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# Editor's Introduction

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I begin this introduction by recognizing the outstanding contributions of the previous managing editor John Haman. While his editorial influence will be seen throughout this issue and into the next, I am grateful for his ongoing skilled advice guiding me through our editorial transition. His year commanding the journal was a profound success, and he oversaw all articles in this issue through the peer-review process into their subsequent acceptance for publication. I look forward to my coming year of editing and the thrilling research being submitted and expertly critiqued by *JCI's* reviewers.

In this issue, Mark A. Rademacher and Casey Ryan Kelly critically analyze the popular reality TV program *Storage Wars* examining representations of masculinity within its first season. They argue *Storage Wars* constructs an emergent working class masculine ideal that reflects the “man-of-action” hero masculinity (Holt and Thompson, 2004) but incorporates skills, knowledge, and behaviors traditionally coded as feminine. The authors extend current studies of masculinity in reality television by focusing on working class auction bidders’ appropriations of the feminine in their work.

Next, Richard T. Craig considers contemporary rap music lyrics to better understand how the “thug” persona is presented to a female-targeted audience. By employing the concepts of Black male masculinity and intimate relationships using psychological literature, Craig explores how the music genre depicts rappers’ regard toward and relationships with women they know intimately to offer an understanding into perceived and actual reasoning for establishing intimate partner relationships. As exemplified by rap icon Ludacris’ 2008 hit song “What them girls like,” the larger portrayal of young men as “thugs” in the genre is particularly scrutinized.

Elizaveta Friesem then analyzes issues affecting civic engagement to examine whether the implicit knowledge audiences accumulate from cursory media coverage of sensitive social problems can be used to help them gain a deeper understanding and reflect on their own social responsibility. Conducting 16 focus groups with 93 college students on media representations of child sexual abuse, Friesem discovered that while media coverage helps inform people about social phenomena, there is no evidence they know what to do with what they have learned. Applying principles from educational dialogue and

media literacy education, Friesem suggests that a question-based dialogue utilizing audience curiosity can encourage civic engagement.

Amidst continuing scholarly interest in the contributions of cultural studies scholar James Carey since his 2006 death and resurging interest in John Dewey's relevance to communication theory, Lana F. Rakow considers issues of democracy, community and the public, and power in her analysis of Carey's application of Dewey's work on community and culture. Exploring the notions of the metropolis and the hinterland, Rakow argues Carey neglected the political implications of Dewey's dual notions of democracy, which she claims blinds us to the politics of local community.

Adina Schneeweis next considers the link between ethnicity, gender, power, and space through a case study of health mediators of Roma ethnicity in Romania. Bridging spatial theory and feminist scholarship with critical approaches to communication, she assesses how gender and power relations operate in and mark ethnic spaces. Drawing from ethnographic observations and interviews, Schneeweis argues that power relations are dependent on space and are mobile across ethnic spaces.

Finally, Jamii Claiborne's review of Andrea McDonnell's *Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines* explores celebrity-obsessed pop culture and the "hot-pink headlines" of the tabloid magazines that narrate it. Elevating the book's blending of theory and application, Claiborne commends McDonnell's "genuine empathy for the female readership of which she is a part." Claiborne's review lends to the book's pedagogical relevance stating that McDonnell's read can contribute to serious classroom study of "the popular feminine."

Many thanks to all those who helped this issue to completion, including *JCI's* SAGE production staff, advisory board, and, finally, our reviewers and authors.

**Andrea M. Weare**

*University of Iowa, IA, USA*

# **Journal of Communication Inquiry – Call for Papers**

## **Special issue on Digital Feminist Media Studies**

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**Andrea M. Weare**  
University of Iowa, IA, USA

The *Journal of Communication Inquiry* invites submissions for the October 2016 special issue on topics incorporating critical cultural approaches to the intersection of user-generated culture and feminisms.

Recent media and communication scholarship has assessed the multiple and complex avenues of interaction between user-generated content and various feminisms—Black feminisms, transnational feminisms, postfeminisms—to highlight the impact of cultural production on users. Feminist scholarship acknowledges that beliefs, practices, and communities online are articulated in an online cultural landscape that demonstrates the vitality of gendered ways of thinking and living in a mediated world, as well as how online media shape and inform feminist philosophies.

A critical cultural approach to online media and feminisms is suited to emphasize emergent notions of meaning, power, and identity across online communities. *JCI* welcomes submissions that engage these intersections within theoretical and methodological approaches utilizing critical, cultural, and historical perspectives. Studies based in feminist epistemologies are welcomed, especially those committed to social transformation research.

Possible topics of inquiry are vast but could include:

- Cyberstalking; online bullying; hacking; surveillance
- Postfeminism and online entrepreneurship
- Gamergate and online misogyny
- Online activism and #everydaysexism
- Blogging, branding and class
- Gendered disability and online organizing
- Transnational identity and YouTube
- Online sexual identity and popular culture
- Gaze and online sex work
- Female racial performance and social media

- Selfies and authenticity
- Indigenous cultures and online identity
- Black feminism and digital music

The deadline for submitting manuscripts is 11:59 p.m. CST on February 15, 2016. Please contact Managing Editor Andrea M. Weare ([jci@uiowa.edu](mailto:jci@uiowa.edu)) with questions.

# “I’m Here to Do Business. I’m Not Here to Play Games.” Work, Consumption, and Masculinity in *Storage Wars*

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Mark A. Rademacher<sup>1</sup> and Casey Kelly<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This essay examines the first season of *Storage Wars* and suggests the program helps mediate the putative crisis in American masculinity by suggesting that traditional male skills are still essential where knowledge supplants manual labor. We read representations of “men at work” in traditionally “feminine” consumer markets, as a form of masculine recuperation situated within the culture of White male injury. Specifically, *Storage Wars* appropriates omnivorous consumption, thrift, and collaboration to fit within the masculine repertoire of self-reliance, individualism, and competition. Thus, the program adapts hegemonic masculinity by showcasing male auction bidders adeptly performing feminine consumer practices. Whether the feminine is assimilated into the male body or represented as its Other, we contend that the expressions of masculinity in *Storage Wars* render women obsolete and subjugated in the marketplaces of the 21st-century economy and contribute to the mediation of the contemporary crisis in masculinity.

## Keywords

masculinity, consumption, reality television, gender and media

<sup>1</sup>Strategic Communication Department, Butler University, College of Communication, Indianapolis, IN, USA

<sup>2</sup>Critical Communication and Media Studies Department, Butler University, College of Communication, Indianapolis, IN, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Mark A. Rademacher, Butler University, 4600 Sunset Avenue, Indianapolis, IN 46208, USA.

Email: [mrademac@butler.edu](mailto:mrademac@butler.edu)

“I see a foot pedal for a B3, I see a bench for a B3, I see the Leslie speakers that usually go with a B3. But I do not see the physical organ. So now I’m gambling that it’s in there.” (Dave Hester, Ep. 1)

And with that declaration, Dave Hester goes to work. His job: to identify a wide range of consumer goods, ranging from tools to household goods to collectibles, by sight alone; utilize accumulated commodity price knowledge; assess the relative value of the goods; and resell the goods at a profit. His office: the gritty, industrial storage facilities that dot Southern California. It is a cutthroat and hyper-competitive industry, where auction bidders take significant financial risks in an attempt to outbid one another and “win” the most desirable units and the hidden treasures within. The current treasure is a unit that may contain a Hammond B3 organ, possibly worth \$7,000. Dave ultimately wins the unit with an \$800 bid. During his postpurchase inspection, he realizes, “[Bleep] Oh, man. I don’t think that’s a Hammond B3. [Bleep] That’s not good. That’s not what we were hoping for” (Ep. 1). In that instance, Dave’s potential \$6,200 profit evaporates. Yet, in a fortuitous turn of events, the unit also contains a vintage baseball card collection estimated at a thousand dollars: “This gives me excitement and energy to go out there tomorrow and find another score. This is what it’s about!” (Ep. 1).

It is this quest for hidden valuable treasures and unexpected outcomes that are at the core of *Storage Wars*, A&E Network’s popular reality TV (RTV) program. The program documents four working-class auction bidders—Darrell Sheets, Dave Hester, Jarrod Schulz and his partner Brandi Passante, and Barry Weiss—who attempt to make a living buying and selling used goods. Each episode follows a formulaic structure, capturing the relatively repetitive day-to-day activities of bidders’ chosen profession. Much like working-class laborers in more traditional manufacturing jobs, the show documents bidders arriving at the storage facilities (the job site), milling around as they wait for the auction to begin (the start of their shift), attempting to perform at a superior level (assessing value, winning units), assessing their performance (evaluating the outcome of the bidding, the value of goods in the unit), and clocking out when the shift is over (leaving the auction site). Episodes conclude with bidders taking items of interest for experts’ appraisals and the narrator’s accounting of bidders’ total profits or losses. This formula is clearly attractive to television audiences; *Storage Wars* was A&E’s top-rated nonfiction show in its premier season, 2010, averaging 2.4 million viewers (Della Cava, 2011), has grown into a network staple currently airing its fifth season (with a sixth season in the works), and has resulted in four spin-off series—*Storage Wars: Texas*, *Storage Wars: New York*, *Barry’d Treasure*, and *Brandi & Jarrod: Married to the Job*. It continues to deliver strong ratings even despite a lawsuit by Dave Hester implying producers placed valuable goods in units to increase the drama in the program (Johnson, 2013).

The emergence of *Storage Wars* coincides with a general shift in American society away from a manufacturing to a service and knowledge economy. RTV programming serves as one tool through which audiences are acclimated to the rules and imperatives of this new economy (Corner, 2002; Kelly, 2012; Ouellette & Hay, 2008) and how everyday people continue to adapt to new circumstances (Hendershot, 2009). As such, programs like *Storage Wars* contribute to the definition of contemporary American masculinity, particularly as it pertains to the gendered division of labor. Recent trends in RTV have expanded its repertoire from personal and professional make over programming, competitive game shows, and celebrity documentaries to shows that both valorize traditional male working-class labor (*American Chopper*, *Ax Men*, *Breaking Boston*, *Deadliest Catch*, *Dirty Jobs*, *Gold Rush*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Pimp My Ride*, and *Prospectors*) and introduce spectators to the new realities of a consumer economy (*American Pickers*, *Auction Kings*, *Barter Kings Extreme Couponing*, *Final Offer*, *Market Warriors*, *Oddities*, *Pawnstars*, *Storage Wars*). While the former positively portray the kind of blue-collar labor that has been steadily on the decline in the United States, the latter adapts a masculine conception of work to markets in which knowledge, consumption, and service are economic necessities. RTV, consequently, now documents various archetypes of sustainable manhood adapted to the American service and knowledge economies, which represent a tentative resolution to the market conditions and social forces used to sustain the myth of male displacement.

