

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

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Abstract This research examines the content of a sample of newspaper articles from the Midwestern states. The analyses find highly gendered accounts of methamphetamine related crimes. Media depictions suggest women use meth for reasons drawn from conventional notions of motherhood, sexuality, and subordination. Alternately, motives of men appear constructed around dominant notions of male criminal virility and the viability of the drug trade. The findings offer a contextual framework to consider how this sort of mediated dichotomy emerges from and reinforces popular notions of gendered crime and drug users in non-urban spaces.

Introduction

American social history is marked by the rise and fall of drug panics. From marijuana, heroin, alcohol and crack, varying levels of moral outrage and repression have been cast at those blamed for “demon drugs” (Reinarman and Levine 1997: 5). Regardless of how these panics have played out, the associated blame often betrays broader race, class, and gender based inequalities. Within the last three decades or so, the social apprehensions surrounding drugs and drugs users have been increasingly central to qualitative and quantitative changes in criminal punishments, the salience of crime in governmental discourse, and massive restructuring of the welfare state (Young 2007; Simon 2007; Wacquant 2009). These changes, many argue, have given rise to the largest carceral apparatus in human history (Wacquant 2001). Numerous cultural scapegoats also appeared alongside these changes seemingly to justify the pyrrhic costs of the war on drugs. From Ronald Reagan’s yarn of opportunistic welfare queens on the south side of Chicago, Willie Horton’s appearance in the 1988 Presidential campaign, to Rudy Giuliani’s quality of life attack on squeegee men, latent yet intertwined assertions about race, crime, drugs, and

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dependency have stirred working class animus, forged public policy, and fed mass incarceration. In the 1990s a group of prominent policy advisors, including former drug czars William Bennett and John Walters and criminologist John DiIulio, produced a body of research heralding coming crime waves rising from inner city ghettos. They argued that inner city poverty and the continued degradation of the urban family would collide with the scourge of crack cocaine and ideal demographic conditions to produce hordes of “morally poor” children or “super-predators”. The resultant storm would release unparalleled violence on urban ghettos and spill over onto white America (Bennett et al. 1996: 13). Constructing the “super-predator” crisis, the authors tapped into white America’s racial fears, exploiting the caricature of the young black criminal while helping to exclude them both spatially and socially. Though history now disproves the veracity of these claims, fear and irrationality continue to produce real outcomes for those entangled in the machinery of U.S. criminal justice, even as the crack-epidemic and super-predator fade from collective memory (Reinarman and Levine 2004).

Though these particular constructions have faded the public is often eager to learn of the next greatest threat. As if reading from a script describing previous drug panics, policy makers and the media again 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 a new one bubbling under the surface. 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. (Schumer 2004)

As if it *is* 1984 again, Schumer warns that like crack, methamphetamine is primed to unleash unpredictable harm. More, because meth is relatively inexpensive and can be produced from common items essentially anywhere it threatens the heart of America—both geographically and metaphorically. Reinforcing the familiar epidemic script, Newsweek recently dubbed meth “America’s Most Dangerous Drug” arguing it’s the 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. (Jefferson 2007)

Perhaps the most striking 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 (2007) warns, meth reaches across the “socioeconomic spectrum” to “computer geeks in Silicon Valley, factory workers in Georgia, gay professionals in New York” (Jefferson 2007). This supposed fact identifies new victims and enemies plucked from middle-class, white America, as opposed to the racialized images of crack babies, welfare queens and urban others 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” (Jefferson 2007).

Other descriptions are more racially explicit. As Cobbina’s (2008) recent findings show, mediated depictions of crack are most often associated with blacks and violent crime, while methamphetamine is most commonly associated with whites and is framed as a public health problem. Though meth production and use may never be formally declared a white or rural drug, and is increasingly connected to Mexican importers, claims like Newsweek’s (2007) 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 such a 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 the so-called meth epidemic becomes most visible.

Though the harmful effects of the drug are undeniable, recent research suggests that its plague-like grip on America is overstated. 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 states like Montana and Illinois and highlights the contours of a unique drug panic.

