Mad Men, Meth Moms, Moral Panic: Gendering Meth Crimes in the Midwest

Abstract:

This research examines the content of a sample of newspaper articles from Midwestern states. The analyses locate the gendered nature of media accounts of Midwestern meth crimes. News accounts suggest women become involved in meth for feminine reasons derived from conventional notions of motherhood, sexuality, and female subordination. Alternately, motives of men appear constructed around notions of criminal virility and the economic viability of the drug trade. Findings illustrate the gendered nature of meth crimes and provide a contextual framework to consider how these constructed images produce gendered and racialized social control campaigns.
Introduction

American social history illustrates the rise and fall of various drug panics. From marijuana to heroin, alcohol to crack, varying levels of moral outrage and social harms are directed at those blamed for “demon drugs” (Reinarman and Levine, 1997). Regardless of how these panics have played out, blame typically falls on the undesired rabble of social life. In the 1990s a group of prominent conservative scholars, including William Bennett, former drug czar of the first Bush administration, and Ivy-League criminologist John DiIulio, produced a body of research heralding coming crime waves rising from inner city ghettos. They suggested that sometime in the 1990s hordes of “morally poor” children would release unparalleled violence on urban ghettos that would spill over on white America (Bennett, DiIulio, and Walters, 1996). Constructing the “super-predator” crisis, Bennett and DiIulio tapped into white America’s racial fears and exploited the myth of the young black criminal. This panic and others wrought reactionary policy decisions and ultimately enormous increases in imprisonment (Irwin and Austin 2000, Wacquant 2001). Although the scope of the imprisonment binge is astounding, the ascent of women in prison is perhaps more remarkable, increasing sevenfold in thirty years (Frost, Green, and Pranis, 2006). Regardless of the veracity of these claims, fear and irrationality continue to manifest real outcomes for those entangled in the machinery of U.S. criminal justice, even as the so-called crack-epidemic fades from collective memory (Reinarman, 2004).

As history shows however, as one panic fades, another materializes. As if reading from a script describing previous drug panics, policy makers and the media now trumpet the coming of an as-of-yet unrivaled epidemic. New York Senator Chuck Schumer recently warned in an Orwellian manner, "It's 1984 all over again," drawing comparisons between the past crack panic and the new one waiting in the wings. Schumer warns:
Twenty years ago, crack was headed east across the United States like a Mack Truck out of control, and it slammed New York hard because we just didn't see the warning signs. Well, the headlights are glaring bright off in the distance again, this time with meth. We are still paying the price of missing the warning signs back then, and if we don't remember our history we will be doomed to repeat it, because crystal meth could become the new crack. (States News Service, 2004)

As if it is 1984 again, Schumer and others caution that the “Mack Truck” of meth is poised to produce unpredictable violence and social harm. More, because meth is relatively inexpensive and is produced from common items, essentially anywhere, claims makers insist the drug threatens the heart of America - both geographically and metaphorically. In a recent exposé, Newsweek chided the far-reaching allure of meth and its threat to the “mainstream”:

Once derided as "poor man's cocaine," popular mainly in rural areas and on the West Coast, meth has seeped into the mainstream in its steady march across the United States. Relatively cheap compared with other hard drugs, the highly addictive stimulant is hooking more and more people across the socioeconomic spectrum: soccer moms in Illinois, computer geeks in Silicon Valley, factory workers in Georgia, gay professionals in New York. The drug is making its way into suburbs from San Francisco to Chicago to Philadelphia. (Newsweek, 2007)

Perhaps the most salient feature of the growing meth panic is that unlike crack and other drugs allegedly concentrated in poor inner-city neighborhoods, meth is supposedly particularly attractive to rural and suburban America. As Newsweek warns, meth reaches across “socioeconomic spectrum” to “computer geeks in Silicon Valley, factory workers in Georgia, gay professionals in New York.” This supposed fact identifies new victims and enemies plucked from middle-class, white America, as opposed to the racialized images of inner city (others) crack babies and welfare queens of previous decades. In addition, because meth provides the ability to stay awake, permits the user to concentrate and accomplish tasks, is associated with weight loss and sexual pleasure, the drug is particularly attractive to one of the last bastions of white middle-class virtue, the “soccer mom” (Newsweek, 2007).
Other racialized descriptions are more overt, as a Midwestern newspaper asserts, “Crack was, and is, a drug primarily used and sold by inner-city Blacks. Meth...has been primarily used by whites. Until recently both production and distribution...was controlled by white motorcycle gangs” (Saint Paul Pioneer Press, 1995). Though meth production and use may never be officially declared a “white” drug, and is increasingly connected to Mexican importers, claims like Newsweek’s and the use of terms like “suburbs”, “mainstream”, “soccer mom” and “professional” all effectively convey whiteness. As Bonilla-Silva (2003) has shown racial hierarchies are consistently maintained and reinforced in this way, even while explicit references to race have diminished or disappeared altogether. This sort of symbolic racism replaces the taboo language of overt racism with a language of “conceptual slipperiness” and equates questions of moral character and deviation from American individualism, with blackness (Bonilla-Silva, 2003:6). It is here, in the distinction between the depravity of a ghetto drug like crack, and the creeping of meth into the “mainstream” that the racialized and gendered nature of meth discourse becomes most visible.