In this essay, we examine the first season of *Storage Wars* and suggest the program, specifically, and RTV, generally, helps mediate the putative crisis in American masculinity by suggesting that traditional male skills are still essential where knowledge supplants manual labor. We read representations of “men at work” in traditionally “feminine” consumer markets (thrift stores, yard sales, grocery markets), as a form of masculine recuperation situated within the culture of White male injury (Robinson, 2000). RTV is a particularly insightful medium for this analysis because it brings audiences into spaces of labor and introduces them to the ways men get by in the new economy (Carroll, 2008). While the resolution to masculinity in crisis can take the form of remasculinization (Jeffords, 1989, 1994), it does not necessarily have to be expressed in a nostalgic appeal to an older version of masculinity (Bederman, 1995; Robinson, 2000). One response has been to appropriate and incorporate the feminine into the male experience to contain the threat of female power (Modleski, 1991). Specifically, *Storage Wars* appropriates values within new labor markets like omnivorous consumption knowledge, thrift, and collaboration to fit within the masculine repertoire of self-reliance, rugged individualism, and competition. Thus, the program adapts hegemonic masculinity to the auction context and showcases men publicly performing their knowledge and adeptness at the practices of a feminine consumer culture. Whether the feminine is assimilated into the male body or represented as its Other, we contend that the expressions of

masculinity in *Storage Wars* render women obsolete and subjugated in the marketplaces of the 21st-century economy and contribute to the mediation of the contemporary crisis in masculinity associated with the decline in traditional male labor.

## Masculinity and Consumption

In critical analyses of masculinity on television, RTV in particular, many scholars have approached consumptive practices as predominantly leisure-based activities that express men's individual lifestyles (Carroll, 2008; Clarkson, 2005; Mo시오, Arnould, & Gentry, 2013). Yet, the emergence of thrift-based reality programming depicts male consumption as a form of wage-earning labor in an individualized professional context (Rademacher, 2015). To attend to this changing dynamic, we analyze how representations of consumption as work augment conceptions of hegemonic masculinity through valorized portrayals of men's labor in the postmanufacturing knowledge and service economy. Our purpose is to bring together literature on how RTV has sustained hegemonic masculinity throughout its putative decline with research on how discourses of consumption and work acclimate audiences with the imperatives of a so-called feminized consumer-based economy.

To begin, hegemonic masculinity is traditionally conceptualized as involving characteristics such as courageousness, risk-taking, rugged individualism, and the ability to withstand or inflict pain (e.g., Bourdieu, 2001; Connell, 2005; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Kimmel, 1996). These characteristics manifest via behaviors and social practices (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), especially those involving the gendered divisions between the masculine public sphere of paid work and the feminine private sphere of unpaid domestic work. Despite the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity, multiple fluid and adapting masculinities exist in any given social-historic moment (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2005) and are relationally structured in a hierarchy of masculinities ranging from the hegemonic masculine ideal to multiple subordinated masculinities (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This hierarchy is constantly in flux as masculinities struggle for legitimacy via the constant negotiation in contradistinction from other masculinities and, inevitably, various models of femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848).

Within the current sociohistoric context, traditional hegemonic masculinity appears increasingly antiquated and less meaningful for contemporary men. Emergent masculinities that allow men to navigate between the historically separate spheres of paid work and domestic work (Sayer, 2005) and embrace consumption are increasingly viewed as more attainable and fulfilling options for contemporary men (Belk & Costa, 1998; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). For instance, the "man-of-action hero" model of masculinity, which merges desirable aspects of "breadwinner" and "rebel" models of

masculinity, has recently emerged as a powerful contemporary masculine archetype (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Likewise, men are forming domestic masculinities based on consumption activities within the home (Moisio et al., 2013) and on traditional feminine behaviors such as child rearing (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). While it is possible to read the role of consumption within these emergent masculinities as compensatory in nature, a means to cope with men's increased alienation from the sphere of production (Belk, 1995; Thébaud, 2010), such a reading misrepresents the ways in which masculinities operate in everyday life (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Moisio et al., 2013). Masculinity and consumption are inherently linked within a consumer culture and pervade all aspects of contemporary life; with consumption practices and products—including subcultural, dramatic, and everyday consumption—representing the “semiotic raw ingredients” men utilize to construct their identities (Holt & Thompson, 2004, p. 427). Despite the integral role of consumption within identity construction, hegemonic masculinity remains a cultural reference, with certain consumption practices and products associated with specific genders. Shopping, for instance, remains an activity coded as feminine (Fiske, 1989; Miller, 1998) that men strive to avoid, except for specific male realms such as automotive, alcohol, and do-it-yourself (DIY) (Miller, 1998) or “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 1982; see also Belk, 1995). Emergent masculinities based on such female-coded activities, however, struggle for legitimacy within the dominant masculine hierarchy (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013).

This brief review illustrates that masculinity does, indeed, represent a fluid, sociocultural construct that is expressed in multiple dramatic and creative ways in a consumer culture. While a stereotypical hegemonic masculinity may exist, contemporary men are cultivating and expressing hybridized masculinities that span binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine, public/private, and work/leisure and are reliant on subcultural, fantastical, and everyday consumption practices across a wide range of social spheres. Yet, these multiple masculinities exist within a social hierarchy that continues to reflect hegemonic masculinity as the ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). We agree, however, with Moisio et al. (2013) that despite the contributions of extant literature, a need exists for research that extends these theoretical foundations to examinations of popular culture representations of contemporary masculinities. Such research does exist (e.g., Clarkson, 2005; Lindgren & Lelievre, 2009); however, we suggest extant literature neglects consumption contexts in which consumption represents a profession rather than a leisure activity. That is, contexts in which consumption represents the primary way men earn a living. We posit that *Storage Wars* represents a popular culture representation of such a context. As such, we examine *Storage Wars* to gain insight into the ways RTV may mediate the contemporary crisis in masculinity associated with the decline in traditional male labor.

We focus on RTV programming because it offers a documentary mode of representation that purports to depict everyday life as it happens (Corner, 2002;

Kelly, 2012). Although it is intensely mediated, framed, and edited to produce the narrative coherence of scripted television, RTV invites audiences to view the real-life circumstances of the new economy and show how everyday people are continuing to adapt to new circumstances (Hendershot, 2009). Ouellette and Hay (2008) contend that RTV also instructs audiences about the rules of postwelfare citizenship throughout the decline of civil society and the ascendance of neoliberal economics. Not coincidentally, the behaviors that succeed in an era of small government (self-reliance, industriousness, individualism, laissez-faire competition, private initiative) are the same ones valorized in most RTV programming. Thus, RTV offers putatively practical but fundamentally ideologically advice for negotiating new social and economic circumstances. Specifically, we suggest as RTV turns to representations of service labor and knowledge economies, it also reaffirms that masculine skills retain their value as knowledge supplants manual labor. This analysis contributes to RTV studies by showing how the values that accompany governing at a distance adapt the kind of personal initiative and industriousness of blue-collar labor to what are coded as feminine labor markets.

### **Constructing Consumption as Work**

Men often avoid consumptive acts, with the exception of male-dominated realms (Miller, 1998; Mo시오 et al., 2013) or forms of “serious leisure” that involve a work-like component (Stebbins, 1982; see also Belk, 1995). As such, a primary goal of *Storage Wars* is to construct auction bidding as a legitimate form of working-class male labor rather than as a frivolous female activity. To do so, the program relies on challenging existing binary oppositions associated with consumption, beginning with the juxtaposition of the industrial setting of storage auctions with the clean, modern, and stylized cathedrals of consumption (Ritzer, 2010). *Storage Wars*' primary setting is the bleak, industrial concrete, and cinder block environment of the urban and suburban storage facilities that populate Southern California. This setting mirrors the familiar but increasingly rare American industrial and manufacturing facilities where men engaged in manual labor and, as such, is presented as the antithesis to sites of nonproductive consumption such as big box stores and shopping malls. While bidders are also shown frequenting retail sites in the course of their work, for instance when they seek appraisals of purchased goods, such depictions represent a minor percentage of a given episode. Even depictions of bidders working within their own thrift stores—stocking shelves, selling goods—are rare. Even more rare are depictions of bidders at home, the epitome of the private, domestic sphere of leisure. Through this juxtaposition, *Storage Wars* constructs storage auctions as a place where bidders work removed from any potential connection to leisure and domestic activities.

This juxtaposition is further reinforced by the program's focus on four White male bidders and their stereotypical working-class appearance and behaviors.

Darrell, Dave, and Jarrod best illustrate this ideal archetype. Darrell and Jarrod are relatively muscular men with facial hair and tattoos who wear jeans or shorts, t-shirts, and baseball hats. Dave's dress is a bit more evocative of traditional working-class laborers' uniforms—a black button down shirt, shorts, and baseball hat emblazoned with the name of his retail outlet, Newport Consignment Gallery. Beyond their appearances, all bidders are often shown driving pick-up trucks, speaking colloquially (using words such as “gonna”), dropping profanities with relative frequency, and in some instances losing their tempers and threatening physical violence (e.g., Ep. 10 and 18). They are also shown joking with one another and simply goofing off. For instance, after leaving an auction empty handed, Barry comments that he plans to spend the rest of the day at a bridge game hosted by some senior citizens in the area, adding “And you know bridge, it's a lot like sex, if you don't have a great partner you better have a good hand” (Ep. 7). Finally, bidders are frequently shown engaging in physical labor, often adding descriptive comments such as “We're going in there and get our hands dirty” (Jarrod, Ep. 3) and “I'm moving refrigerators and hair salon stations and it's not easy [laughs]. This is dangerous work” (Barry, Ep. 4). In aggregate, the bidders' appearance and behaviors reflect the American ideal of the untamed rebel who refuses to conform to the rules and regulations associated with (feminine) office work.

*Storage Wars* also explicitly juxtaposes auction bidding with forms of leisure through bidders' constant references to their activities as “work” and as a “business.” As Darrell mentions, he takes his bidding seriously: “I'm here to do business. I'm not here to play games” (Ep. 2). Dave expresses a similar sentiment, declaring, “Lazy people don't get far in this business. You gotta be active, you gotta get up early, you gotta do your homework” (Ep. 12). Embedded in these statements is a complex contrast between bidding and the associations between games and childish, frivolous leisure. Unlike games and other leisure activities, bidding is work because it requires mental and physical energy and generates bidders' primary income. As Stebbins (1982, pp. 254–255) suggests, the ability to generate one's primary income from an activity is one characteristic that distinguishes work from leisure. Bidders, in fact, make specific references to how bidding is different from collecting, a specific form of serious leisure (Belk, 1995). Dave comments, “A lot of people are collectors. They like to hoard the best stuff. That's not me. The only thing I like to collect is Benjamins” (Ep. 1). While bidders do admit they get a thrill from auction bidding—Darrell describes it as his “addiction” (Ep. 1), Jarrod enjoys “the excitement of the gamble” (Ep. 14)—their focus on profits does not tarnish their activities, such as it might for collectors (Belk, 1995, pp. 94–95). In fact, profits represent their primary motive for bidding: It is essential for their economic survival. The bidder/collector distinction also constructed through bidders' limited attachment to the items they find in units. As Darrell comments during a tour of his family's home, the only time in Season 1 where a bidder is shown at home, “If you see something you

like, I'll make you a price on it" (Ep. 1). Bidders value goods for their potential monetary value alone, unlike collectors who often value them for their meaning or identity-related benefits (Belk, 1995). By emphasizing the seriousness and profit-generating ability of auction bidding, *Storage Wars* distinguishes this activity from forms of leisure, further establishing it as a legitimate form of working-class male labor rather than a leisure activity conducted outside the sphere of work.

