counterstereotype group being significant (β = .345, p = .001) and the

stereotype group not being significant (β =.086, p = .388). The counterstereotype clip had a

positive causal effect on participants answering more in the direction of the character deserves a

lesser punishment or reduced sentence. In regard to the statement, *I am glad that the character is*

in prison, the stereotype group was statistically significant (β = .529, p = .000) and the

counterstereotype was not significant (β = .138, p = .136). The stereotype clip had a positive

causal effect on the participants answering more in the direction of *I am glad that the character*

is in prison. The statement *I believe the character should not be incarcerated and should have a*

different form of punishment, resulted in the counterstereotype group as statistically significant

(β = .318, p = .002) and the stereotype group as not significant (β = .127, p = .209). The

counterstereotype clip caused participants to answer more in the direction of the character should

not be incarcerated and should have a different form of punishment.

Fill in the Blank Slider Statements and Character Portrayal Effects on Prison Policy and Reform

The four fill in the blank slider statements had statistical significance for both the counterstereotype group and the stereotype group. For the statement, *I believe that the main character deserves a sentence that is__*, the stereotype clip (β = .213, p = .014) and counterstereotype clip (β = .582, p = .000) had positive causal effects on participants answering more in the direction of *lenient and shorter*. However, the counterstereotype clip had a greater magnitude of effect than the stereotype clip (β = .582 > β = .213). In regard to the statement *I feel compelled to vote for a political candidate that supports prison reform that will make prison sentence__*, the counterstereotype clip (β = .445, p = .000) and the stereotype clip (β = .415, p = .000) had positive causal effects on participants answering more in the direction of *more lenient*. However, the counterstereotype clip had a greater magnitude of effect than the stereotype group (β = .445 > β = .415). For the statement regarding prison conditions in America, watching the counterstereotype clip (β = .312, p = .002) and the stereotype clip (β = .386, p = .000) caused participants to answer more in the direction of *poor and in need of improvement*. However, the stereotype had a greater magnitude of effect than the counterstereotype clip (β = .386 > β = .312). In regard to the statement addressing increasing or decreasing funding for state and federal prisons, the counterstereotype clip (β = .323, p = .001) and the stereotype clip (β = .359, p = .000) had positive causal effects on participants answering more in the direction of *increase*. The stereotype clip had a greater magnitude of effect than the counterstereotype clip (β = .359 > β = .323) .

Variable Effects within the Stereotype and Counterstereotype Groups

Linear regressions on the counterstereotype and stereotype groups were rerun with the variables, gender and empathy, to see if gender or empathy had an effect on the original

statement regressions. Gender was not significant for any of the statements (p >.05) nor changed

the significance of the stereotype effect and counterstereotype effect of those statements.

However, empathy was significant for some of the statements. P-value and beta value results for

regressions with empathy on the statements are in Table 3.

Character Relatability and Likability and Accounting for Empathy

For the statement *I did not feel any empathy towards the character*, empathy was

significant (β = .247, p = .015). The stereotype group remained significant (β = .353, p = .000)

and participant answers were still more in the direction of *I did not feel any*

empathy towards the character. However, when empathy is accounted for, the counterstereotype

group becomes significant (β = -.306, p = .005) and participants answer in the opposite direction

of the statement, *I did not feel any empathy towards the character*. In regard to the statement *I*

believe the character is relatable, the empathy variable was significant (β = .694, p = .000). The

stereotype group remained insignificant (β = -.072, p = .301). However, the counterstereotype

group became insignificant (β = .057, p = .484).

Character's Portrayal on Real Inmate Perceptions and Accounting for Empathy

Empathy was significant for the statement *I believe the character is representative of*

most women inmates (β = .728, p =.000). The counterstereotype group for that statement became

insignificant, (β = -.029, p = .738) and the stereotype group remained insignificant (β = .066, p =

.374). For the statement, *I believe the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged*,

empathy was significant (β = .465, p = .000). The significance of the stereotype group remained

significant (β = .278 and p = .004) while the counterstereotype group became insignificant (β = -

.056, p = .607). In regard to the statement *I do not believe that the average woman inmate is*

violent, heartless, and damaged, empathy was significant (β = .746, p = .000).