Though the harmful effects of the drug are undeniable, recent research suggests that its plague-like grip on America is overstated. As many have noted, media attention, political rhetoric, and policy initiatives do not necessarily coincide with rising drug use or drug related crime. One report by The Sentencing Project, finds that meth is not only among the least used drugs, but also use rates among the general-public are stable since 1999 and are declining among youth (King 2006). This report and others contest the deluge of meth crime blurbs and hyperbolic public service campaigns in Midwest states like Montana and Illinois and suggest the swell of another drug panic has formed.

The aim of this research is to illustrate socially constructed dimensions of meth crimes.
Specifically this research explores the gendered presentation of meth use by comparing mediated depictions of men and women’s involvement with the drug. Emerging from these depictions, are culturally constructed notions of the female meth user’s hyper-sexuality, immorality, and inability to parent. These depictions stand in stark contrast to concurrent constructions of male meth users as a calculating entrepreneurs and criminal mad men. The analysis offers a contextual framework to consider how this sort of mediated dichotomy influences and reinforces the public discourse around a meth use and the corresponding social reactions.

**Moral Panics, Gender, and Crime**

Examining exaggerated constructions of drug crime provides a glimpse of broader arrangements that structure social life. As Greer (2008) and his colleagues remind us, moral panics or “crises of the moment” have much to tell us about salient, yet sometimes unseen, social beliefs and attitudes. They argue:“Within [crises of the moment] identities remain mediated accomplishments, circulating from fly posters to websites to video clips, and yet grounded still in gendered, racialized, and class-based notions of ideal parents, ideal victims, and unknown perpetrators” (Greer, Ferrell, and Jewkes 2008: 7-8). A powerful example of meth users and victims as mediated accomplishments currently emerges from official state discourse as the Montana Meth Project. The project characterizes itself as a large-scale exercise in prevention consisting of, “an ongoing, research-based marketing campaign…that realistically and graphically communicates the risks of methamphetamine to the youth of Montana” (http://www.montanameth.org). The campaign uses television, print, and radio formats built around graphic scare tactics depicting teen meth users as pimps and prostitutes who prey on family, friends and strangers. Scare tactics aside, the print ads are overtly sexualized, racialized, and gendered representations of meth users. For example, of the fifteen print images available
on the organization’s website, all of them feature young white users and more than half feature females. In addition to graphic depictions of users picking scabs or “meth bugs” and being raped, each ad contains an alarmist warning like “15 bucks for sex isn’t normal. But on meth it is.” When examined in context of bygone drug panics, amplified media and governmental attention, and public service campaigns like the Montana Meth Project, it is clear that meth presents a new moral panic – and one with very clear racialized and gendered elements.

Two complementary bodies of literature frame the theoretical portion of the paper. The moral panics literature provides a theoretical framework to consider how political authorities and the media construct certain people and behaviors as other. Connected to this, literature examining the intersections of race, class, gender and drug use helps to flesh out the unique gendered components of the meth panic.

Moral Panics
The term moral panic as first coined by Cohen (2002) has been used extensively academics in the examination of the social reaction to social problems. The concept has significant theoretical import for the sociology of deviance and criminology, but also on the discourse of the ‘culture wars’ and practices of government officials and the media (Garland, 2008). Scholars use it to examine the emergence of a wide variety of groups, from the Mods and Rockers of Cohen’s early work to Hall and colleague’s (1978) Bobbies and all manner of other behaviors identified by the powerful.

Essentially the term describes the media and authorities’ exaggerated reaction to the behavior of a particular group, or a “collective mistake in understanding” (Ferrell, Hayward, Young, 2008). Most often, folk devils are the young, poor, and powerless placed in the crosshairs of moral outrage and indignation reflective of broader racist or sexist cultural beliefs.
In the midst of panic, the public feeds on stylized and exaggerated depictions of the new social enemy, as media officials, pundits, and politicians champion traditional morality. At the same time, socially accredited experts, like Bennett and Dilulio, pronounce diagnoses and solutions to calm fears and sway public sentiment. The aggrieved are central to the construction and tenor of moral panics. Victims must be “someone with whom you can identify, someone who could have been you and one day could anybody (Cohen 2002:11)”. The majority must identify with the wronged, whether an innocent child or a middle class “tax-payer” to produce the fear and loathing of a moral panic.

Perhaps most central to this discussion is the suggestion that the emergence of a certain folk devil is somehow symptomatic of larger social decay. This element is perhaps more evident when discussing the place of women and racial minorities in drug panics. As I argue, and the literature suggests, the mainstream associate the ills of drug use, illicit sex, welfare dependency, and single parenthood to individual level pathologies and broader indicators of social decline (Boyd 2004, Daniels 1997, Sack 1992, Toscano 2005). In other words, daily newspaper reports, news broadcasts and multi-mediated ‘public service’ campaigns lead us to conclude that the phenomenon of the female meth user is a symptom of decay of the core of American social life: motherhood, childhood, and family.