## Masculinizing the Feminine

It is within this context that Darrell, Dave, Jarrod, and Barry embrace the underlying mantra of "the man-of-action hero;" "with vision, guts, and a can-do spirit," anything is possible (Holt & Thompson, 2004, pp. 428–429). Through auction bidding, bidders embody this contemporary masculine archetype and avoid the constraints of other forms of labor within a service and knowledge economy. Specifically, bidding serves as a display of bidders' respective abilities to balance individual autonomy with collective duty, success with conformity, adventure with responsibility—but in a fashion unique to their consumption-based workplace. This unique working-class, consumption-based version of man-of-action hero masculinity requires that bidders retain various attributes of hegemonic masculinity—competitiveness, risk-taking, domination—while integrating skills, knowledge, and attitudes traditionally coded as feminine—household management skills, commodity price knowledge, and an ability to assess the relative value of consumer packaged goods (Fiske, 1989). Within *Storage Wars*, bidders are knowledgeable and competent consumers, exhibiting a specific form of sub-cultural capital (Thornton, 1996) tailored to their unique profession.

Bidders' knowledge extends well beyond traditional male realms of consumption, spanning numerous cultural boundaries: masculine and feminine, high- and low-class, utilitarian and aesthetic. Barry and Darrell, for example, quickly identify the potential value of a unit containing what they describe as "fragile" goods including antiques, china, and "grandma's jewelry" (Ep. 6). The diversity of goods bidders purchase, appraise, and resell is truly staggering and demands bidders possess an encyclopedic knowledge of goods and their value. Bidders' ability to identify and value goods does not, however, indicate they possess high levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998) or cultural omnivorousness (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992). Rather, it indicates their ability to develop the subcultural capital necessary to perform their job. In practical terms, robust consumption knowledge delivers a competitive advantage at auction, preventing bidders from making what Darrell describes as "rookie mistakes" (Ep. 7) such as overbidding on units, discarding valuable items unknowingly, or selling them below market value.

The importance of acquiring this subcultural capital becomes apparent by examining the challenges Jarrod faces as a result of his "newbie" status. Jarrod

has only been bidding full-time for two years—in contrast, Darrell and Dave have been bidding for close to 30 years—and his previous career in the mortgage industry did little to develop auction-relevant skills. And because skills are acquired through informal means, Jarrod must learn through trial and error. During the first season, Jarrod appears most comfortable bidding on units containing industrial tools, sporting goods, or automotive goods. These items are reflective of his working-class habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and traditional male-oriented consumption domains (Moisio et al., 2013). He is less confident bidding on more feminine or more refined goods such as household goods, fashion, jewelry, and collectibles. Consequently, he has a tendency to gamble—“You know I’m a gambling man. I gotta take a gamble whenever I can” (Ep. 2)—and often makes rookie mistakes when bidding on these units. For example, he admits, “I don’t know [bleep] about” a midcentury dining set, possibly designed by Charles and Ray Eames (Ep. 1). Despite his deficiencies, he is shown refining his skills, such as when he recognizes the value of a pile of vintage denim overlooked by the others (Ep. 11). In this way, Jarrod embodies the neoliberal ideology embedded in the program—while his current lack of subcultural capital may put him at risk of losing potential profits, he can overcome it through a combination of autodidactic learning through experience and risk-taking. All bidders possess their respective areas of expertise and weakness, but the most experienced bidders exhibit a more developed level of subcultural capital expressed as working-class omnivorousness (Rademacher, 2015) that creates yet another competitive advantage in this marketplace.

*Storage Wars* may highlight bidders’ investment in omnivorous consumption knowledge, but it tempers this investment in a marginalized feminine realm of knowledge by highlighting the highly aggressive and competitive nature of auction bidding as well. All of the bidders are aggressive and competitive at auction, but Dave exemplifies the hyper-masculine auction buyer through his loud and aggressive bidding style. Dave does not just strive to win units but to intimidate other bidders in the process. His all-black uniform, the \$10,000 bankroll he brings to most auctions, and his signature “YUUUP!” auction call all reflect this goal. His bidding mantra is “Nobody outbids me, takes something I want. Period” (Ep. 4). To facilitate this goal, he often bids up units well beyond their true market value so as to drive down competitors’ potential profits. As he admits, “Once we get through those gates there is no friends, there is no professional courtesy. It’s every many for him self. Let the best man win” (Ep. 1). Consequently, Dave emerges as the villain in the program. Dave redeems himself, however, by acknowledging a need to temper his rebellious aggression and desire to win against the obligations of covering what he describes as the “massive overhead” associated with his business (Ep. 5). Successful bidders, therefore, are aggressive and competitive and take risks, but they do so in a strategic, calculated fashion that allows them to fulfill their obligations to their families and their businesses.

Strategic, calculated bidding requires bidders to embrace the dual benefits of thrift. As Miller (1998) argues, thrift is capable of generating both economic and hedonic benefits. While not a masculine or feminine disposition per se, research suggests women often pursue thrift as a means of constituting relationships, benefiting the household, or representing an act of devotional love (Miller, 1998). *Storage Wars* often ignores the benefits associated with the family and the domestic sphere. Instead, the program depicts thrift as primarily delivering economic benefits such as profits or monetary savings, which are traditionally ascribed to the masculine world of business. Even when the program acknowledges hedonic benefits of thrift, such as when it highlights Darrell's fixation on the "wow factor" (Ep. 1), unexpected valuable goods found in units, the benefits lack the relational aspects Miller (1998) identifies. Rather than stimulating thoughts about family or relationships, Darrell experiences a rush of excitement as a result of the thrill of the hunt, an inherently individual hedonic experience. His excitement is further amplified by the realization that these valuable goods have increased the profits earned on the unit, an inherently economic benefit.

The emphasis on the potential economic benefits of thrift rather than the hedonic benefits, particularly the relational benefits, pervades the program as a whole. The program is clear that an ability to buy units at bargain prices is a prerequisite to being a successful auction bidder. Moreover, those monetary savings contribute to bidders' ability to purchase additional units and, consequently, earn even greater profits. Auction bidding is therefore constructed as a market in which bidders must spend money to earn money in the long-term pursuit of profits. The spend-earn-spend cycle reflects another aspect of thrift—that thrift can drive consumers to spend more money than they save (Miller, 1998, p. 137). Yet, *Storage Wars* valorizes spending in the pursuit of profits as long as one does not overbid. Even the newest bidder, Barry, recognizes this rule despite his tendency to often break it. After another newbie purchased a unit for \$2,600, Barry critiques the bidder, saying, "Buying units like this for that kind of money? He'll be out of business sooner than he knows" (Ep. 17). Likewise, Jarrod notes after seeing Dave and Darrell engaged in a bit of competitive banter prior to an auction:

Whenever I see these guys show up and they're waving their money around like this, I can already tell they're a little rambunctious this morning. That's great for me. I mean, that's a sign of their weakness. They're gonna overspend, hopefully I can sneak right in and steal a couple of units. (Ep. 4)

By emphasizing the economic benefits (i.e., masculine) of bidders' quest for thrift rather than the hedonic and relational benefits (i.e., feminine), *Storage Wars* suggests auction bidding allows for the ritual transformation of spending—a frivolous and wasteful act—into a productive act (Miller, 1998). Further, this

emphasis removes the relational elements of thrift and shopping, sanitizing spending and positioning it clearly as an economic act.

*Storage Wars'* depiction of the lone mixed-gender bidding team, Jarrod and Brandi, further illustrates its tendency to highlight the economic and individual hedonic benefits of thrift while ignoring its relational benefits. Because the couple possesses the most limited experience, omnivorous knowledge, and economic capital of any of the bidders, each purchased unit must generate profits. According to Brandi, "We have bills to pay and we have to make some actual money" (Ep. 6). Jarrod recognizes this reality but discusses his motivations for bidding in individualistic terms: "Whenever we buy a storage unit, I get the excitement of the gamble. Brandi doesn't care. All she wants to know is, 'when are we gonna sell it, and when do I get my money?'" (Ep. 14). As this statement suggests, Jarrod acknowledges his need to earn a profit but is primarily motivated by "the excitement of the gamble." Jarrod's pursuit of individual hedonic benefits both removes thrift from its relational underpinnings and reinforces Jarrod's desire to enact a rebel masculinity. Brandi's overemphasis on thrift, in contrast, represents the antithesis to Jarrod's expression of masculine risk-taking and rebelliousness. She represents an outlier concerned first and foremost with meeting the financial obligations required by her family and business rather than pursuing individualistic hedonic benefits. As she readily admits, "I'm all for taking chances, but . . . wait, no I'm not" (Ep. 9). While Brandi's emphasis on profits may follow the tenets of traditional breadwinner masculinity (Holt & Thompson, 2004), her unwillingness to take risks is depicted as a negative trait within this context, as it imposes rules and limitations on Jarrod's ability to act autonomously in pursuit of economic and individualistic hedonic benefits. This tension pervades the couple's interactions, such as the following exchange illustrates:

Brandi: "JM can you come here please?"

Jarrod (walking into Brandi's office): "What's up?"

Brandi: "You spent all that money yesterday – \$1,000?"

Jarrod: "I, I know I went over budget. But you know, I saw a couple of good units.

You know, I can't let them go by. When I see the ones I think that'll make us the money, I got to get them."

Brandi: "Out of what you got, we're not making our money back." (Ep. 1)

Essentially, Brandi serves as Jarrod's conscience, reminding him to rein in his competitiveness and risk-taking in favor of his obligation to provide financially for their family and business. Within the eyes of the other bidders, however, Brandi's constant reminders emasculate Jarrod. Barry comments after watching Jarrod hesitate to bid on a unit that "If Jarrod wants this unit he's gonna have to get his balls out of Brandi's purse" (Ep. 5). Brandi even acknowledges that her desire for caution and smart investing may hinder their ability to reap large

profits. At one point, she even critiques the limitations of her approach, suggesting that to win a desirable unit from Dave, “We just need to go balls out” (Ep. 9). That is, they need to gamble and spend whatever is needed to win the unit. Through their interactions, Jarrod and Brandi reinforce the ideal auction-based masculinity; successful bidders—“true” men—act on their aggressive and competitive impulses but self-regulate these impulses in pursuit of the economic and individual hedonic benefits thrift provides. Bidders incapable of doing so are marginalized and, in the case of Jarrod, emasculated.

Further blurring the lines between traditional masculine and feminine behaviors is the fact that while bidders’ investment in thrift is not seen in relational terms, bidders are constructed as rugged individualists capable of forming and cultivating relationships with other bidders. The four core bidders, for example, may compete against one another, but they remain friendly, cracking jokes and generally enjoying their time together. Bidders’ collegiality suggests they share a consciousness of kind—an intrinsic connection to others based on shared consumption experiences—similar to that found in brand communities (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). Much like brand community members, bidders are shown providing proactive mentorship to newbie bidders, instructing them on the nuances of auction culture. Further, in a strong refutation of the “marketplace man” archetype, an absent father fixated on his work (Kimmel, 1996), Darrell and Dave are both heavily involved in socializing their sons, Brandon and Dave, Jr., into auction bidding. Brandon, in particular, accompanies Darrell to most auctions and is shown as an active participant working with his dad to assess value, strategize, bid, and process units while simultaneously learning about omnivorous consumption and the profession. Darrell views his investment in Brandon as a success, concluding, “Brandon can run his own show, he’s perfectly capable of it” (Ep. 3). Dave, Jr. appears less frequently, but Dave’s relationship with his son is a main priority for him: “I’m building an empire that I can pass on to my son. That’s what drives me and that’s why I’m so aggressive at these auctions” (Ep. 6). In an attempt to show he is ready to take over the family business, Dave, Jr. brings his entire life savings—\$5,500—to auction in hopes of winning big (Ep. 19). When Dave, Jr. risks his entire bankroll on a single unit, Dave applauds the risk, saying the bid is “like going up to a black jack table and throwing \$5,500 down on one hand and just stand there and watch the cards flip” (Ep. 19). Dave’s pride grows as they process the unit side-by-side, commenting, “I’m shocked at how good this unit is turning out to be.” Ultimately, Dave, Jr. realizes a \$1,900 profit, symbolically confirming Dave’s success as a mentor.