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, which stand in stark contrast to concurrent constructions of male meth users as calculating entrepreneurs and criminal mad men. The analysis offers a contextual framework to consider how this sort of mediated dichotomy emerges from and reinforces popular understandings of meth users in rural spaces, gendered notions of criminality, and corresponding social reactions.

Moral Panics, Gender, and Crime

Examining exaggerated constructions of drug crimes provides a glimpse of broader arrangements that structure social life. As Greer (2008: 5) and his colleagues remind us, moral panics or “crises of the present” have much to tell us about salient, yet sometimes unspoken social values. They argue: “within [crises of the present] 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 et al. 2008: 7–8). A powerful example of meth users and victims as mediated accomplishments currently emerges from official state sources 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” (Montana Meth Project 2009). The campaign uses television, print, and radio formats built around graphic depictions of 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 a warning like "15 bucks for sex isn't normal. But on meth it is" (Montana Meth Project 2009). 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 threat—and one with very clear racialized and gendered elements.

The term moral panic first coined by Young (1971) and elaborated Cohen (2002) has been used extensively to examine the emergence of all manner of social problems. While popular among academics, it is one of the few concepts found in popular culture and invoked on television and in print by government officials and the media (Garland 2008). Moral panic describes the media and authorities' exaggerated reaction or "collective mistake in understanding" to the behavior of a particular group or cultural identity—the folk devil (Ferrell et al. 2008: 48). Often folk devils are young, poor, and powerless emblems of social change and the scapegoats of life in an ontologically uncertain world. In the midst of panic, the public feeds on stylized and exaggerated depictions of a new enemy, as media officials, pundits, and politicians champion traditional morality. Meanwhile, socially accredited experts, such as Bennett and DiIulio, pronounce diagnoses and solutions to calm fears and sway public sentiment. In many cases, reactionary policies that promote inequality remain long after the panic retreats from popular imagination.

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 equate drug use, illicit sex, welfare dependency, and single parenthood to individual level pathologies and indicators broader social decline (Boyd 2004; Daniels 1997; Toscano 2005). In other words, daily newspaper reports, news broadcasts and multi-mediated public service campaigns lead the public 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. Here are women that presumably shirk traditional working-class values of motherhood and service to family for the idleness and debauchery of drug use. While unique in representation, intersecting cultural constructions of race, class, gender, age, appear in both the bygone crack craze that ensnared urban blacks and the growing meth panic pointed at the white countryside. This is interesting considering that moral panics often represent a contradiction, offering the public both a scapegoat and an object of envy able to transgress and subvert the structural traps of everyday life (McRobbie and Thornton 1995). As Young asserts "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). When viewed individually, panics appear episodic, they seem to rise and fall at the whim media and public attention. However, if we pay attention to the cultural script of drug panics and make connections between crises of the present, like crack and meth, a new narrative appears. Here meth is not a new drug epidemic, but a particular face emerging from the monolithic backdrop of crisis, control, and crime—the hegemonic narrative of modern life (Garland 2001; Simon 2007; Feeley and Simon 2007).

Perhaps the greatest problem with the moral panics schema is its misapplication. Often it used as a blanket approach to social problems leaving the identities of folk devils and the contexts which produced them assumed or underdeveloped (Gelsthorpe 2005). For instance, as Miller (2002) argues, though the mandates of masculinity and femininity are pervasive, viewing crime as a predominately masculine endeavor is problematic. In other words, we must expand our conceptions of crime beyond the trap of exclusive masculine and feminine criminal dichotomies (Miller 2002).

Further, feminist scholars argue the importance of recognizing coexisting constructions of race, gender and class as intersectionality (West and Fenstermaker 1995). This suggests that as we cannot fully consider the constructions of gender and race separately, neither can we conceptualize the emergence of a drug panic independent of the intersectional identity of its object. Therefore, moral panics as cultural productions exist at varying intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Gelsthorpe 2005). Moreover while attempting to draw connections between crises of the present, we must do so with the understanding that these axes of oppression do not emerge from a social vacuum, but are rather a product of dynamic and reciprocal social history (Hill-Collins 1995: 504). Therefore analyzing moral panics is most useful “as a means of conceptualizing the lines of power in society” (Jewkes 2006: 85). In this respect, a moral panic rising from threats to the “mainstream” and “soccer mom” offers new insight to dominant notions of morality and processes of criminalization and social control that are ground at specific intersections of race, class, gender, etc. 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 et al. 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, the popular conception of the Midwest is that its smaller towns and less dense 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. I limit the sample to Midwestern¹ states identified by the HIDTA (High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas) program of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP 2009). 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 men and one for women that are mutually exclusive.² From the samples I begin with a body of newsprint articles from numerous regional sources for the years 1995–2007.³

¹ States included: Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oklahoma.