When examining depictions of rural meth use, this observation suggests that a new demographic of women represent an object of fear, resentment, and perhaps envy for the moral mainstream. Here are women that presumably shirk traditional working class values of motherhood and service to family, to the debauchery of idle drug use. Further, the intertwined cultural constructions of race, class, gender and age are evident in both the bygone crack craze that ensnared black “ghetto populations” and the growing meth panic pointed at the white
countryside. As Jock Young reminds, these constructions hint at values lying just below the surface of daily discussions of crime and drug use:

It cannot be accident that the stereotype of the underclass with its idleness, dependency, hedonism and institutionalized irresponsibility, with its drug use, teenage pregnancies and fecklessness, represents all the traits which the respectable citizen has to suppress in order to maintain his or her lifestyle. (Young, 2007:42)

Ultimately, panics are seldom cured, nor do folk devils disappear; they just lose appeal and are eclipsed by newer, sexier villains. Though many panics arise and pass seemingly at the whim of media attention and public interest, some affect long lasting change in social policy and cultural hegemony (Cohen, 2002:1). Scholars also note that moral panics are not random products of culture, but rather scapegoats that solidify social insiders and outsiders and help to satisfy a sense of personal inferiority and a desire to humiliate others (Greer and Jewkes 2005, Garland 2008). In this way, moral panics reaffirm social boundaries by selecting the sinners from among the saints.

Though enormously influential the moral panics schema is not without critique. Jewkes (2006) comments that not all moral panics fall unceremoniously on unworthy targets, nor do panics always rise and pass in brief periods. In this respect, perhaps the American drug war can be viewed as a decades long moral panic, ebbing and flowing in intensity over time. Further Jewkes finds that the “moral” element of panics is sometimes narrow and contradictory reflecting political agenda rather than broad social reaction. Ultimately, Jewkes reminds us that the framework is most useful “as a means of conceptualizing the lines of power in society and the ways in which ‘we are manipulated into taking some things too seriously and other things not seriously enough” (Jewkes 2006:85).

In this respect, the starkly gendered depictions of meth users are an avenue to interrogate “lines of power” in a certain social context. As feminist scholars assert, though the mandates of
masculinity and femininity pervasive, assigning femininity only to women is problematic, particularly in the discussion of crime (Miller 2002). Further, feminists explain coexisting constructions of race, gender and class as doing difference, multiple bases, interlocking categories, or intersectionality (West and Fenstermaker 1995, Spellman 1990). This suggests that as we cannot fully consider the constructions of gender and race separately, neither can we conceptualize the creation of moral panics independent of other salient social identities. Therefore moral panics as cultural productions exist at varying intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Gelsthorpe, 2005). Moreover, Miller states that we must account for the “dynamic nature of inequality” and must not assume a static and primary position of gender in the examination of crime (Miller 2002). In other words, we must expand our conceptions of behavior beyond the trap of exclusive masculine and feminine criminal dichotomies. Similarly, Websdale and Ferrell note, “crime, deviance, and control exist as socially and culturally constructed phenomena, rather than random events in the ‘natural’ world” (Websdale and Ferrell, 1999: 355). The authors observe that what we “know” about crime is a product of social interaction, further cautioning against uncritical assumptions about the causes of crimes and motivations of alleged offenders. Likewise, if we recognize the cultural constructions of interlocking spheres of oppression, we must do so with the understanding that these varying axes do not operate in the moment, independently of each other, but they are very much the product of dynamic and reciprocal social history (Hill Collins et.al, 1995:504).[ Consequent]ly, if we are to build a complete picture of moral panics as cultural productions, we must acknowledge not only class influences, but also the shared influence of the intersections of race and gender, in historically specific contexts. In this respect, a moral panic rising from the threat to the “countryside” and the “soccer mom”
offers new insight to dominant notions of morality and processes of criminalization and social control.

The Drug Users

Cohen describes social control simply as “the organized way in which society responds to behavior and people it regards as deviant, problematic, worrying, threatening, troublesome or undesirable in some way or another” (Cohen, 1985:1). Examining the crack panic, for example, the descriptors of “deviant”, “problematic” and so on, take on a very clear gendered and racialized tenor as images of crack heads, crack babies and other scapegoats emerged from this moment in history. The most influential myth of the crack panic, that crack is dramatically different from cocaine has been disproven (Reinarman and Levine 1997, 2004). However, peddling crack as unique, emanating from inner cities, allowed media and state claims makers to construct concurrent myths about its harmfulness and those responsible. Further, the crack panic “crystallized a host of fears about family, race, poverty, drugs and crime” once connected to the inner city became a valuable tool for authorities to craft policy and support agenda (Toscano 2005: 381).

Hawdon (2001) traces the existing public attitudes and resulting moral outrage towards drugs and drug related crime to a “masterfully incited…moral panic” created by the Reagan administration (Hawdon, 2001:438). Connected to this, along with exaggerated fears of crack babies and super-predators, appeared the welfare queen. The welfare queen is a cunning manipulator that navigates governmental bureaucracy in such a skillful manner, that she not only violates American meritocratic ethics by living on the government dime, but also makes far more than the average “hard-working” citizen doing it. What’s more, she is single, has numerous children with scattered fathers, liberally uses drugs and alcohol, and is most generally, not white.
As Sack (1992) describes, “sixteen years after Ronald Reagan transformed the 'welfare queen' into a weapon of class warfare… candidates… have been emboldened to make welfare a seminal political issue” (Sack, 1992: 2018). Feminist scholars also observe that women who use drugs face the double stigma of defying social norms regarding drug use and expectations of gender normative behavior (Boyd 2004). Therefore, in terms of broad implications for female drug users, the net of social control is cast much wider, encompassing not only the prison, but also social services, medical care, and housing aid etc. For example, several policies including Section 115 of Clinton’s 1996 Welfare Reform Act, which prohibits felony drug offenders from receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families, disproportionately affect women and their children (Allard, 2002). Additional barriers to housing, education, and employment connected to the criminalization of drugs have collateral consequences for users and families (Mauer, 1999, Chesney-Lind 2002).