The mentorship of one’s son may be dismissed as a patriarchal act motivated by a desire to extend one’s personal legacy. However, mentorship occurs throughout the program, establishing it as an act expected of successful bidders. At moments, the program even employs the conventions of contemporary film

and television “bromances,” or portrayals of male camaraderie that integrate strong homosocial bonding and affection into traditionally masculine relational identities. Among others (DeAngelis, 2014), Albert (2013) suggests that male love, friendship, and mentorship present audiences with “an internal struggle of the male characters with their understandings of their identities and roles as men” (162). This portrayal of male bonding is particularly visible in the on-screen relationship between Darrel and Jarrod. Darrell, for instance, invests in Jarrod, helping him overcome his limited consumption knowledge regarding collectible goods. When Jarrod expresses disappointment that an old safe he found in a unit was empty (Ep. 7), Darrell takes the time to teach Jarrod that value can be found in unexpected places: “Did you see the safe? This thing’s the bomb!” As he elaborates,

This is the Olde York Safe Company. These things are real collectible. And what makes this thing so nice, and it doesn’t take a dummy to understand this, it’s got all the original brass fittings, but the printing is on it. And it’s all gold-embossed. That was hand-laid on there and hand painted. Uh, turn of the century. Maybe 100—120 years old, if I had to guess. (Ep. 7)

Darrell ultimately concludes the safe alone may be worth “two to three grand . . . [which] just goes to show ya, there’s always something to learn in this business” (Ep. 7). Not only has Jarrod gained important knowledge that should help him avoid similar rookie mistakes in the future, he internalizes the message that mentorship represents a desirable masculine characteristic. As evidence of his commitment to mentorship, Jarrod invests in another newbie, Bill, even after he outbids Jarrod on a unit (Ep. 17). In this highly competitive marketplace, getting outbid can create some animosity between bidders. However, Jarrod takes this loss in stride. Jarrod is shown empathizing with Bill, who some critiqued for overpaying for the unit and just recently quit his job to pursue auction bidding as a full-time profession, commenting, “I’m not gonna give this guy a hard time ‘cause it wasn’t that long ago that I was the newbie and it was tough” (Ep. 17). Bill finds Jarrod’s mentorship extremely valuable:

I just bought my first unit today and I paid \$2,600 for it. And with the help of Jarrod, he told me I had \$1,500 in it and we haven’t even made a dent in it. And I’m really stoked about it and I can’t wait to go out and buy some more.

Bidders’ investment in mentorship and homosocial bonding sends a clear message that masculinity as constructed in *Storage Wars* requires balancing individualism and fierce autonomy with a caring and communal orientation that preserves the collective characteristics and functioning of the auction community, despite its highly competitive nature.

## Conclusion

Our analysis suggests *Storage Wars* contributes to the construction and legitimation of an emergent working-class masculine archetype relevant to a knowledge and service economy: the working-class storage bidder. Unlike other RTV programs that trade in nostalgic appeals to an older version of masculinity, *Storage Wars* valorizes the man-of-action hero masculine archetype (Holt & Thompson, 2004), successfully balancing rebel and breadwinner masculinities within the auction context. Success at auction, however, requires these working-class men to integrate knowledge and behaviors traditionally coded as feminine into their working-class habitus. Through the documentation of the appropriation of the feminine into the male experience within *Storage Wars*, we argue the program contributes to the transformation of consumption from a salve for men's alienation from the world of work into a legitimate form of productive labor. Consequently, far from representing a marginalized, subordinated masculinity, auction bidders are valorized as the contemporary masculine ideal capable of adapting rugged individualism, adventurousness, risk-taking, and personal autonomy to get by in the new economy.

RTV plays an integral role in the transformation of consumption as labor and the legitimation of working-class auction bidder masculinity. Unlike other emergent masculinities that may remain invisible within larger culture, RTV disseminates masculinities to millions of potential viewers weekly. Much like *Storage Wars*' creator Thom Beers' previous RTV programs, including *Ice Road Truckers* and *Deadliest Catch*, legitimated and celebrated other masculinities, his selection of auction bidding as a context worthy of documentation serves as a de facto endorsement of the legitimacy of this masculinity within the larger masculine hierarchy. By documenting the dramatic treasure hunt-like narrative, the program acclimates viewers to the importance of omnivorous consumption knowledge, thrift, and mentorship and a communal orientation. It blurs the lines between the traditionally gendered nature of consumption—as feminine rather than masculine, leisure rather than work—constructing it as a legitimate realm of masculine investment. As such, the associated status costs of embracing subordinate cultural capital (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013) may be minimized. By presenting bidders retaining their rebel and breadwinner masculinities while engaged in historically undervalued and subordinate forms of feminine labor *Storage Wars* contributes to the cultural definition of hegemonic masculinity within the current cultural, social, and historical context.

*Storage Wars* not only shifts general cultural understandings of hegemonic masculinity but also identifies and recognizes the plurality and hierarchy of masculinities present within the auction context. We argue that Darrell, Dave, Jarrod, and Barry represent distinct auction bidding masculinities that occupy specific locations within the storage auction social hierarchy based on their ability to merge rebel and breadwinner masculinities with the requisite feminine subcultural capital. Darrell and Dave represent the “top dogs,” bidders who most

successfully perform the ideal working-class auction bidder masculinity. Jarrod represents a midpoint in the hierarchy, as he effectively performs rebel masculinity but struggles to balance it with other elements of the auction bidder ideal; specifically, a fully developed working-class cultural omnivorousness, an appreciation of thrift, and a full investment in collaboration and mentorship. Despite Jarrod's shortcomings, he represents the neoliberal ideal of an upwardly mobile member of this community. That is, through hard work and continued investment in learning the requisite skills of his trade, Jarrod reflects the neoliberal ideal of self-responsibility and the "maximisation of the self" (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 12). In contrast to the other bidders, Barry's lack of serious investment in auction bidding as a profession places him on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. As a collector, he is presented as engaging in serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982) rather than a profession. He lacks the skills and knowledge required of the profession and, therefore, remains an outsider within this community.

Celebrating hybridized masculinity, *Storage Wars* valorizes male appropriation of feminine skills and marketplaces as a potential pathway to male primacy throughout the decline of industrial labor. This co-optation contributes to the ongoing subjugation of the feminine, precluding what might otherwise be used as an occasion to redefine the gendered division of labor to deny women a prominent place in the new economy. The popularity of *Storage Wars* in combination with the specific masculinities it celebrates bespeaks the adaptability of hegemonic masculinity in the face of structural upheavals in the social definition of labor. As women come to represent an increasing percentage of the workforce in the contemporary service and knowledge economy, *Storage Wars* suggests working-class men are capable of adapting to forms of work coded not only as feminine but also as converting that previously marginalized labor into something to be valorized. Consumption becomes productive through men's investment in this activity. Hence, men's commitment to this previously marginalized form of unpaid domestic labor can transform it into something economically and socially valuable. Our analysis of *Storage Wars* evinces how mediated masculinity depends on the appropriation of the feminine to sustain the preeminence of men's labor in a knowledge economy. The program is a fitting example of how women's gains and contributions to the new economy are elided in the service of keeping "men's work" relevant in the 21st century.

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## Author Biographies

**Mark A. Rademacher** is an assistant professor of strategic communication at Butler University. His research investigates the links between consumer behavior, identity, and culture and has appeared in journals such as *Journal of*

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*Children and Media*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, and *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

**Casey Ryan Kelly** is an associate professor of critical communication and media studies at Butler University. His research has appeared in journals such as *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and *Critical Studies in Media Communication* among others.

# “I Know What Them Girls Like”: A Rhetorical Analysis of Thug Appeal in Rap Lyrics

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Richard T. Craig<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Rap music, once associated with low-income urban communities, has become a staple in contemporary pop culture extending globally beyond the ghettos, and projects from where it began. Along with the transcendence of the art, those who master the art are repositioning themselves in a social context. This analysis observed the content of rap lyrics to understand how the genre depicts the rappers' regards toward and relationships with women they know intimately, particularly content that portrays these young men as “thugs.” This observation explores the characteristics put forth by the rapper, specifically those demonstrating thug characteristics, as a potential dating and mating partner for young women. This analysis takes into consideration psychological concepts offering knowledge into peoples' perceived and real reasons for establishing relationships. Psychological theories contribute to the analysis of the observed actions and principles found in the content of the reviewed lyrics. At the core of this study are concepts of Black male masculinity and intimate relationships. This study analyzed rap lyrics to understand how the “thug” is presented to the female audience.

## Keywords

popular culture, popular music, criticism, masculinity, rhetoric

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<sup>1</sup>George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Richard T. Craig, George Mason University, 4400 University Dr., 3D6, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA.

Email: rcraig@gmu.edu

## **Black Youth Culture, Hip-Hop, and Relationships**

Kitwana (2002) notes many male rappers have adopted anti-Black woman attitudes exhibited in rap songs, particularly rappers deemed to be “thugs.” Rap lyrics perpetuate sexist attitudes persisting in Black male populations; yet, there is a dichotomy to the ideologies in rap lyrics. On one hand presenting anti-woman sentiments disregarding and degrading women, while on the other hand demonstrating some form of “love” or “adoration” for women and relationships with women. This analysis strives to determine in all of their bravado and machismo what are the endearing attributes of these men, as expressed in their musical product. How do thug/rappers communicate socially acceptable/admirable qualities to a potential female partner?

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, challenging living conditions such as high unemployment, declines in public services, cuts in education budgets, along with increased sale and use of crack cocaine in the inner cities, stimulated new forms of artistic expression among Black youth, giving way to the birth of hip-hop (Brym, 2001; Perry, 2004; Rose, 1994); “part of this growing hip-hop culture revolved around the talent to rhythmically speak in time to a beat, storytelling over electronically based music” (Rose, 1994, p. 2). Rap music became the voice of marginalized Blacks, providing a forum to critique social, cultural, and political issues in America (Blair, 2004; Brym, 2001; Cheney, 2005; Rose, 1994). After developing in low-income, urban communities, rap music has become a staple in contemporary pop culture, extending beyond the ghettos, and projects from where it began. M. Elizabeth Blair (2004) highlights rap music has moved out of the inner city and into the mainstream.