Table 3: Stereotype and Counterstereotype Beta Value and P-value Results for Linear Regressions for Experiment Statements Accounting for the Empathic Variable.

Statement	Stereotype		Counter stereotype	
	β	p	β	p
I felt empathic towards the character.	-	-	-	-
I believe the character is representative of most women inmates.	.066	.374	-.029	.738
I believe the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged.	.278	.004	-.056	.607
I believe that the character deserves a lesser punishment or reduced sentence.	.098	.181	-.086	.317
I am glad that the character is in prison.	.531	.000	-.073	.467
I believe that the character is relatable.	-.072	.301	.057	.484
I did not feel any empathy towards the character.	.353	.000	-.306	.005
I do not believe that the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged.	.230	.004	-.143	.121
I believe the character should not be incarcerated and should have a different form of punishment.	.132	.088	-.102	.260

The stereotype group remained significant (β = .230, p = .004) and the counterstereotype group became insignificant (β = -.143, p = .121).

Character Portrayal on Policy Attitudes and Accounting for Empathy

In regard to the statement, *I believe that the character deserves a lesser punishment or reduced sentence,* empathy was significant (β = .778, p = .000). The stereotype group remained insignificant (β = .098, p = .181). However, when empathy was accounted for, the counterstereotype effect became insignificant (β = -.086, p = .317). The statemen*t I am glad that the character is in prison* resulted in a significant effect for empathy (β = .379, p = .000). Even when empathy is taken into account, the significance of the stereotype effect (β = .531, p = .000) and counterstereotype effect (β = -.073, p = .467) do not change. For the statement *I believe the character should not be incarcerated and should have a different form of punishment*, empathy was significant (β = .753, p = .000). The stereotype group remained insignificant (β = .132, p = .88). However, the counterstereotype group became insignificant (β= -.102, p = .260).

Fill in the Blank Slider Statements and Accounting for Empathy

The empathy variable was not significant for the four fill in the blank slider statements: *I believe the character deserves a sentence that is___* (β = .088, p = .282), *I feel compelled to vote for a political candidate that supports prison reform that will make prison sentences__* (β = .080, p = .348), the statement regarding prison conditions (β = -.013, p = .889), and the statement addressing funding for state and federal prisons (β = -.041, p = .651).

Discussion

Overall, the majority of the experiment results ran as expected and supported the experiment hypotheses regarding fictional character portrayals effects on perceptions of inmates, the criminal justice system, and prison reform policy. Hypothesis 1 predicted that the fictional

character portrayals in the counterstereotype clip and the stereotype clip would affect

participants' attitudes and opinions about the American prison system. For each statement, at

least the effect of the counterstereotype clip or the stereotype clip was significant. The

interpretation of these results is that the fictional portrayals did affect participants' responses

regarding the American prison system, thus supporting Hypothesis 1.

Unsurprisingly, the stereotype clip caused participants to answer more in favor of the

statements, *I did not feel any empathy towards the character* and *I am glad that the character is*

in prison. These statements address unfavorable views of the character and help to support part

of Hypothesis 3 that predicted participants that watch stereotypical portrayals of inmates will

view inmates less favorably. Hypothesis 2 predicted that participants that watch the

counterstereotypical portrayals of inmates will view inmates more favorably and the criminal

justice system as too harsh and in need of reform. The counterstereotype clip caused participants

to answer more in favor of the statements *I felt empathic towards the character*, *I believe the*

character is relatable, *I believe the character is representative of most women inmates*, *I believe*

that the character deserves a lesser punishment or reduced sentence, and *I believe the character*

should not be incarcerated and should have a different form of punishment. These statements

regard favorable views of the character and that the criminal justice system as too harsh, thus

supporting Hypothesis 2. As expected, the counterstereotype clip caused participants to answer

in favor of *more lenient and shorter* in regards to the statement *I believe that the character*

deserves a sentence that is___, and *more lenient* for the statement *I feel compelled to vote for a*

political candidate that supports prison reform that will make prison sentences__. These

statements pertain to viewing the criminal justice system as too harsh and in need of reform and

thus help support Hypothesis 2. The statements regarding American prison conditions and U.S.

funding of state and federal prisons were also unsurprising in regard to the counterstereotype

clip. As expected, the counterstereotype group favored *in need of improvement* (prison

conditions) and *increase* (funding) which helps to support Hypothesis 2.