When viewing the crack panic through an intersectional lens we gain a better understanding of coexisting spheres of oppression, but also begin to understand how various moral panics and folk devils coalesce into the same socio-political agenda. In this respect, the belief that methamphetamine is “poor man’s cocaine” concentrated in rural areas, implies that it is a ‘white drug’ with a new unique set of offenders, victims, and collateral consequences.

Perhaps it is easier for academics to link the political rhetoric on drug users, drug addicted children and welfare manipulators, to broader spheres of social control. As to this point the public at-large appear content having the next drug panic play out on the countryside. Paying keen attention to the racialized and gendered frame of a so-called “white” and “rural” “epidemic” this research helps connect it to potential and familiar outcomes while providing insight into popular assumptions of race, class, and gender in unique social contexts. In doing
this, we interrogate the meaning and consequences of a drug panic directed at a very specific population. Inevitably, we question if the current panic is really a new phenomenon or merely a repackaging of previous campaigns such as the persecution of moonshiners or oxycontin users in rural Appalachia (Tunnel 2004). With this in mind, this paper examines the “gendered, racialized, and class-based notions of ideal parents, ideal victims, and unknown perpetrators” for new insights into the exclusionary power of moral panics (Greer, Ferrell, and Jewkes, 2008: 7-8).

**Data and Method**

This paper analyzes the construction of meth crimes by examining a sample of Midwestern newspapers. I focus on Midwestern newspapers for a number of reasons. First, when compared with urban areas of the United States, the popular conception of the Midwest is that its smaller towns and less dense urban areas are not prone to the same levels of violence and crime. Therefore, I believe mediated depictions of methamphetamine as an epidemic are more obvious in semi-rural areas of the Midwest. More importantly perhaps, as Newsweek and others assert, methamphetamine production and abuse as portrayed by the media has emerged as a regionally concentrated phenomena. More specifically, I limit the sample to Midwestern states identified by the HIDTA (High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas) program of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. I limit the sample in this manner as I believe the official discussion regarding the importance of meth as a social problem as well as funding to intervene in these areas will influence and reinforce media publication. Queries of the Lexis/Nexis Academic database with general search terms of male and female involvement with meth identify articles for this study. These queries produce two separate samples, one for

---

1 States included: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oklahoma
men and one for women that are mutually exclusive². From the samples I begin with a body of newsprint articles from numerous regional sources for years 1995-2007. I restrict the data to articles published in select Midwestern newspapers of study states. Then, to take account of Midwest states that do not appear in the Lexis/Nexis query, I also include Associated Press/Newswire stories that describe events occurring in study states³. I eliminate articles that contain the specified search terms but do not pertain to illicit involvement with methamphetamine. Further, to help ensure ease of comparison between men and women I eliminate articles that are unclear who is the main actor or subject of the report (i.e. a married couple arrested together). Finally, I sort the articles by relevance and select the first 105 that meet these criteria⁴. After theoretically restricting the sample, I analyze 210 articles (105 male, 105 female). To examine the data, I use a combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies. For the quantitative portion of the study, I identify the main depictions of men and women’s involvement with the meth trade. For example, one article tells the story of two men arrested while attempting to steal anhydrous ammonia, commonly used in meth production. The article also describes a wild police chase led by the men. In this instance, I identified several important depictions of the men’s involvement in the meth trade: the men were involved in production - rather than simple distribution or possession, they were involved in obtaining chemical precursors - and when contacted by authorities they went to some lengths to

² General Search Terms: men AND man AND methamphetamine, women AND woman AND methamphetamine.

³ Newspapers selected are: Omaha (NE) World Herald, Lincoln (NE) Journal Star, Topeka (KS) Capitol Journal, St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch, Kansas City (MO) Star, Tulsa (OK) World. These papers were the most prominent papers available in the Lexis Nexis database.

⁴ Lexis/Nexis allows retrieved articles to be sorted by relevance. I use this option to ensure that I have examined the most appropriate data and retrieve the first 105 articles in each query.
After I developed preliminary summary depictions, I reviewed the articles again and identified and counted several emergent themes. While many of the themes crossover between men and women, several themes do not. Presentation of the data in this manner permits comparison between the two samples. After comparing the samples, several points of divergence in the narratives of men and women’s meth involvement become apparent. I then focus on these differences, relying on ethnographic content analysis (ECA) to examine differences between the samples. Similar to inductive analysis, ECA, or qualitative document analysis as developed by Altheide (1996), is particularly suited for analysis of these data as it stresses a grounded or reflexive approach to data analysis as opposed to a strictly quantitative approach that fits the data to an instrument or analytic categories. As Altheide describes “the aim is to be systematic and analytic but not rigid. Categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout” (Altheide, 1996:33). I include a brief discussion of the analytic categories developed from the quantitative analysis, and then expand upon each these themes in detail in the qualitative analysis. After coding, I find the data fit into four general analytic categories: reasons for involvement, role in the meth market, criminal virility, and outcome of involvement. Table 1 provides a description of the sample, the themes that emerged and the differences between men and women.