Jefferies (2011) and Kitwana (2002) observe the mainstreaming of Black youth culture has increased acceptance of derogatory terminology and sexualizing of female counterparts. Thus, antiwoman and sexist ideology seem to permeate throughout rap culture. Kitwana (2002) notes that the acceptance of this new logic highlights a change in identity and worldviews, influencing hip-hop enthusiast’s beliefs of “...interpersonal relationships, dating, marriage, sex, love and gender identity” (p. 86). Consequently, rap music contributes to its audience’s ideas about sex, love, friendship, dating, and marriage (Collins, 2004; Jefferies, 2011; Kitwana, 2002; Rose, 2008); as such, it is important to observe the lyrical content of rap music and what is intimated to audiences of rap music. Rose (2008) notes the top five song list for KPWR of Los Angeles on May 23, 2008 and suggests the “lineup reflects a distortion of youth music’s long-standing and perfectly acceptable focus on sex and courtship into sexist and objectifying tales...” (p. 150). Media contribute to educating audiences how to behave, what to think, feel, believe, and desire (Kellner, 1995); thus influencing the development of social norms and values including ideas and models of what is attractive and desirable in a potential romantic partner.

## Literature Review

### *Thug Persona*

Meaning is a fluid concept that can change depending upon the users association of a word or phrase; therefore, it will contextually have different implications depending on when, by whom, and how the term or phrase is used. Collins (2004) notes terms such as nigger, bitch, and faggot "...signal a reworking of historical language of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, all played out in the spectacles offered up by contemporary mass media" (p. 121).

Scholars likewise observe Black men's adaption of the term *nigger*, offered as a term of endearment instead of the negative derogatory term of a White oppressive society (Collins, 2004; Jefferies, 2011; Rose, 2008). This reworking, referred to as an "ironic misnaming" (Jefferies, 2011; Judy, 2004), is used for "self-affirmation and community building" purposes (Jefferies, 2011, p. 165). Similarly, young Black men have adopted and adapted the term *thug*, as Hill and Ramsaran (2009) observe, "'Thuggin' has become an important dimension of projecting masculinity" (p. 70). The scholars indicate rappers invoke the ideology associated with "thuggin" through "Lyrics promoting gang violence, glorifying drugs, and bragging about these actions..." (Hill & Ramsaran, 2009, p. 70).

Probably, the most notable of hip-hop artist to embrace the term, especially during the "Modern Era; 1992–1997" of hip-hop (Cobb, 2007, p. 41), was rap artist Tupac Shakur. Shakur altered the word into an acronym meaning "The Hate U Gave {T.H.U.G} Little Infants F\*\*ks Everybody (L.I.F.E.)" as part of his "T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E." mantra (Cobb, 2007; Jefferies, 2011; Lazin, 2003; Rose, 2008). The acronym describes the influence of an oppressive society on Black men's social, mental, and spiritual development, more importantly, how limited access to resources forged the individual feared by society.

For some, adopting a thug demeanor similar to Tupac demonstrates a deconstruction/reconstruction of its original meaning and a racialized meaning equating to the word nigger (Boyd, 2007; Jefferies, 2011). Stripping the established meanings to fashion new meanings, as rappers tend to do, represents an individual and collective resistance and resilience against a perceived tyranny of the oppressive culture that has hated him and those like him. As young Black men and women attempt to find opportunities to resist the same oppressive system manipulating and exploiting them (Blair, 2004; Collins, 2004), the adoption of the thug image, though commodified and marketed in popular culture, becomes a voice of resistance for Black youth as demonstrated by Tupac Shakur's T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E.

Stigmatized words find new connotations, creating a shared understanding in a subculture that counters the literal associations. Collins (2004) points out, "People also resist systems of oppression by taking offensive words and changing their meaning..." (p. 121). Hip-hop has developed into a cultural

institution allowing those who feel oppressed, overlooked, and mistreated to express themselves through art forms of music, dance, and painting (Cheney, 2005; Cobb, 2007; Hill & Ramsaran, 2009; Jefferies, 2011; Ogbar, 2009). The producers of these art forms recreate themselves and the societal ideology positioned on them by attempting to transform the purely negative associations and create new/modified meanings to express value in their existence.

Some academics have examined negative characteristics of Black men associated with hip-hop in conjunction with “cool-pose” (Jefferies, 2011; Majors & Billson, 1992). Majors and Billson’s (1992) theory that suggests Black men function in an oppressive structure that withholds opportunity and access to resources by carefully crafting a cool character:

Blacks have not had consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success. Many have become frustrated, angry, embittered, alienated, and impatient . . . Black males especially those who are young and live in the inner cities of our nation, have adopted and used cool masculinity – or as we prefer to call it, “cool pose” as a way of surviving a restrictive society . . . (pp. 1–2)

By altering meanings, people attempt to redefine themselves and their roles in oppressive social conditions (Blair, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992). Thus, the cool pose becomes a means to survive what young Black men see as a hostile environment restricting them from upward social mobility. Likewise, the “thug” stigma associated with many young Black men, particularly those considered a part of the hip-hop culture (Jefferies, 2011), becomes an identity-related performance, similar to the “badman” narratives of folk tradition (Jefferies, 2011; Perry, 2004; Rose, 1994), or the “Baaad Nigger” archetype (Cobb, 2007).

Blair (2004) asserts, “. . . youth cultures have often been organized around music” (p. 498). Black culture is a highly marketable product in the pop culture marketplace and draws heavily from the cultural production and styles of urban Black youth (Blair, 2004; Collins 2004; Hall, 2005; Jefferies, 2011). Marketing rappers as thug figures to sell records exploits the urban youth culture both Blair and Collins allude to. Rose (2008) describes a cyclical system encouraging “black youth, who are raised on images of black thugs as a primary source of power, to tailor their image to suit market needs” (p. 89). Media become influential to youth in development, particularly if there is a lack of alternative sources. Collins (2004) points out young Black men and women rely on media content to foster their understanding of self and others, when experiencing an erosion of alternative sources (i.e., family, churches, school clubs). Media becomes the new parent or teacher that fosters the values and beliefs that young Black men and women construct. Collins (2004) suggests ideas of Black sexuality are reformulated and contested; likewise, ideas of relationships and attractive partners are presented and explored in popular media content. The indication is that these images of Black men are part of the new racism that commodifies Black

men for their representations connected to strength, sexuality, and violence. The images appear consistently throughout popular hip-hop content (Boyd, 2007; Jefferies, 2011), reinforcing social perceptions and concepts of Black men.

### *Psychology of Attraction*

Attraction and relationship studies introduce models and theories to better explore the portrayals and potential meanings embedded in the of the rapper's lyrics. Klohen and Luo's (2003) study suggests individuals' perceptions of potential romantic partners, rather than the partners' actual characteristics, play an even greater role in the attraction process. Perception is subject to the influence of numerous social institutions. Elements of popular culture like rap lyrics, filtered through mainstream media, carry influence on our perception of real world encounters.

Rap lyrics carry the opportunity for perception to be shaped and for ideologies to be created about potential behaviors, interactions, and outcomes with a person similar to the thugs represented in the lyrics. Klohen and Luo (2003) further suggest, "The perceptions of partners' characteristics are more important than partners' actual characteristics" (p. 719). In the construction of meaning in rap lyrics, it is plausible that the rapper presents "potential" characteristics influencing the perception of those exposed to the genre. Thus, these potential positive traits may be emphasized and presented to outweigh the negative characteristics.

Popular culture presents a template of the rewards and penalties expected of certain interactions; hip-hop content may influence perception of the securities and risks, advantages, and disadvantages of dating a person who exhibits the characteristics and traits of the thug rapper. Examinations of attraction and commitment suggest individuals are more satisfied with their relationships as long as the relationship provides high rewards and low costs (Rusbult, 1983). Likewise, individuals consider the rewards as opposed to the costs of his/her own relationship and the continuance of his/her relationship, as well as determining the costs and rewards of pursuing alternative relationships (Floyd & Wasner, 1994). Thus, observing the suggested consequences, positive and negative, situated in rap lyrics provides an idea of what to expect in a relationship with a thug type.

Content associating positive characteristics to the thug, or conveying negative traits into positives, portrays the thug beneficially and creates an interpretation with higher reward to cost opportunity for romantically interacting with a person of this caliber. Eastwick and Finkel (2008) submit, "people do not truly know what they want in a partner" (p. 262). Popular culture, such as lyrics of rap music, presents options to its audience. In these presentations are opportunities for audiences to observe and consider the traits and qualities they want from a partner, long and short term.

## Methodology and Research Questions

A rhetorical analysis of popular rap music may illustrate a narrative in which cultural artifacts manifest themselves in society. The songs and artists observed for analysis came from airings of rap and R&B (featuring rap artist) videos on *MTV Jams* between 11 p.m. to midnight over 7 days. Artist and songs observed have ranked among the *Billboard* top 100 rap or R&B songs at the times of their releases, with multiple songs ranking among the top 10 in their peak positions (see Appendix). In total, 94 songs were taken into consideration for analysis. Eliminating repeats, songs with no rap element, and songs not referencing thug personas or activities, or relationship values associated with thugs, the selection was narrowed to 20 (see Appendix).

The focus of this analysis addresses the lyrical content of rap music and its capacity to present attractive qualities of “thug”-like men. For the purpose of this analysis, “thug” refers to those who demonstrate what Ogbar (2009) labels “ghettoized pathology” (p. 43) in their lyrical content. A pathology exhibiting traits of criminal behavior includes (a) sale and distribution of narcotics, (b) use of narcotics, (c) theft, (d) use of firearms and other lethal weapons, and (e) use of physical presence as a form of intimidation. Bearing in mind the characteristics of ghettoized pathology, the observations centered on rappers highlighting characteristics of criminal behavior in their lyrics as part of their persona or lived experiences. The goal of the analysis was to determine if and how the rappers rearrange these traits of criminal behavior into laudable characteristics. Rappers and lyrics included in this analysis underscored at least one ghettoized pathology trait.

Observations of the music also took into consideration: (a) acknowledgment of, and regard toward women and (b) descriptions of the thug as a potential dating partner. Prowomen sentiments in the lyrical content build a better narrative of the individual character of the thug/rapper. Does the lyrical content allow for positive depictions of women contrasting the antiwoman sentiment (Jefferies, 2011; Kitwana, 2002), or demonstrate constructive connections with women? The presentations offered in the lyrics shape potential listeners’ perception of a thug fitting into the idea of an appropriate mate, including adoration of women they interact with on an intimate level. For extended review of content, copies of the lyrics were retrieved from Web sites including <http://www.lyricstime.com> and <http://www.azlyrics.com>.

This analysis presumes a standard of attractiveness and desirability for thugs is set via hip-hop lyrical content, a model that situates thug attributes as potentially desirable and appealing in real-world experiences. Rap lyrics present an ideology, potentially identifying thugs as worthy of being sought after and worthy of interest in intimate relationships. This analysis accordingly explores the following research questions:

- a. How do rap lyrics present positive traits and characteristics of thugs?

- b. How do rap lyrics present the thug's positive regard toward women?
- c. How do rap lyrics present the thug's constructive relationship(s) with women?