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

³ 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.

I restrict the data to articles published in select Midwestern newspapers of study states. I also include Associated Press/Newswire stories that describe events occurring in study states.⁴ 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). 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 elements of 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 resist apprehension.⁵ I analyzed all of the data in both samples in this manner.

After I developed preliminary summary depictions, I reviewed the articles again and categorized them by several emergent themes. While many of the themes cross over 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. In the attempt to be systematic yet not rigid, “categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout” (Altheide 1996: 33). After coding, the data fit into four general analytic categories: reasons for involvement, role in the meth market, criminal virility, and outcome of involvement. I include a brief discussion of the analytic categories developed from the quantitative analysis, and then expand upon each of these themes in detail in the qualitative analysis. Table 1 provides a description of the sample, the themes that emerged and the differences between men and women.

Findings

Gendered Reasons

The first and perhaps most striking contrast is reasons for use or involvement with meth. Thirteen percent of the articles suggest that women begin to use meth as a weight loss strategy, for energy to accomplish household tasks, or to enhance sex. Conversely, the

⁴ 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.

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.

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

Themes in sample articles	Male (%) N = 105	Female (%) N = 105
Reasons for involvement		
Sex/weight loss/energy	–	12.9
Large amounts of drugs or money	33.3	20.9
Role in the methamphetamine market		
Simple possession	8.6	8.6
Sale-distribute	54.3	26.6
Manufacture	51.4	15.2
Mule/bystander	–	33.7
Securing chemicals or precursors	30.5	7.6
Criminal virility		
Attacked or fled police	18.1	4.8
Weapons involved	16.2	4.8
Abuse-neglect/custody/social services	.9	40.3
Outcome of involvement		
Clean/treatment	–	11.4
Prison sentence	28.6	23.8
Fire/explosion and injury/death	12.4	1.9
Murder	4.8	8.6

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, describing 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. Recalling Miller's (2002) work, this is very much a static and gendered portrayal that perpetuates and extends the connection of female criminality to monolithic social structures that shape human behavior (i.e., boys will be boys). As women's reasons for using meth are reflect appropriate femininities, 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 use meth as a weight loss strategy characterized by the term "Jenny Crank Diet", as the following passage from the Topeka Capital Journal asserts:

One woman said the drug helped her lose weight by taking away her appetite for everything — except meth. (Hrenchir 2000)

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. (Eiserer 1999)

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. (Range 2000)

Here is a strange presentation of meth use encouraged by highly gendered norms. In contrast to men, 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. In this narrative, rural or suburban, and therefore white women, fall prey to a new invader, in part because of the gendered nature of their daily live. Perhaps, as the data seem to suggest, the behavior of meth using women is somehow mitigated because it results from their attempt to satisfy long standing social expectations. The passage below illustrates the disparity between male and female norms that persist even when under the influence of meth:

[O]ne can often tell where ice is being smoked, because the woman in the house will be a compulsive cleaner and the place will 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. (Goldberg 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 houses. 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. (Range 2000)

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 (Cuniberti 2003)

The excerpts above carry the clear suggestion that women begin using meth to become "superwoman", "superwife", "superemployee", and "super thin". All of these characterizations stand in clear contrast to depictions of men and also starkly oppose the depravity of the inner city other central to the crack panic. 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. (Range 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”*(Goldberg 1997). Both quotes give descriptions of how meth can aid women in performing gendered and sexualized 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. Moreover, while many believe drug users assume a master status that overrides individual identities, summary depictions of meth users seem to exaggerate taken for granted identities. In this context, the vanity of the feminine form is exaggerated to such a degree that weight loss, sexuality, and household chores sit at the core of meth related crime and deviance.

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.

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) findings that drug dealing activities help construct ideal masculinities 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.