Findings

**Gendered Reasons and “Womanly Duties”**
The first and perhaps most striking contrast is reasons for use or involvement in the meth trade. Thirteen percent of the articles suggest that women begin to use meth as a weight

---

5 Therefore this article is associated with at least three of the final categories: manufacture, chemicals/precursors, and attacked or fled police-these categories are not mutually exclusive.
loss strategy, for energy to accomplish household tasks, or to enhance sex. Conversely, the articles commonly portray men as rational actors, becoming involved as a business decision connected to economic opportunity, as evidenced by descriptions of large amounts of drugs or money. This dichotomy is possibly the most interesting finding of this research, painting male involvement simply as a business decision while women assume the risks of methamphetamine for banal and vain reasons related to sex, housekeeping, and appearance. This is very much a static and gendered portrayal that perpetuates and extends the connection of female criminality to monolithic social structures that dictate human behavior (i.e. boys will be boys). As women’s reasons for using meth are tied to common notions associated with feminine norms, the motivation of men appear to rarely come into question. In this context then, women’s experiences as drug users are marginalized and sexualized, if not trivialized. For example, a consistent suggestion is that women begin to use the drug as a weight loss strategy characterized by the term, “Jenny Crank Diet”. The following excerpt from the Topeka Capital Journal provides an example this sort of assertion:

*One woman said the drug helped her lose weight by taking away her appetite for everything --- except meth.* (Topeka Capital Journal, 1996)

Other mediated depictions underscore the collision of drug use, sexuality, and expectations of a physique that fits the racialized, classed beauty norms of modern American life.

*Her life was then a merry-go-round of men and drugs. She eventually settled on meth as her drug of choice, because it helped her stay awake and keep her weight down.* (Omaha World Herald, 1996)

Here the report suggests that meth use for women is just an accessory or tool to attract men. The article typifies women as those who “eventually settle” on meth to help stay awake in the “merry-go-round” of illicit sex with multiple partners. This statement constructs women’s
meth use as nothing more than a whim, accommodating the moral depravity of promiscuous and lurid sexual habits. Again, this proposes a gendered dichotomy of female offending that Miller (2002) and others have cautioned against.

Although the analyses will later show that women are disproportionately punished for child abuse and neglect resulting from meth use, in this instance oddly, the data purport that women begin using meth to be more effective mothers.

*The young mother felt energized. ‘It makes you motivated,’ she said. ‘You get a lot of stuff done. That’s what I like so much about it. I could take care of my kids, get the housework done and not get burned out.* (Omaha World Herald, 1996)

Again, the media present a strange depiction of drug use encouraged by gendered demands. In contrast to the calculating male, women start using meth so they can keep up with their housework and children. Hidden within this image, as Bonilla-Silva might agree (2003), are discussions of “housework” and “taking care of my kids” that carry implications diametrically opposed to previous depictions of the welfare queen, who presumably did neither. Here, good rural or suburban, and perhaps white women, fall prey to a new invader, in part because of expected “womanly duties”. Additional references to an enhanced ability to “clean house” contradict reports of male “tweaking” behaviors:

*one can often tell where ice is being smoked, because the woman in the house will be a compulsive cleaner and the place with be spick and span. The man, meanwhile, will have become what police officers call a “tweaker,” overcome with a manic urge to take things apart, and so car and machine parts will often be scattered on an immaculate lawn.* (New York Times, 1997)

As the Times describes, male and female meth users follow the typical trajectory of gendered norms; masculine or mechanical chores for men, while women feel compelled to clean their house. Finally, the following excerpts depict women as not only able to accomplish typical middle class suburban wifely tasks on meth, but also being able to over-perform such
duties on the drug.

*It blew her mind away, she got so much energy from it that she could clean five or six homes a day and still take care of her own home.* (Omaha World Herald 1996)

*It’s amazing what you can accomplish when you’re on meth...it’s the superwoman drug. Women use it to be superwife, superemployee, and super thin* (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2003)

The excerpts above carry the clear suggestion that women begin using meth to become “superwoman”, “superwife”, “superemployee”, and “super thin”. All of these connotations stand in clear contrast to depictions of men and also starkly oppose depictions of lethargic, inner-city, crack heads and welfare queens of the previous campaign. Moreover, when the media tells us what it means to be a “superwife” it also imparts very clear racialized meanings that in turn construct notions of ideal criminals and ideal victims, in a new social context.

The final interesting depiction of the female meth user in the Midwest is that she uses the drug to perform sexually. As the Omaha World Herald describes:

*Dubbed by some experts as the "woman's wonder drug," the highly addictive drug can provide a sense of unlimited energy and focus. It suppresses the appetite, causing its users to shed pound after pound without effort. And meth can enhance sexual performance.* (Omaha World Herald, 2000)

Interviewing a law enforcement official, The New York Times adds that meth helps the user perform as a sex worker: “*There may be piece of it related to weight loss,” he said, and “a piece of it related to enabling prostitution, it’s a drug that allows you to deal with your feelings of remorse*”(New York Times, 1997). Both quotes give descriptions of how meth can aid women in performing gendered tasks expected of them.

This selection of quotes correspond with broad cultural mandates requiring women to remain thin, keep a clean house, keep up with children, and perform sexually. Regardless of the
validity of these assertions it leads to the belief that women are so vain that they involve themselves in the drug market to manage their appearance and their households. Meanwhile, tales of men involved with methamphetamine revolve around rational business decisions and the sensual lure of the criminal lifestyle. These depictions diminish the agency of women inside and outside of the meth culture, while also constructing mitigating narratives of the rural or suburban female meth user as victim to “womanly duties” that clash with descriptions of her inner-city counterparts.