## Analysis

Observations revealed positive themes associated with the “thug” character and positive themes that present the “thug” as a potential partner. The thug character is a contradictory depiction; in one light portrayed as a criminal voluntarily participating in illegal activities, while simultaneously a resilient survivor fighting for socioeconomic relevance. Themes that work in his favor include (a) rise from obscurity, (b) the urban tragic-hero, and (c) endless effort to earn. In regard to relationship potential, the thug is situated with ideal traits that would warrant the attraction of the opposite sex. The thug as a potential mate is presented as a man: (a) appreciative of older women that have guided him through life, (b) devoted to the women that he loves, (c) with family values, and (d) of great sexuality. Each of these themes are defined and presented below.

### *Thug Characteristics*

*Rise from obscurity.* The first theme among the thug characteristics, his rise from obscurity, highlights the thug/rapper's beginnings, drawing particular attention to the reality that they started life with very little material wealth and access to resources. Yet, despite his miserable beginnings, he was able to build himself into a person of economic well-being, living a lavished lifestyle. Jay-Z, one of hip-hop's most prominent artist, is known for highlighting his rise from obscurity as demonstrated in the first verse of his song “Dirt off my shoulder” (Jay-Z, 2008), in which Jay-Z states, “Came from the bottom the bottom, to the top of the pots . . .” (Jay-Z, 2008). Referencing the “bottom,” Jay-Z refers to his earlier life in the Marcy Projects of Brooklyn, a place far removed from his lifestyle of traveling the world. The rise from obscurity is laced throughout the lyrics of Beanie Sigel's song “Remember Them Days” (Beanie Sigel, 2008) as noticed in the chorus of the song performed by fellow female rap artist Eve. Sigel reflects on his impoverished past noting, “It's all good now . . . we out the hood now” (Beanie Sigel, 2008). Beanie Sigel's song is a tribute to the thug/rapper's rise from his obscure past to a place of financial and material security.

The story of his rise from paltry beginnings is a common characteristic throughout their lyrics and chorus. The rise from obscurity presents the thug/rapper as an endearing individual who has fought against all odds to make something of his life. The lyrics depict these individuals as young men who come from the poorest of neighborhoods and families to now being financially successful and materially prosperous.

*The urban tragic-hero.* The next theme, the urban tragic-hero, reflects a man who has survived the ills of the ghettos in pursuit of a better life. He overcomes a life full of tragedy to fulfill his own greatness, subsequently setting into motion the subplots of the people around him, including those who envy him. The lyrics become a storyline portraying him as the focal point in a series of events that denote his rise, maybe his fall, and rise again. He becomes a hip-hop version of the mythical Phoenix, as exemplified by the rapper T.I. Lyrics to T.I.'s "Live Your Life" (T.I., 2008) demonstrate the rapper's self-description as a trailblazer who is wronged by rivals attempting to eclipse what the rapper has accomplished. T.I. claims in the first verse of his song

... Safe to say I paved the way/for you cats to get paid today/You still be wasting days away/nah had I never saved the day/Consider them my protégé'/how much I think they should pay/Instead they violate in a major way. (T.I., 2008)

The song exemplifies the perseverance of the thug/rapper as a protagonist who prevails through various problems and obstacles. The same theme is echoed in the chorus as R&B songstress Rhianna sings, "You're gonna be a shining star, in fancy clothes, and fancy car-ars. And then you'll see, you're gonna go far..." (T.I., 2008). The verses and choruses play like a theme song for a ghetto hero.

West coast rap artist The Game demonstrates similar ideals as he remarks in his song "My Life" (The Game, 2008):

Take me away from the hood like a state penitentiary/Take me away from the hood in the casket or a Bentley... Like I overdosed on cocaine/Or take me away like a bullet from Kurt Cobain Suicide (Suicide...Suicide)... From a block close to where Biggie was crucified/That was Brooklyn's Jesus. Shot for no f\*\*kin' reason... (The Game, 2008)

The verses of this song are riddled with the tragedies of his life, such as the absence of his father who was addicted to drugs. Moreover, the chorus asks, "...Dear Lord, you've done took so many of my people but I'm just wonderin' why, You haven't taken (my life x3) Like what the hell am I (doing right?)..." (The Game, 2008). What's more, The Game observes the lives of fellow rap artists (Do or Die, Kanye West, Beanie Sigel, Notorious B.I.G.), and other pop culture icons (Kurt Cobain, John Lennon), and the hardships of their lives and tragedies of their deaths. Note, The Game's invoking of Jesus as a stronger connection to a heroic figure and the likening of his life, as well as other rappers, lives to that of Jesus. The rapper portrays himself as a potential savior to those who listen to his music, champion of his generation.

*Endless effort to earn.* The endless effort to earn theme demonstrates the thug/rapper's willingness and ability to earn a financial living. This is something that he seems to excel at via "hustling," and often described through the sale of narcotics (Jefferies, 2011; Rose, 2008), defines the thug's economic proficiency. In the chorus of "My Life" (The Game, 2008), The Game has fellow rapper and thug figure Lil' Wayne harmonize, "... And I'm grindin' til I'm tired. They say You ain't grindin' til you tired. So I'm grindin' with my eyes wide..." (The Game, 2008). "Grindin'" refers to the rappers persistent efforts to tirelessly generate income, highlighting what the rapper considers essential to his existence, a sense of always handling business affairs and earning money. Cassidy (2008) claims, "... In 5th grade I was hustling my genesis games, I was dumb young, selling chewing gum to my classmates..." emphasizing in his own way the thug has been hustling since a young age. He establishes his legitimacy as a hustler and demonstrates his commitment to earning money, doing whatever he needs to.

For a thug, hustling is a means of measuring achievements through how much he earns. The ability and drive of the thug to make a lot of money is the best way for him to establish himself as a professional, even if the means by which he earns money is illegal. The song "Paper Touchin'" (Red Café et al., 2008) demonstrates the commitment to hustling, as the chorus to the song highlights, "... I don't know if your money right but a ni\*\*a like me got paper (HUH!)/I'm 'bout paper, I'm 'bout paper... That's all... All my hustler's got paper" (Red Café et al., 2008). The song title "Paper Touchin'" epitomizes the thug's motivation to "make bank," having so much money that it ultimately touches and stacks up like "bricks."

The thug/rapper's primary source of income stems from criminal narcotic activities: "I keep my loot saved, sell mad crack..." (Red Café et al., 2008); "I'm paper touchin', hustlin', servin ev'eryday, You could even flip birds or flip burgers ev'eryday, You could work at Micky D's if you ain't workin' with the keys (reference to kilograms of narcotics)" (Cassidy, 2008). Despite the means by which the thug generates money, he proves himself to be hardworking and an "overachiever" as Q Da Kid (2008) underscores in the chorus of "On a mission." The thug's legitimate counterpart in the business world is the Chairman of the Board. In a criminal world the thug has, as T.I. self-describes, "... the spirit of a hustler and the swagger of a college kid... Articulate but still would grab a ni\*\*a by the collar quick..." (2008). The thug/rapper is the personification of an individual with a propensity for high achievement, and motivation for success, forced by circumstance to fulfill his aspirations for material prosperity via criminal activities.

### *Romantic Interest and Relationships*

Nas (2008) asserts in the first verse of "We make the world go round," "Women dream I'm your husband..." What is it about the thug/rapper that would

motivate women to visualize this character as a husband, perhaps inspiring women to imagine him as their lifelong mate? This section explores the lyrics to interpret the traits that rappers project to encourage ideas of attraction. Each of these relationship themes are defined and presented below.

*Appreciative to older women in his life.* This first relationship theme demonstrates an appreciation for older women who have been a part of his survival and ascension from the dire circumstances of his earlier life to his present success. The thug/rapper exhibits a manner of gratitude toward these women: mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and others, manifesting their sentiments into material expression. In one example, Q Da Kid (2008) says, "Momma said you gotta go out and get it son. She can't drive but a Benz I'm a get her one. Just for the hell of it to say that she got it . . ." Beanie Sigel (2008) also demonstrates such sentimental expression when he states, "... Mom I know I put you through hell. But now I'm gonna' order you heaven. No more temporary layoffs like Florida Evans . . ." Sigel expresses his gratefulness for his mother's commitment to his well-being and vows to financially and materially support his mother to thank her for her love.

The Game (2008) also demonstrates a similar attitude toward his grandmother, "... I'm from the city that made you motherf\*\*ers afraid of Suge (Compton, Compton). Made my grandmother pray for good. And never made her happy, when I bet that new Mercedes could (My Life x3)." The Game not only pays tribute to his own matriarchal connection, he also acknowledges and respects the connection fellow rapper Kanye West had to his mother who had recently passed away at the time the song was released, "... put on a Kanye smile (my Life x3). Damn, I know his momma's proud. And since you helped me sell my dream, we can share my momma now . . ." (2008). The Game's respect and acknowledgment of the importance of Kanye's mother to his life shows the appreciation and mourning for Kanye's mother and conveys a willingness to share the love and adoration of his own mother with his fellow rapper friend. Taken together, this thug/rapper theme expresses sincere attachment to the women who have helped him to not only survive the hardships of his earlier life but have as well molded him into a success.

*Devotion to the woman that he loves.* This second relationship theme demonstrates the ways in which artists exhibit a sense of commitment and loyalty to the woman he is romantically interested in or involved with. Traces of commitment can be observed in lyrics referencing love interest. Fabolous (2008) states, "Shawty you the one I give my air to . . ." indicating his overwhelming attraction and undivided attention to the woman that has caught his interest. The thug/rapper displays a sense of loyalty that is a reciprocal process with his mate. When the woman trusts in the thug/rapper and can stand by his side, the rapper vows to take care of her and show the same type of support.

Ace Hood (2008) asserts, “Baby look, just ride with me/Swear that I got us mama . . . Promise to move you out the hood into a bigger house . . .” The lyrics of the rapper’s song expresses a commitment to making his and his partner’s lives better, a commitment that lends itself to the concept that his business affairs are the only motivation for him to be away from her.

Considering the lyrics observed for this analysis, the only mistress that the thug has is that of hustlin’. The chorus of the same Ace Hood song notes, “. . . even though I’m in the streets. You know exactly what I do. When I chase this paper. You ain’t gotta wait for me to bring it back home to you . . .” (2008). In these few lines, he highlights the only thing compelling him to be in the streets and away from his woman is the pursuit of income, money that he in turn can bring home and support their lifestyle.

A similar sentiment is expressed by a rapper known as Plies (2008), in which he asserts, “If I wasn’t married to the streets, it would be you . . .” Plies demonstrates the overachieving attitude of hustlin’ that the thug is known for and acknowledges the streets as the only mistress to his relationship with his lover. The chorus of the song, sung by R&B singer Ne-Yo, declares, “She my lil’ hood thang, ask around they know us . . .” (Plies, 2008). Plies also notes he does not attempt to hide or cover-up his relationship and is fond enough of his lover that their relationship is well known among the people of their community.

Both rappers demonstrate a sense of establishing a future with and for their lovers. As part of the chorus of “Ride” Ace Hood claims, “. . . cuz I ride or die we gon be good . . . and if you ride or die we gon make it out this hood . . .” (2008). Verse 2 of the song speaks of taking vacations together and establishing deeper relations with one another as long as the woman can demonstrate patience as he gets his business in the streets together. Likewise, Plies encourages his partner to not pay attention to the naysayers who speak negatively about him and their relationship:

. . . They say he’s an entertainer. Your just one more. He just gon hurt you and neglect you. Well let ‘em say what they wanna. I made a promise. To do right and I’m gonna. Girl do everything I can. To prove I’m a betta man. Then ya friends think I am . . . (2008)

These artists exhibit a level of devotion to the woman who stick with them through the rough times and vow to make their lives better. These rappers propose a “ride or die” loyalty to the woman they share an intimate relationship with.