Expectations were met for most of the tested controlled variables. When accounting for

gender, there were no expectations for change in the significance of the stereotype effect or the

counterstereotype effect for any of the statements. Gender was not significant for any of the

statements, meaning that whether a participant was male or female did not affect their

perceptions measured in the questionnaire. In regard to the effect of empathy with the

stereotypical clip, the stereotype effect remained significant for the statements, *I did not feel any*

empathy towards the character and *I am glad the character is in prison*. This means that even

when accounting for variation in empathy, the stereotypical clip still caused participants to

respond negatively toward inmates and support Hypothesis 3. As expected, the stereotype clip

remained insignificant for *I believe the character is relatable*, *I do not believe that the average*

woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged, *I believe that the character deserves a lesser*

punishment or reduced sentence, and *I believe the character should not be incarcerated and*

should have a different form of punishment. Even when variation in empathy is accounted for,

the stereotypic group is still not significant for statements pertaining to favorable attitudes about

inmates and the prison system as too harsh. Therefore, these results support Hypothesis 3.

In regard to the counterstereotype clip and empathy, the counterstereotype effect

remained insignificant for the statement, *I am glad the character is in prison*. It is expected that

someone with empathy would not desire the character to be in prison, especially after viewing

the counterstereotypical clip. For the statement, *I did not feel any empathy towards the*

character, the counterstereotype effect became significant, but in the opposite direction. This

means that participants did not answer toward not having empathy for the character. It is expected that a counterstereotypical clip would cause people to feel empathic and answer against not feeling empathic. The counterstereotype group became insignificant for the statement *I believe the character is relatable* when accounting for the variable empathy. Empathy is not always required to relate to someone, so it could be expected that empathy is not significant.

There were a few results that were unexpected. Surprisingly, both the stereotype clip and counterstereotype clip caused people to answer in favor of *I believe the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damage*. Expectations for the counterstereotype clip were that it would cause participants to answer in the opposite direction of the statement, or that the effects would not be significant. However, when accounting for empathy, the counterstereotype becomes insignificant, which would be expected and helps to support Hypothesis 3. Even without accounting for empathy, the stereotype clip had a greater effect on participants to answer in favor of the statement, which is expected and helps support Hypothesis 3. Interestingly, the stereotype clip and counterstereotype clip also caused participants to answer *I do not believe that the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged*. Perhaps there were some participants in both treatment groups that already perceived inmates to be stereotypical and some participants that already viewed inmates as not stereotypical, which caused the groups to answer in favor of both statements. However, there was a greater effect of the counterstereotype clip on participants for the statement *I do not believe that the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged,* meaning that the counterstereotype favored this statement more than the stereotype group. That is expected and helps to support Hypothesis 2.

Surprisingly, the stereotype clip also caused people to answer more favorably towards the character and that the criminal justice system is too harsh and in need of reform in regards to the