**Meth Jobs and Criminal Virility**

The next category, duties in the meth market, reflects the type of activities individuals have in the meth trade. Though the categories are similar, the data clearly suggest that men are responsible for the production and sale of meth (54.3% and 51.4% respectively), and women remain accomplices, mules, or bystanders. This finding is similar to Maher’s (2000) observations of the Brooklyn crack market that shows while men and women crack users both shared similar risks, female methods to stay afloat in the illicit crack market were consistently subordinate to men. Though official statistics do not necessarily support the suggestion of the data, it mirrors dominant notions of female subordination in many spheres of social life.

According to the data, men are primarily responsible for securing chemical precursors, manufacturing, and distributing the drug; women are responsible for delivery or operate as assistant to a man more centrally involved. This finding also complements Collison’s (1996) suggestions that drug dealing activities help construct ideal masculine identities for men with little other social resources. The following excerpt details how men secure chemicals necessary for production, a theme that appears in 30.5% of the sampled articles, as opposed to women who appear involved in this behavior in about 7.6% of the articles.
About an hour later, [three men] were stopped by a deputy in Montgomery County on Highway 94 near McKittrick...deputies found a gallon milk jug of anhydrous ammonia along with other items used to make methamphetamine.” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2001)

Similar to previous binary descriptions of masculine and feminine “tweaking” behaviors (mechanical vs. household tasks), the sample portrays these behaviors as decidedly masculine—men do the “heavy-lifting” of chemical collection and production and women fill in the blanks. Although the dichotomy is clear, it is not clear whether this division of labor is entirely constructed by the media or if the data depict actual differences in duties. Regardless, the mediated depictions illustrate perceived differences in male and female meth use. Whereas men are often portrayed as rational or violent producers or distributors, women are marginalized in mediated depictions. The following passages further document this hierarchy, illustrating how the gendered nature of everyday life, is present in meth culture as well.

June Garcia’s trial started Monday. She was charged with conspiracy to distribute...methamphetamine. The crime is a felony punishable by as much as 20 years in prison and a 1 million dollar fine. Garcia was not the main player in the drug ring, but testimony and evidence showed she was clearly involved. (Aberdeen American News, 2007)

This passage contains an obvious contradiction. Apparently for June Garcia, her role in distribution may result in a prison sentence of 20 years. However, regardless of the severity of her punishment, the media assert that somehow Ms. Garcia was “not the main player” in the conspiracy, leaving the reader to wonder what type of punishment the “main player” might receive – but more centrally this leaves the reader to assume someone more powerful and instrumental was the main player, someone other than June, someone who is in fact likely to have been male. In an even more direct manner, the St. Louis Post Dispatch reports that “Women, [are] traditionally couriers for boyfriends or husbands who sell drugs...” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1999), again underscoring the hierarchical nature of depictions of Midwest
methamphetamine culture. Other media reports tell us of a variety of accomplice roles that women occupy, whether mule or maid. One woman describes the extent of the duties necessary to remain in the good graces of her dealers: “I cooked their food,” she said. “I washed their clothes.”(Bismark Tribune 1997). Facing yet another double stigma, some accounts propose that regardless of their position in the meth industry, women often share an equal or greater burden of criminal punishments.

At the time, authorities seized a package, which was delivered to the house, that they say contained 32 ounces of methamphetamine, James Johnson III already pleaded guilty in the case. He was the main player in the drug case and testified Tuesday that Taylor (his girlfriend) helped him ship drugs from the Phoenix area to Aberdeen. (Aberdeen American News, 2007)

The article referencing another case in which the man is the “main player” describes an instance where the man’s testimony helps convict his girlfriend, even though he has already been convicted. Ultimately, this theme illustrates that mediated depictions of the meth trade are not substantially different than “mainstream” social life, women’s duties and activities remain subordinate to men’s.

Mad Men and Meth Moms

Again, clear divisions in the type of interactions individuals had with law enforcement are also evident in the data. The media suggest that men are much more likely to use weapons, or attack or flee from authorities. This reaffirms the depiction of women as passive actors and suggests that men possess more criminal agency than women. However, the clearest division in terms of descriptions of criminality is child abuse. As it relates to meth, women are almost exclusively held responsible for abuse and neglect of children. Very little discussion of male responsibility for abuse or neglect cases appears in the sample. This finding mirrors broader social norms, placing the bulk of child rearing duties at the feet of women. The finding also suggests that responsibilities in the meth culture are gendered, as are the official responses to
child abuse.

The media report that the behavior of men is more erratic and criminally volatile than that of women. For example, I find that the data depict men attacking or fleeing police four times as often as women, as evidenced by the following passages:

At 9:21 pm, Monday police say they tried to pull over the men’s truck for a lane violation near the intersection of Interstate 70 and Highway 47. A chase ensued with speeds reaching 110 mph, and during the pursuit, police saw numerous items being thrown from the passenger window of the truck.” (St. Louis Post Dispatch, 2005)

Troy police responded to the Dollar General Store…Employees told police that the man had gotten into a truck and driven behind the building. Police drove to the back of the store, saw the truck, and found the man inside a trash bin. (St. Louis Post Dispatch, 2003)

These articles support the narrative of male unpredictability and the ongoing distinction between masculine and feminine criminality. When authorities confront male meth users, they confront strong, sometimes violent opposition. This however, appears to not be the case for women or their attempts at alluding authorities are not quite as publicized. In any case, the media provide clear and distinct competing narratives in behavior differences between men and women. Other articles describing sophisticated levels of security and weaponry used by male dealers also help construct the “mad man” identity of men in the meth trade. As the St. Louis Post-Dispatch describes:

Police searched the home Wednesday morning. Officers found five pipe bombs inside the kitchen, a shotgun, an assault rifle, a .357 Magnum and a crate holding about a thousand rounds of ammunition, authorities said…The level of paranoia is the highest we’ve ever seen…We’ve seen surveillance equipment and stuff like that, but it has never gotten to the point where bombs were being manufactured. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1999)

As the article describes, men are not only sophisticated in their methods, but are dangerous and “increasingly paranoid” in their activities. Other depictions of men contacted by authorities vacillate between unpredictable and bizarre conduct, as this narrative describes:
Harr was stopped Jan. 21 for traffic violations...The officer asked the man who is 6-feet-9 inches tall and 200 pounds if had any weapons. The man pulled back his coat to reveal two knives.” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2000)

Though this article successfully conveys male criminal threat, it is impossible to verify the actual context of this arrest. The introduction of physical size and the mention of weapons transform a mundane drug arrest into a strange tale of potential violence. These tales of male criminality are examples of what Reinarman and Levine (2007) call the “routinization of caricature” or cases in which the media rhetorically construct unusual events as everyday occurrences. In this case, the media tells us that men are either rational actors, or meth-fueled mad men.

Meanwhile, the data present a concurrent, yet altogether different narrative of female meth criminality. For women, their criminality reflects their failures as mothers. Recall this theme ironically contradicts previous assertions suggesting that women become involved with the drug so they can “keep up with their kids” and “keep a clean house”. Just as Cohen’s (2002) typology asserts, the media construct “meth moms” as a new folk devil exemplifying the moral decay creeping into Midwestern communities. Additionally, victimhood is an important indicator of the tenor of this panic. Existing media accounts of meth related child abuse portray the children as pure victims of circumstance. However, as we recall this was not the case for children of inner-city crack using welfare queens, constructed as “super-predators” in worst cases and “burdens” to taxpayers at best.

While I do not argue the potential harm that children of drug using parents face, the construction of the “meth mom” provides a clear illustration of the media’s portrayal of racialized and gendered differences between men and women in urban and rural contexts. As indicated by the data, meth involved men are exonerated from the task of raising their children, a task which falls squarely upon the shoulders of women. On the other hand, women failing at
parenthood are particularly contemptible and easily scapegoated by the media. In discussions of meth moms, parallel narratives exist in the construction of a white drug in rural communities and inner city welfare queens using crack cocaine. Things such as “lending” a child for a drug debt or loosing custody are frequent in the data. The descriptions are also somewhat reminiscent of stories, such as Janet Cooke’s “Jimmy’s World”, that chronicled the lives of a drug involved inner city family and their abused child Timmy, which won Cooke the Pulitzer, while also being a complete fabrication. This theme is associated with women in 40.3% of the articles, while it appears in less than one percent in the male sample. The following quotes provide examples of some of these instances:

> A woman settled her drug debt by ‘lending’ her 11 year-old daughter to drug dealers who gave the girl drug-laden shoes and used her to mask their crimes (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1999)

> Weeping as her 5 year-old daughter watched, a 22 year-old Omaha woman captured in Bolivia pleaded guilty Thursday to a Federal charge of conspiring to deal methamphetamine in Omaha. (Omaha World Herald, 1999)

Despite the fact that no one would excuse these behaviors, the media report them as though mothers are solely responsible. Virtually, no mention of men’s failures as parents appears in the sample. Additionally, other instances detail how mothers victimize their children by providing them the drug or encouraging them to traffic meth. Both of the following examples describe such circumstances:

> A Lincoln (Neb) woman has been charged with supplying marijuana and methamphetamine to her two eldest daughters. Cheri L. Ball 33 was charged Tuesday with two felony drug charges and felony child abuse. A single mother, she was accused of using drugs with her two daughters ages 17 and 13. She also has an 11-year old daughter.” (Omaha World Herald, 1997)

> A 49-Year old mother told police Thursday night that she supplied her son with methamphetamine to help him work long hours at his job as a cook. (Omaha World Herald 1997)
The question persists, what has been the role of men in the lives of children of meth users. Where are media reports of “meth dads” who shirk child support payments, who are inconsistent or altogether absent fathers and leave women to raise families on their own? Yet, in detailing accounts of fatal abuse or neglect cases, little discussion of father’s culpability is found. Furthermore, when women fail, not only do they face potent ridicule, they are often deemed incapable of ever being a mother, as the passage below describes:

*It is undeniable that Theresa Hernandez has no business being a mother. The 31-year-old Oklahoma City woman has had five children, all of whom were removed from her custody because of criminal activity and drug use. (Tulsa World, 2007)*

The assertion that Theresa Hernandez “has no business being a mother” is a powerful one. Statements about her age, number of children, and drug use detail what crimes she has committed against middle class values. Thus, as with welfare queens and crack babies, the media suggest that the meth mom is responsible or coincides with the decline of families in the Midwest. Constructions of meth moms result from alleged violation of norms that hold women primarily responsible for the welfare and behavior of their children. This theme is punctuated by former drug czar Barry McCaffery, who asserts that meth “one of few things powerful enough to shatter a mother’ love for her child” (New York Times, 1997). Although, the deleterious effects of meth are undeniable, the discussion of meth use and child abuse invariably focuses on the failures of women as mothers. Recalling Cohen, we understand the how vile a creature the meth mom is, because she victimizes the most vulnerable among us all.

