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Good Cop, Bad Cop? Decriminalizing Black Men in the Media

For Partial Completion of the Philosophy Capstone

By Libby Cronican

Education comes in many forms. From learning our first words at home to struggling with a math problem in our second year of high school to being a good friend, we are constantly learning about the world and how to dwell in it. Although many say that we only learn in school, we learn through other societal avenues that are not regulated by formal, compulsory schooling. Avenues of informal education - such as media, relationships, literature, or art - teach us how to sustain a sense of wellbeing. Sustaining our wellbeing is important not just for the continuance of humanity as it also allows us to lead full, robust, relational lives. It is in modes of informal education that the robustness of our lives and our openness to others can be deeply hindered. Examples of being mis-educated by formal and informal education exist within our history. One example being the Protestant Church in the infancy of the United States misguiding its followers by teaching them slaves - especially black men - are less than human, resulting in following generations to believe that non-white races ought to have less value. Today, the belief is unconsciously and persistently supported through the media, particularly primetime television shows starring police officers. Such television shows cultivate among its audience immoral judgements towards black men which results in moral harm.

Looking critically at the history of primetime television shows starring police officers, nearly all characters casted as police officers are projected to look and act in a certain way. Male and female characters acting as police officers are portrayed as moral agents working to help victims cope with the trauma they have been subjected to while tracking down the criminal and

bringing them to justice. The viewer observes how the police officer maintains their personal life while coping with the stress of their job. Police officers are usually portrayed in a crisp, clean uniform and are presented as well-groomed. Typically, these characters use proper English. However, one overarching trait of the typical police officer's personality is quite clear, the police officer will go to extreme lengths, even to the point of physical force, to get a criminal to confess to their crimes. The aspects of the police officer's life, as portrayed on television, is not mis-educating us in our sense of our moral beliefs. What is specifically swaying our moral beliefs is the fact that nearly all police officers on television are white.

Although being white is not a morally offensive piece of one's identity, it does become damaging to one's sense of self and the views we hold of others when the white cop we watch on primetime television interact with the same sorts of criminals in each episode. The images used to portray criminals on television directly contrast that of the white police officer. While the cop is depicted as a clean-cut individual in their crisp uniform and bright white teeth, criminals are portrayed to have torn and sagging pants. Most criminals have gold plates embedded on their teeth and don't speak using proper English. Their arms and legs, when visible, are covered with tattoos and piercings. Enormous chains and bulky jewelry typically hang from their necks and baggy pants. The crimes police officers on television accuse criminals for are either possessing a gun or illicit drugs, heinously murdering someone, or raping a woman. It is interesting to note that police officers initially confront suspects with little to no evidence that the person committed the crime. Rather, the police officer is portrayed as having a hunch that is later proven to be true. In many episodes, the police officer is unable to interrogate the suspect on peaceful terms. Instead, the suspect spots the police officer and runs in the opposite direction. The camera angles, set from the police officer's point of view, insinuate the suspect running away as a

passive admittance of guilt. This is another point of contrast, unlike the morally righteous cop who confronts justice head on, the criminal admits moral guilt by running away. The crucial point of contrast between the criminal and the police officer is the criminal's race. In nearly every episode of primetime police television shows, all criminals are men of color.

In addition to the stark differences between the morally up worthy, clean cut police officer and the morally deficient, dirty criminal, the story line of each episode follows the same plot line. Using a story line over and over is known as a trope. To best display that there is a trope within the story telling of the struggles of justice in prime-time television shows, let's look at the popularized family drama called *Blue Bloods* as it follows the same story line in each episode. Danny Reagan, one of the main characters, is a middle-aged homicide detective. In each episode, the viewer watches Danny chase after black criminals in the worst parts of New York City. After brutally tackling the fleeing criminal, Danny forcefully handcuffs the suspected perpetrator and brings him into the local police precinct for questioning. Barring torture, Danny uses nearly every coercive tactic one could imagine a cop using to interrogate a suspected criminal such as: throwing the interrogation table around, physically hitting the suspect in the head, assuming guilt, or verbally abusing and coercing the suspect into admitting guilt. The character Danny plays is an example of a specific trope known as the rabid cop trope (Torres, 2003, 81-89). This trope is used time and again by many other written and televised stories about police officers.