four fill in the blank slider statements. The stereotype group favored *more lenient and shorter* in regard to the statement *I believe that the character deserves a sentence that is___*, and *more lenient* for the statement *I feel compelled to vote for a political candidate that supports prison reform that will make prison sentences__*. Participants in the stereotype group also favored *in need of improvement* in regard to the statement pertaining to American prison conditions and *increase* regarding U.S. funding to state and federal prisons. Perhaps participants preconceived perceptions of the criminal justice system may have influenced their responses. As noted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, many American do not believe incarceration is the best method for dealing with crime (Vera institute of Justice, 2018) and that prisons and the criminal justice system are in need of improvement (ACLU, 2017). Another possibility is that the poor prison conditions and harsh criminal justice policy depicted in the clips could be a reason why the character is acting stereotypical. Therefore, the stereotypical clip may have caused participants to answer more favorably towards *more lenient*, *in need of improvement*, *increase* (funding). Another reason for these results, could be that the stereotype and counterstereotype clip contained the same character. Even though she was portrayed differently in each clip, she was in the same prison, same conditions, and a had the same sentence in both clips. The prison, criminal justice system, and her conditions did not change. So, with that in mind, it is possible to expect that responses of the counterstereotype group and the stereotype group could be similar.

The results of the linear regressions for the fill in the blank slider statements when accounting for variation in empathy, were also surprisingly in that empathy was not significant for any of the four statements. These statements were on a much larger scale (0 to 100 point scale as opposed to the other statements that were on 1 to 5 point scale). So, perhaps differences between the counterstereotype and stereotype groups were more precisely found, whereas

empathy was not. However, it may just be the case that empathy was simply not significant enough to impact people's responses to those statements.

There were a few surprising results for other non-fill-in-the-blank slider statements regarding the empathic variable as well. This was particularly true in regard to the counterstereotype group. The counterstereotype effect in the statements, *I believe the character is representative of most women inmates*, *I believe that the character deserves a lesser punishment or reduced sentence*, *I believe that the character is relatable, and I do not believe that the average woman inmate is violent, heartless, and damaged* became insignificant. A possible conclusion for these results may be that empathy was activated in the counterstereotype group, but not in the stereotype group. So, once empathy is accounted for, it appears that the clip itself had no effect. It is also important to note that the stereotype group for these statements did not change. Possibly, the stereotype clip was effective enough to counter any effect empathy may have had on a participant.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that need to be addressed. The sample was small and the majority of participants were white, female, from high income families, democratic, with at least a high school education, and currently in college. Results from the experiment may only reflect that specific group. Using a more diverse and even sample of race, age, gender, income, and political affiliation may help strengthen results and conclusions found by the experiment.

Only one Latina character was used for the experiment. *Orange is the New Black* includes diverse characters that portray stereotypes and counterstereotypes of inmates. Future studies may want to include multiple characters in the experiment to examine if results are the same for different characters. Multiple characters could also be used to test if the race of the character has

an effect on participants' answers. *Orange is the New Black* focuses on the lives of female prisoners. Future studies may want to use a television show that focuses on the lives of male prisoners to see if gender of the character impacts participants' perceptions.

For ethical reasons, participants were not asked about their personal exposure to American prison systems. Real life prison experience could be a propensity. As Vandebosch & Van den Bulck, (2003) noted, media is more influential the less people have personally knowledge about a topic. Therefore, a participant that has been to prison or has visited a prison may have differing results than a participant with no real life exposure to American prisons.

Only gender and empathy variables were tested and accounted for when running regressions and analyzing results. Future studies may want to test for political party affiliation or political ideologies when running regressions and analysis to find if it has an effect on how people answer the questionnaire. Further research on political party affiliation or political ideologies and attitudes toward prison reform and policy may be necessary before accounting for these variables in an experiment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the experiment found that fictional portrayals of a character from *Orange Is the New Black* did indeed affect people's perceptions and attitudes regarding inmates, the criminal justice system, American prisons, and prison reform policy. Despite some unexpected findings, the overall results help support the study's hypotheses. This study may be useful for future fictional media affects studies, as well as creators of fictional female prison television shows and policy makers. The results of the experiment prove that the manner in which prison television shows portray characters matter, and content that is produced shape viewers' perceptions of real inmates and prisons. Candidates who run for office and lawmakers who focus

on prison reform may also find the results of this study useful in regard to what influences voters.

Empathy was a significant variable in the experiment. Therefore, future studies may desire to

investigate the role of empathy in regard to fictional media affects.

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