*Family values.* Along with demonstrating a level of devotion to the woman in his life, the thug/rapper also exhibits a commitment to family values that can be witnessed in the lyrics of his music. This third relationship theme, family values, is defined as showing commitment to the growth and development of

his children. Beanie Sigel demonstrates in his lyrics, "... Where life gonna lead us?... Knowing if we get married.... Our wife will need us..." (2008), what rappers exhibit on occasion, thought of marriage and their role in establishing a family. Sigel later goes on to speak on surviving his own youth and reflecting on now having children of his own. The rapper shows a particular appreciation and commitment to acknowledging his children, in efforts to create a better life for them than he experienced in his youth. Similarly, The Game expresses his joy in observing his children, "... Sometimes I think about my life with my face down.... Then I see my sons and put on that Kanye smile..." (2008).

In these few lines, The Game establishes the despair that he feels in his own existence yet finds optimism in the future and hope that he sees in raising his children. The thug/rapper can at times be observed acknowledging the importance of family, and the importance that they hold for preserving and protecting the family.

*Great sexuality of the thug.* The final theme, sexuality, highlights how the lyrics from each of the observed songs are laced with sexual innuendos, escapades, pleasure, and elation, which contribute to the imagined hyper-heterosexuality of Black men (Collins, 2004). The sexuality of the thug and his ability to provide carnal satisfaction is one of the most glaring attributes of his persona. "Mrs. Officer" (2008) by rapper Lil' Wayne is a song entirely dedicated to a sexual escapade with a female officer. In the song, the rapper describes his attraction to a female cop who reciprocates his attention, thus leading to sexual escapades, "... I got stopped by a lady cop. She got me thinking I could date a cop. She said I had the right to remain silent, Now I got her hollering sounding like a siren" (Lil' Wayne, 2008).

The sexuality of this song displays the thug as a figure that can attract even those sworn to uphold the law, moreover a physical attraction to this violator of the law. Lil' Wayne represents physicality and sexuality that can enhance his partner's sexual experience as witnessed in the chorus, performed by R&B signer Bobby Valentino:

When I get up all in ya/We can hear the angels calling us/We can see the sunrise before us/And when I'm in that thang/I'll make that body sang/(She know what I mean)/I make it say.../Wee Ooh Wee Ooh Wee... (2008)

The sexual prowess of the thug is a steady portrayal of what the thug has to offer to any relationship. The thug's ability to attract a woman from his physical stature and keep her satisfied via his sexual proficiency is a trait that many thug/rappers exhibit in their lyrical and visual content. Gangsta L Crisis demonstrates more of this sexual strength in his verse to "Disperse," claiming:

... Up there they warned ya, about girl I put it on ya/Let me mack you down in this corner/Look like the type that look good in the morning/E'ry time we

bonin you moanin/Love the way I F\*\*\* you have you tellin' your homies... (Consequence, GLC, & Really Doe, 2008)

The choruses of these songs, addressing their ability to meet a woman's physical and sexual desires, ring with bravado expressing confidence in their sexual performance. Rap group G-Unit's song "Wanna get to know you" unashamedly emphasizes their physical ability and stresses their desire to know the woman in a physical manner. One verse of the song notes:

She loves it when I'm in town/Hate it when I'm not around/I get her and wear her down/Next door neighbors her the sound/Pictures hittin' the ground/Just enough to hold us down/I'm stickin' 'n moving cruising after the third round/Just lay back baby and let me drive you crazy/I can make a 40 year old feel like a young lady... (2008)

Just like his hustlin' skills, the thug/rapper's skill in between the sheets is only to be craved and unmatched. He is proficient in his sexual endeavors and likens the euphoria of sex with him to experiencing a narcotic.

## Conclusion

Mass media has the capacity to circulate ideologies of Black masculinity, and relationships with Black men, in this case those demonstrating a thug persona. The aforementioned themes situate the thug as a protagonist who has been a victim of circumstance. Yet, despite the circumstance, the thug manipulates his environment to create some semblance of livelihood in effort to build a lifestyle of comfort and luxury. Consequently, the love interest and family of the thug reap the benefits of his economic ambitions. The lyrics suggest the thug as a person with high economic goals, as well as a person appreciative of family and bringing the bounty home for the family. Thus, as positioned in the work of these lyrics the potential reward(s) to dating a thug are high, promising the opportunity to advance from prior or current living conditions to a more lavished lifestyle. The rewards to costs value of dating a person such as the thug demonstrated in rap lyrics are greatly skewed toward high reward. Frequent exposure to this content presents an idea of positive outcomes when interacting with this individual. Momentary, stresses may occur, obstacles may materialize, but ultimately, the relationship will be worthwhile economically, and potentially socially.

It is worth mentioning that 45% of these songs, particularly those addressing some relational aspect with women, were typically performed in duet with a male, sometimes female, R&B singer. Of the 20 songs observed, 7 were performed with a male R&B singer, 1 was performed with a female R&B singer, and 1 was performed with a male and female R&B duo. These performances seem to present a softer more intimate aspect of the thug, in which the rapped lyrical content demonstrates his rugged persona and the harmonized singing content represents his

softer intimate character. Beyond the exterior observations and surface impressions is a man who is not void of moral fabric and seemingly has virtuous elements to his overall being. He seems to function from a distorted moral compass, in pursuit of honorable outcomes for himself and his loved ones.

Consequently, the content fails to acknowledge negative aspects of dating relationships involving “thugs,” that is, encounters with violence, encounters with law enforcement. Interestingly, in review of the content observed only one song, Ace Hood’s “Ride” (2008), demonstrated a potential negative reality of dating a person with a criminal background. A consequence not observed in the lyrical content but actually noticed when taking into account the video content. A negative consequence occurs when the female love interest in the video is escorted away by police officers for suspected involvement with criminal activities. This example of the visual text stimulates interest to suggest that textual analysis of the visual accompaniments to hip-hop content should be explored. From the observations of this analysis, the lyrics represent positive consequences; it would be worthwhile to analyze how the visual components reinforce positive and negative traits of these characters?

The term and concept of a thug has been reclaimed and reworked by young Black men in hip-hop culture. Hip-hop culture is a site of resistance in which young Black men attempt to reshape the traditional tropes demonizing Black men and build idealizations of Black masculinity, including a thug persona with positive valuations. The thug’s demonstration of ghettoized pathologies, situated in the context of his lyrics, is a response to an oppressive system that has minimized opportunities for him. He has carved a lifestyle through the only avenues he has seen bear lucrative economic fruit, despite the risk associated with those endeavors. Thus, the thug/rapper, and those who may resemble this character, is not inherently bad; instead, he is the product of a repressive system and callous upbringing. Beyond the rough external demeanor of the thug, as a potential romantic interest, there is a man with the potential to protect and provide for those he loves. His risky life is a means to an end for him to provide for himself and family, ultimately having some form of financial prosperity. Plausibly, greater exposure to such storylines and ideologies associated with thugs’ influences a person’s perception of individuals demonstrating similar characteristics and mannerisms as posed in hip-hop content. The psychology studies indicate the perception of the potential partner tends to outweigh the realities of the partner. Influencing those perceptions is a mixture of social cultural agencies, including content in popular mainstream media. Hip-hop’s position as a highly marketable form of entertainment media situates it as an indoctrinating agency for those frequently exposed to its content.

The analyses reveal the existence of two major themes and several subthemes. First, thug characteristics as a major theme include the dialectical nature of thug character, portrayed as a criminal while simultaneously a resilient survivor. Second, in regard to relationship potential, the thug also attracts members of

the opposite sex with personality traits a potential partner may appreciate, counteracting the less appealing sexist, misogynistic traits associated with this individual. Thus, the thug takes the sexualized stereotype of Black men and adopts this stereotype; wearing it with a badge of honor, seducing potential partners with promises of both sexual and financial satisfaction. Additionally, the thug/rapper has repurposed his existence in the body of his work, and though recognizing the negative social context of “thug” has issued a reply to society. Embedded in his reply are his ideologies about relationships and love. Ideologies interpreted and internalized by women consuming this content.

### *Future Research Directions*

Regarding heuristic value, the next step for this project is to center on those who frequently consume hip-hop content, audience studies that explore the audience interaction with the content and influence on behavioral patterns and social norms. Women and men should be queried about the content of hip-hop. Many questions remain. How this content affects their perceptions? How this content influences their behaviors? How this content influences their expectations, about self and others? Hip-hop has received harsh criticisms for perpetuating violence, sexism, and numerous social ills for Blacks as well as the larger society for most of its existence.

During its earliest years of mainstream exposure, pundits argued the style of performance would not last long and would experience nominal success. Decades later, the genre warrants immense wealth for those who produce the content. Our interest in examining the content should not be solely for criticism; instead, we should focus on understanding why the genre has experienced such success as well as the various impacts it has on its audiences. Hip-hop thugs build narratives about love and relationships as demonstrated in the lyrics of Ace Hood’s “Ride” (2008), Beanie Sigel’s “Remember them days” (2008), and G-Unit’s “Wanna get to know you” (2008); narratives that are repeatedly presented via mainstream media, in popular culture productions. In the lyrical content of these rappers’ music, we find the ideologies that potentially influence a person’s perception of thug-like individuals. The content glamorizes the thug persona, arguably adding elements of gallantry to what is a crude existence.

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## Appendix. Song Information.

Song title	Performer(s)	Writers	Release date	Billboard peak position
Ride	Ace Hood	McColister, A.; Neverson, T.; T-Pain; Elliott, L.; Carpenter, M.; Mollings, J.; Mollings, L.	July 2008	14 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
Remember Them Days	Beanie Sigel	Grant, D.; Sandlofer, M. J.; Jeffers, E.	February 2000	33 <sup>b</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
I'm a Hustla	Cassidy	Reese, B. A.	March 2005	5 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
Disperse	Consequence, GLC, and Really Doe	Mills, D. R., Jr.; Harris, L.; Trotter, W.	March 2007	12 (Hot Rap Album: <i>Don't Quit Your Day Job</i> )
I Can't Hear the Music	Brutha ft. Fabolous	Crawford, E.; Harrell, C.; Harrell, J.; Harrell, G.; Harrell, A.; Overton, J.; Williams, E.; Jackson, J.	September 2008	64 <sup>a</sup> (Hot R&B/Hip- Hop Songs)
Wanna Get to Know You	G-Unit	Jackson, C.; Brown, D. D.; Lloyd, C. C.	January 2004	5 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
	Jay-Z		March 2004	2 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)

(continued)

Continued.