To many, the contrast between the police officer and the criminal in any dramatized police series on primetime television may seem arbitrary. However, coupled with the rabid cop trope, the popularized stereotypes of police officers and criminals lead to oppressive moral judgements. These moral judgements and attitudes feed into oppressive societal structures which

detracts from the overall wellbeing of the lives of black men while further advancing the improvement of white men. How these moral judgements first form begins rudimentarily in our childhood as we watched television shows that portrayed justice being carried out. These early lessons learned by watching the rabid cop trope on television shows cultivate specific emotions towards who we deem as morally upright and safe and those who we label as dangerous. When these emotions get attached to character stereotypes projecting a certain race, moral harms follow.

For many years, it has been the common belief that emotions are not logical or cognitive. Therefore, emotions have no direct impact on our moral judgements. Yet, it has been argued by Martha C. Nussbaum, a key philosopher in the realm of the philosophy of emotions, that emotions are not uncontrollable movements of the human body and that they are cognitive. As human beings, Nussbaum points out that we have an innate concern for our own wellbeing. She calls this concern *eudaimonia*. Coined from the Ancient Greek Stoics, Nussbaum takes this concept and alters it to fit with her neo-stoic theory on the value emotions have in public and private life. To sustain ourselves and reach the fullest of our capabilities, humans naturally tack value onto external objects. These external objects have a wide range of variety: from technology to close friendships and kinships. These objects feed into our perceived sense of wellbeing. Therefore, when an external object important to us is compromised or ceases to exist, we have an emotional response to let us know that this has occurred. Within the emotional experience, certain judgements about how we ought to support our *eudaimonia* spring forth (Nussbaum 2001, 130-137).

At the root of what is being illuminated in these emotional judgements is our constant struggle to acknowledge and cope with our own human vulnerabilities, weaknesses and lack of

control. When a loved one passes away, we are reminded of the preciousness of life and that we will one day die as well. We may even wonder how we are supposed to keep one living when someone so vital to our life is gone. In this example, the way in which we grieve is informed not only by our emotional judgements. These judgements are regulated by our previously held beliefs about the person who has passed away. The struggle to overcome our own lack of control and helplessness that is brought forth with emotional judgements is a topic that is constantly explored publicly on prime-time television. Though human beings are, at their core, helpless and lack of control over external objects with which they share value and meaning, how they overcome or become blinded to these vulnerabilities have moral implications. Nearly all human beings tend to project their vulnerabilities and insecurities onto another external object. By doing so, the individual can focus their time and energy on overcoming the challenge this object presents to them. The process of projections allows one's underlying vulnerabilities to fall into the background and are nearly forgotten (Nussbaum 2001, 181-190; 111-112).

The process of projecting one's vulnerabilities onto external objects is a practice commonly portrayed within the rabid cop trope seen on primetime television. What often is portrayed in this trope is the cop projecting his or her vulnerabilities onto the criminals in the city. Going back to the example of Danny Reagan from *Blue Bloods*, Danny very visibly projects the rage he feels towards his own helplessness and lack of control onto the black criminals he tracks down and violently brings them to justice. By bringing the criminal to justice, Danny reaffirms that he is strong enough to overcome his vulnerabilities; thus, he can identify himself as being a good police officer. When he fails to bring criminals to justice, Danny usually spends the rest of the episode dwelling on this inadequacy by becoming more and more enraged until the breaking point at the climax of the episode where Danny violently solves the mystery but only

through the means of violent coercion and threats towards the criminal black man. To a viewer, what is unconsciously occurring is moral education on what justice is and what it looks like.

When one feels they are a morally upright citizen, one justifies they can do nearly anything and everything to detain and punish those who have fallen from the letter of the law. In addition to this message, the viewer unconsciously becomes used to picturing a criminal being and looking a certain way both on screen and in real life: they are all black men.