**Redeeming Good Victims**

The final broad category is outcome of the cases. These themes are most similar between men and women, however, some differences warrant discussion. First, several of the articles discuss the aftermath of a meth lab that exploded, resulting in fire, injuries, and often death. The
sample indicates that men are almost exclusively involved in these sorts of situations. This finding is reflective of the type of positions men seem to occupy in the meth trade, such as obtaining chemicals or running labs. It also again indicates that male behavior is perhaps more explosive, and volatile, compared to women’s banal, if not pitiful behaviors. More curious though, is the consistent theme of women who seek and obtain some sort of redemption through drug treatment. While prevalent in descriptions of female users, not one account of a man attempting to overcome meth via treatment appears in the sample. The lack of male “success stories” perhaps indicates that women are considered redeemable victims, while men may be too far gone for salvation. This is another interesting dichotomy, illustrating competing constructions of male and female culpability. First, men are typically not portrayed as victims of the drug or the social circumstances that lead many to drug use. The data tell us that men have made a decision to manufacture meth and are deserving of the consequences, whether death or jail. Meanwhile, the articles tell stories of women attempting to recover their lives for themselves and often their children. And although they carry the stigma of a new ghetto drug, they also carry elements of a good victim, in that they offer a promise of return to a drug free lifestyle. Often efforts at treatment correspond with the children and family that they have failed as a part of their involvement with meth. As one mother describes:

“I’ve got two babies in DHS (Department of Human Services custody)…I’ve got a lot to change for.” (Tulsa World, 2006)

This statement once again connects failures women as mothers, and the hope for redemption, to meth use. Other accounts discuss how women’s efforts to regain the trust of the community once becoming involved with the drug:

what we showed the world today is she is going to earn her right back into the
community, and she’s going to do so quickly, and she’s going to do so in a way that says to women all around the world that it’s not a crime to stop using drugs. (Oklahoma City, AP Newswire, 2007)

When her 6-year old son asks her why, she said, she as to explain her addiction. She said the drug she now calls the devil takes your morals and values... and you don’t realize its happening. (Omaha World Herald, 2007)

These passages describe how women must rationalize their bouts with meth to themselves and their children, and in many cases fault themselves for lack of “morals and character”. Further, once confronted by authorities, it appears that these drug using women and mothers must take special efforts to “earn her right back into the community.” However, I did not encounter a similar assertion regarding men in the sample. It is unclear why these media accounts only portray women users as hopeful for reform. I suspect that this makes good news because the idea of redeemed female abusers suggests that some of the harm constructed around drug use can also be repaired, signaling hope for traditional middle class, Midwestern values. However, it must be noted that here and elsewhere in the accounts, the media do not encourage neighborhoods, communities, States and the Nation to accept some responsibility for conditions promoting drug use. In the typical American individualistic tradition, the stories document individual pathologies, permitting collective repulsion and social exclusion.

Conclusion

This study is an exploration of mediated images of men and women involved in the Midwest methamphetamine culture. The data provide a glimpse at differences in constructions of masculine and feminine criminality and illustrate the unique ways female meth users are demonized, othered, and excluded. The media tell us that women begin using meth to keep up with children, manage households and their weight. They occupy the lowest rung on the meth production and distribution hierarchy, and are dupes at times of men driven by the sensual allure
of crime. Meth moms are confronted for their failures as mothers, while men get a pass on parental duties. And when their stories reach conclusion men are shuffled off to prison, while some women remain hopeful for redemption. These highly gendered dichotomies represent the disparate social expectations that women face. It also shows the media’s depth of skill in the construction of unique objects of exclusion (meth moms) and inclusion (redeemed moms) (Greer and Jewkes, 2005). Further when juxtaposed against the late-eighties crack panic the racialized construction of meth becomes quite apparent. As Webster (2008) also finds, these sorts mechanisms of exclusion distinguish between different forms of whiteness, sift through markers and meaning, and identify those acceptable and those not. Then unlike previous bouts with “ghetto-drugs”, through meth, the depravity of the city officially reaches the country. Small town authorities and rural claims makers now have their own social problem to wage war against and further legitimize their control efforts. Understanding this, it is crucial for criminologists to produce and publicize reliable information regarding the nature and extent of methamphetamine use rather than gendered media hyperbole (Barak 1988).

In the end, perhaps this latest panic is not a recycling of an old format, but rather its latest stage. It represents the next turn in exclusionary processes separating the social wheat from the chaff. As others show, moral panics and control campaigns manifest in every nook of social life, from the prisonization of youthful behavior in schools (Hirschfield 2008) to the criminalization of “everything” in public space (Ferrell 2002). In this instance control expands beyond the ghetto to new territories and victims, with the ever-present warning -- do not stand out, do not transgress, less suffer the fate of those who have gone before.
Bibliography


Table 1: Newspaper depictions of Midwestern meth-related crimes 1995-2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes in sample articles</th>
<th>%Male</th>
<th>%Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons for Involvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex/Weight loss/Energy</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Amounts of Drugs or Money</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role in the Methamphetamine Market</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Possession</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale-Distribute</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mule/Bystander</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Securing Chemicals or Precursors</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criminal Virility</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacked or Fled Police</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapons Involved</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse-Neglect/Custody/Social Services</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome of Involvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean/Treatment</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison Sentence</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire/Explosion &amp; Injury/Death</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>