As Morbach returned to patrolling Nebraska 92, he saw another man filling a 1-gallon gas can from a tank of anhydrous ammonia, a farm fertilizer that can be used to make meth. Morbach said the suspect ran and he tackled him in a nearby farm field. The suspect...said that the other man was an accomplice and that they planned to make meth in the 1983 Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera parked by the ammonia tank, Morbach said. Equipment and materials used to make methamphetamine filled the car’s trunk and front passenger seat. (Spencer 2000)

Similar to previous binary descriptions of masculine and feminine “tweaking” behaviors (mechanical vs. household tasks), the sample portrays these behaviors as decidedly masculine-men who do the important work of chemical collection and production while 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. 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 1million dollar fine. Garcia was not the main player in the drug ring, but testimony and evidence showed she was clearly involved. (Waltman 2007a, b)

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...*" (Bryant 1999), again underscoring the hierarchical nature of depictions of Midwest meth 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.*" (Winter 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. (Waltman 2007a, b)

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 the 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. (Weich 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. (Weich 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. (Munz 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-foot-9 inches tall and 200 pounds if had any weapons. The man pulled back his coat to reveal two knives. (Munz 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 Reinerman and Levine (1997) 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 tweaked-out 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 that contradicts previous assertions suggesting that women become involved with the drug so they can "keep up with their kids" and "keep a clean house". As Cohen (2002) and others note, this seems to reflect that the media construct "meth moms" as a new folk devil, emblematic of a new threat to traditional morality seeping 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. On one hand, 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 shameful and easily reviled. 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. (Strawbridge 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. This discussion is quite reminiscent of the cultural calamity surrounding Nadya Suleman, better known as “Octomom”. Suleman a single woman was placed at the center of a national spectacle after giving birth to octuplets outside of marriage is equally contemptible for violation of middle-class notions of motherhood and family. Thus, as with welfare queens and crack babies, the media suggest that the meth mom is a cause rather than a correlate of the decline of Midwestern family

life. This theme is punctuated by former drug czar, Barry McCaffery, who asserts that meth “one of few things powerful enough to shatter a mother’s love for her child” (Goldberg 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 (2002), 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 the 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 meth 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...I’ve got a lot to change for. (Sherman 2006)

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

[W]hat 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. (Evans 2007)

When her 6-year old son asks her why, she said, she has 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. (Nygren 2006)

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 values”. 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” (Evans 2007). 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 or 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 popular constructions methamphetamine in the Midwest. The data provide a glimpse of differences in constructions of masculine and feminine criminality and illustrate the unique ways female meth users are demonized, othered, and excluded. The data report that women begin using meth to keep up with children, manage households and their weight. Similar to Miller's (1998) and Maher's (2000) ethnographies, the media insist that women occupy the lowest rung in the meth crime hierarchy, and are often the dupes of men driven by the sensual allure of crime. Meth Moms as folk devils are confronted for their failures as mothers, while men are forgiven of parental obligations. At last, when their stories reach conclusion, men are shuffled off to prison, while some women remain hopeful for redemption. These highly gendered dichotomies represent concentration of disparate relations pervasive to social life. It also shows the media's place in the construction of unique objects of exclusion and inclusion (Greer and Jewkes 2005). Further when juxtaposed against the late-eighties crack panic the racialized construction of meth becomes quite apparent. Meth brings the depravity of urban drug panics to new spaces. As Webster (2008) argues, these mechanisms distinguish between different forms of whiteness, sift through markers and meaning, and identify those acceptable and those not. Meth provides small town authorities and rural claims-makers their own social problem to wage war against and to further legitimize their control efforts. Meth as the crisis of the present illustrates the contours of a drug panic not built upon the tidy stereotypes associated with minority populations and the threat of urban violence. It also illustrates lines of power and the reach of punitive ideologies that make mass incarceration a reality. Understanding this, it is important for scholars to produce and publicize reliable information regarding the nature and extent of methamphetamine use rather than gendered hyperbole (Barak 1988).

As Jenkins (1994) showed fifteen years ago, the fears surrounding methamphetamine are not new. In the end then, the current panic is not a recycling of an old format but 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 public 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; else suffer the fate of those who have gone before.

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