The unconscious belief that black men are criminals is not rooted in rational thought, as we may hope. Rather, it is the emotional education we have gained by becoming engrossed in primetime television that has cultivated irrational beliefs about black men via misguided emotional judgements. Within the rabid cop trope, we come to associate black men with anger, fear and disgust, especially if we have never been exposed to people of different colors in real life. Imagine an elderly white woman living in rural Nebraska is out on main street going for a walk on a warm July evening. Walking towards her is a tall, muscularly built black man carrying a heavy duffle bag. Until this point in her life, she has never seen a black man in person, only on television. As he gets closer to her, she notices his arms are full of tattoos mirroring the style of black men on television shows starring police officers. Imagine what her assumptions will be of this black man in her weakened elderly, yet naïve, state. Most likely, she is shocked to see this man in her home town in the first place. Once that shock has passed, it would not be unusual of her to start feeling and assuming the same thoughts she makes of the black men on primetime police shows. More than likely, she sees this man as a criminal himself. Finally, out of her emotional judgements, the woman is more likely to shrink away from the man and avoid eye contact.

The emotional responses and thoughts of white individuals towards men of color negatively impacts their ability to have relationships with people of color. In turn, lacking these relationships affects white people's ability to feel compassion towards people of color, in particular black men (Nussbaum 2001, 403). Having a lack of compassion for people of color results in harm towards these individuals. What begins as merely strained personal relationships between black men and white people leads to racist policies such as President Richard Nixon's 'War on Drugs', an anti-drug campaign which passed legislation has been proven to specifically target people of color. Once arrested for possessing drugs, nearly all are labeled as criminals and are stripped of specific rights as a U.S. citizens (Lusane and Desmond, 1991, 5-6). The 'War on Drugs', coupled with the mis-education we receive about race in American media feeds into a higher rate of police brutality towards men of color because it works to deprive white individuals of the proper compassion to be in relationship with men of color and see them as unique human beings.

According to Nussbaum, compassion is also an emotion. As an emotion, it brings forth emotional judgements and beliefs that can be used for public good. However, public good can only be brought about when all of compassion's cognitive factors are properly cultivated. They are: seeing the victim as blameless in the situation, acknowledging that what befell the victim was of a serious nature and being able to see that what befell the victim negatively impacts your sense of wellbeing (Nussbaum 2001, 306-319). Thanks to the overuse of the rabid cop trope, the way in which the viewer is taught to emotionally judge a black criminal is the opposite of what Nussbaum argues are key cognitive factors for proper compassion. The viewer is led to believe that the black man is not blameless; rather, he is blameworthy because as a suspected criminal, he is seen as the person who caused the harm. Therefore, being the morally upright viewer that

the person is, the viewer holds no similar possibilities with the criminal black man. Instead, it is in the action of doing away with the black man by putting him in jail at the end of each episode that the viewer experiences a sense of relief and pride about imaginatively overcoming their own tendencies to disobey the law. Instead the idea that, as a white individual, they do not look like a criminal nor would they commit any crimes the televised black man is being punished for is reinforced. These unconscious beliefs and emotional judgements which result from improper compassion are then translated into harmful public policies and cause frayed interracial relationships.

Our lack of compassion bars us from seeing the full humanity of the black man. What we often don't see being portrayed or discussed in primetime television shows starring police officers are deeper discussions into why black men and their communities live in extreme poverty, a scenario that may push them to commit petty crimes. Likewise, the viewer is never prompted to ask why the black criminal in the television show is on the streets selling drugs instead of being in school or pursuing a career. Most noteworthy, white viewers are never prompted by the narrative on TV to critically consider why the white, morally up worthy cop is only pursuing legal cases that only involve people of color nor why police officers in television show and in real life only patrol the streets in communities of color. Instead, what is promoted is the idea that the black man and his community are, in the words of Danny Reagan, "Good for nothing, low life scum," who are too lazy "to get off (their) duff and go get a real job" (Season 7, Episode 14). Throughout our lives, these judgements become subsumed into our own consciousness and become our own assumptions about black men and their communities.

The major, over used tropes which display black men as violent criminals lacking the initiative to create a better life for themselves negatively impacts black men and others see

themselves. It is important to note that I am not insinuating men of color are helpless individuals who constantly feel sorry for themselves and never try to overcome adversity. Instead, what I am saying is, at an early age, most men of color realize they exist in a world that is designed with the odds stacked against them. Therefore, their ability to pursue futures tend to exist within the realm of survival rather than proper flourishing. Being in survival mode rather than focusing on how they can live full, robust lives negatively impacts their sense of self. Hilde Lindemann-Nelson writes of this harm to one's identity in her book, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair*. By not being provided the resources necessary to develop the imaginative ability and self-confidence necessary to live a good life due to many factors including the overuse of the rabid cop trope, a black man's sense of identity is harmed. To Lindemann-Nelson, identity is the interaction of person's sense of self with how others perceive them to be, all of which is done narratively (Lindemann 2001, 69-72). When watching television shows, parts of identities resonate with specific characters in a show. How these characters are treated or handle certain situations helps us to visualize how we may handle similar scenarios.

In the case of a young man of color watching a popular primetime television show about police officers, the characters they most closely associate with are the black criminals. The message this sends to the young viewer of color is they will always be seen and portrayed as criminals in the eyes of others, regardless of how morally upright they feel. Such judgements and emotions are later solidified when they are subjected to racist, unjust societal structures that allow white people to treat them as criminals regardless of who they are.

Within the realm of the black man's sense of identity in relation to being exposed to popular tropes is his sense of moral agency, the ability to make moral decisions, is ripped from him by white individuals. Due to overused tropes, every decision that men of color make are

automatically judged as criminal and are met with suspicion by others. What results are oppressive judgements made that hinders society's ability to institute relational and institutional change that would benefit men of color. How Lindemann-Nelson suggests society ought to counteract these oppressive, morally harmful narrative structures is by popularizing counterstories. Counterstories are stories that push against the ordinary assumptions being made and communicated in overused tropes. At the core of their structure, all counterstories work to fill in the gaps of characters who are not typically portrayed as full robust characters in the commonly used rabid cop trope by rehumanizing them and restoring their sense of moral agency (Lindemann 2001, 150-152). Certain counterstories that work to narratively repair the damaged identities and sense of moral agency black men are slowly becoming popularized thanks to specific social movements such as Black Lives Matter.

Part of the Black Lives Matter movement is empowering people of color to record their experiences of being arrested and unfairly treated by white police officers (Garza, Tometi, and Cullers 2013). Up until this video campaign, the experiences people of color have when being interrogated or punished for a crime they are accused of was never publicly viewed on such a massive scale. The work of the Black Lives Matter Movement in this respect is doing what Nussbaum and Lindemann-Nelson have encouraged public life to do. By portraying one's own personal experience of being abused and in some cases killed by police officers, merely due to the color of your skin and the laws stacked against your ability to prosper in America, the white bystander's compassion is forcefully expanded to consider this instance of injustice that they once thought was morally permissible due to the informal moral education they received through watching primetime television.

Though the Black Lives Matter Movement is working diligently to help shed light on and advocate for the fair treatment of all people, regardless of skin color, within the justice system, the Black Lives Matter Movement and their videos are not typically shown on primetime TV. Therefore, it would be useful to investigate what is being shown on television during this time slot. Here again, there have been some improvements made by producers to expand the popular narratives surrounding how men of color and their communities are publicly portrayed. The television series *Blackish* is a prime-time comedy starring a black family that allows the viewer to visualize what it is like to be a successful black business man raising family man in modern day America. Another comedy to take note of that addresses race relations is the prime-time television show *Superior Donuts* where a young black man stars is helping an elderly white man save his business from bankruptcy.

Taking steps towards narratively repairing the damage done to the identity of black men and their moral agency as well as white people's perception of black men is beginning to properly educate our moral judgements and emotional judgements; thus, starving racial oppression in America. However, much more needs to be done in the realm of the narratives shown on primetime television. It is still shocking to note that no television shows have been produced that are set through the eyes of black men caste as police officers or as criminals. Yet, in these sorts of narratives the moral harm against men of color can be repaired. In them, audience members can work to rehumanize and restore people of color's sense of agency by imaginatively learning about how men of color experience race in the lens of law enforcement. These narratives will slowly help us fight against a racist societal structure. Yet, more needs to be done within the narrative of primetime television to ensure that all people, regardless of their color, can live good lives. Until this narrative shift occurs, all Americans are partially at fault for

causing the moral wrong that results from partaking in and upholding oppressive trope due to their unconscious emotional judgements and beliefs which causes them to view all black men as criminals.

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