Song title	Performer(s)	Writers	Release date	Billboard peak position
Dirt Off My Shoulder		Carter, S.; Mosley, T.;		
Mrs. Officer	Lil' Wayne	Carter, D., Jr.; Wilson, R.; Harrison, D.; Stewart, C.	September 2008	3 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
What Them Girls Like	Ludacris	Bridges, C.; Garrett, S.; Jerkins, R.	August 2008	8 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
Bust it Baby (Part 2)	Pliies	Washington, A.; Shaffer, S.; Rotem, J.; Lewis, T.; Harris, J.	February 2008	2 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Tracks)
On a Mission	Q Da Kid	King, S.	October 2008	22 <sup>a</sup> (Bubbling Under R&B/Hip-Hop Songs)
Paper Touchin' (Remix Part Three)	Red Café, Cassidy, Fat Joe, Fabolous, Jadakiss, Latif	Denny, J.; Reese, B. A.; Cartagena, J. A.; cJackson, J. D.; Phillips, J.; Williams, C. L.	May 2008	N/A
My Life	The Game	Taylor, J.; Carter, D., Jr.	July 2008	4 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)

(continued)

Song title	Performer(s)	Writers	Release date	Billboard peak position
Live Your Life	T.I.	Balan, D.; Harris, C.; Riddick, M.; Smith, J.	September 2008	1 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
Addiction	Ryan Leslie ft. Cassidy and Fabolous	Leslie, R.; Jackson, J.; Ventura, C.	August 2008	35 <sup>a</sup> (Hot R&B and Hip-Hop Songs)
Make the World Go Round	Nas, ft. Chris Brown, and The Game	DelGrosso, T.F.; Evans, B.	October 2008	1 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Album: <i>Untitled</i> )
Paper Planes	M.I.A.	Arulpragasam, M.; Pentz, T. W.; Headon, T.; Jones, M.; Simonon, P.; Strummer, J.	February 2008	6 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
We Fly High	Jim Jones	Jones, J.; Wingate, C.	October 2008	1 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
Wonderful	Ja Rule	Kendrix, J.; Gotti, I.	September 2004	2 <sup>a</sup> (Hot Rap Songs)
Locked Up	Alkon	Thiam, A.	April 2004	6 <sup>a</sup> (Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs)

<sup>a</sup>Billboard.com<sup>b</sup>AllMusic.com

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### **Author Biography**

**Richard T. Craig** is an assistant professor of communication at George Mason University. His research centers on popular culture, media rhetoric, media and policy, media political economy, media ownership, social influences of media, ethnic/alternative media, media reform, and media literacy. He takes particular interest in exploring the social structure/struggle embedded in media production and interpreted in media consumption. He recently published his book *African Americans and Mass Media: A Case for Diversity in Media Ownership?*

# Question-Based Dialogue on Media Representations of Social Problems: Enhancing Civic Engagement by Uncovering Implicit Knowledge Accumulated From the Media

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Elizaveta Friesem<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Media coverage helps people to be informed about many important social phenomena. However, there is no evidence that audiences know what to do with what they have learned from the media. The current study examines whether we can use implicit knowledge that people accumulate from the media about sensitive social problems to help them understand these issues, and reflect on their social responsibility. I applied principles of media literacy education and educational dialogue to conduct 16 focus groups on media representations of child sexual abuse with 93 college students. This study suggests that a question-based dialogue where the facilitator uses participants' natural curiosity to help them construct meanings out of implicit knowledge they possess has an important potential to encourage civic engagement.

## Keywords

citizenship, media and sexuality, education, sexuality, media studies

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<sup>1</sup>Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Elizaveta Friesem, Temple University, 2020 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA.

Email: [elizaveta.friesem@temple.edu](mailto:elizaveta.friesem@temple.edu)

The media have been blamed for misrepresenting, in one way or another, many social phenomena and groups (e.g., Corner & Pels, 2003; Dines & Humez, 2010; Downing & Husband, 2005; Gerstl-Pepin, 2002; Gill, 2007; Poole, 2002; Weingart, 1998). Scholarship on media reception informed by cultural studies (Hall, 1980) suggests that audiences are active meaning-makers who reject messages that are not relevant for their life circumstances (e.g., Bobo, 2002; Cooper, 2009). However, as Bird (2003) notes, “[w]e may be able to make creative, individual meanings from this torrent of messages and images, but we can still only work with what we’re given” (p. 3). Concerns about the ability of the media to inform audiences led to the emergence of media literacy education, which aims to enhance audiences’ critical thinking skills and help them discern biases in media portrayals (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 1998; Masterman, 1985).

Some scholars describe the rise of infotainment (e.g., Thussu, 2008) and note that, although media texts inform us about many social problems, consuming media does not necessarily lead to civic engagement. In Bird’s (2003) words,

the weakness of the personal, entertaining tale, whether about scandal or about war, is that it can become just another story that engages our emotions, while failing to help us understand the complexity of issues that ultimately affect our lives. (p. 175)

Media coverage helps people to be informed about many important social phenomena; however, there is no evidence that audiences know what to do with what they have learned from the media (Schudson, 1998). When it comes to sensitive issues such as racism, sexism, and sexual violence, infotainment might not be enough to explain to people how they can contribute to dealing with structural roots of these problems through their everyday actions. As a result, the media have the potential to create “*spectator mentality* toward social and political knowledge, where we can watch injustice and degradation on the many screens in our lives but feel no need to take these messages seriously or respond to them sanely” (Hobbs, 2011, p. 115, emphasis in original).

Helping audiences to be active media consumers able to question media messages and use knowledge gained from them for civic action is the primary goal of media literacy educators (Hobbs, 2013). Using theoretical and conceptual frameworks provided by the fields of media studies and education, media literacy scholars focus on issues of ideology and power in media representations (Buckingham, 2003). They discuss the need to help audiences critically deconstruct media texts and use knowledge gained in the process for social action (e.g., Goodman, 2003; Hobbs, 2011; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Kilbourne, 1999). The orientation toward social action has a long tradition in media literacy education; it is rooted in works of Freire (1970/2000) and Dewey (1916/2008), which have shaped the field’s development.

Media literacy scholars point out that, in order to develop students' critical thinking and intellectual curiosity, classroom activities should be based on the pedagogy of inquiry (Hobbs, 1998). The pedagogy of inquiry lays out the basis for lifelong learning, which is "essential not only to ourselves and those close to us, but also to the remaking and transformation of the society in which we live" (Billet, 2010, p. 403).

In line with this goal, the study discussed on the following pages explores the use of a question-based dialogue about media representations of a serious social problem—child sexual abuse (CSA). This study is based on the idea that media literacy education can lead to students' empowerment and civic engagement (Dewey, 1916/2008; Freire, 1970/2000), and that using popular media texts in the classroom helps teachers address contemporary social issues, at the same time connecting with students (Morrell, 2004).

Child sexual abuse "is not uncommon and is a serious problem in the United States" (Child Sexual Abuse, n. d.). However, scholars note that press coverage of child molestation tends to be sensationalistic, and "the images . . . conveyed by press reports have been found to correspond to popular myths and stereotypes about the problem" (Corbella & Collings, 2007, p. 388). Despite the availability of information about this phenomenon through various media sources, it remains a serious problem in our society (Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Cederborg, 2007).

Media literacy education is still seldom used to help students learn about sensitive issues. Scull, Malik, and Kupersmidt (2014) discuss a notable exception to this rule in a study about sexual health education. The authors describe a media literacy program that "provided an easier way to approach the discussion of sexual health with students compared to their experiences using traditional sexual health education programming" (p. 8). They point out:

It is possible that [a media literacy education] approach allowed students and teachers to talk openly about the potentially uncomfortable topic of sex. Specifically, the use of media examples may have provided a relevant and engaging context to educate students about sexual health topics where students were given the opportunity to discuss the sexual decisions of media characters. In this way, students could explore their attitudes and beliefs without talking about themselves directly or about the people they knew. (p. 8)

The study by Scull et al. demonstrates that the potential of using media literacy education for helping students talk about sensitive issues should be further explored.

The project that I describe on the following pages was designed according to the core principles of media literacy education (Core Principles of MLE, n. d.), and the principles of educational dialogue developed by such scholars as Freire

(1970/2000), Buber (Hodes, 1972), and Bohm (Bohm & Peat, 1987). According to Buber, educational process is most productive and beneficial for students when the instructor is not trying to convey facts, but instead engages in a spontaneous dialogue with students (Hodes, 1972). Participating in such a dialogue, students and the teacher do not attempt to convince each other, but work on understanding the world together (Bohm & Peat, 1987). Having a dialogue with students, the teacher intellectually nurtures them instead of imposing knowledge, which leads to intellectual emancipation and empowerment (Freire, 1970/2000). Although some media literacy scholars point out that discussions in the classroom are inevitably inflected by power relationships between teachers and students (Buckingham, 2003), I argue that if the former are aware of these power relationships, they can minimize the power imbalance by using inquiry-based techniques.

To have a successful inquiry-based dialogue about social problems, it can be enough to help students discover knowledge that they already possess, for example, implicit knowledge gathered from the media. This knowledge can be made explicit through a conversation that leads participants to discover their prejudgments and see beyond them, thus learning about themselves and the world around them. Exposing implicit knowledge that students possess but are not fully aware of and have not reflected on is an important outcome of a question-based dialogue.

Having an inquiry-based dialogue about such a social problem as CSA is useful for understanding how the information provided by the media is processed and whether it can be used for civic action. Although scholars point out that mainstream media occasionally misrepresent child molestation (Gough, 1996; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999), others claim that, due to the media, there is enough information out there to make sense of it, at least to a certain extent (Corbella & Collings, 2007; Kitzinger, 2004). If the media provide enough information to critically engage with and use for civic action, can an inquiry-based dialogue led by a teacher-facilitator help students uncover knowledge that they possess and reflect on it in meaningful ways? In order to explore whether a question-led conversation about media representations of CSA can make participants' implicit knowledge explicit and useful, I analyzed conversations in 16 focus groups with 93 college students who gathered to talk about media portrayals of this phenomenon.

## **Focus Groups as an Instructional Practice**

The current study grew out of a project aimed to reveal reactions of media consumers in the United States to representations of CSA. The purpose of my initial study was to explore what stories provided by various media sources tend to capture viewers' attention and what people learn from the media. I chose to use focus groups as a methodology for this project as I wanted to see

how participants would feel talking about media portrayals of CSA with each other.

Focus groups are a qualitative method used to explore people's thoughts, feelings and behaviors. They are "a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data" (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 311). I intended to use focus groups to gain deeper understanding of participants' ideas about and experiences with the topic of CSA. However, I soon noticed that our conversations, which were supposed to be only a source of data for my research, became an important learning experience for participants. Students were engaged in the conversation, comparing their knowledge, and questioning assumptions that they developed through exposure to various media representations.

As a result, I decided to use my study as an opportunity to see how question-based conversations about media representations of a serious social problem can be applied for educational purposes. Although focus groups as a research method are intended for gathering data and not for teaching participants, the characteristics of this methodology open interesting possibilities for educators. Focus groups have clear parallels with the instructional practice called group discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), and with educational dialogue described by Buber (Hodes, 1972), Freire (1970/2000), and Bohm (Bohm & Peat, 1987).

Unlike an in-depth interview, each focus group engages participants in the interaction not only with the researcher but also with each other (Krueger, 1994). The interaction between participants allows the researcher to hear opinions that may never come up in individual interviews. People who are initially reluctant to talk often end up joining a discussion in order to express their opinion (Kitzinger, 1994). Focus groups help to create a nonthreatening environment (Krueger, 1994); as each participant does not feel the pressure to answer every question her or himself (Montell, 1999), this method is appropriate for conversations about social problems that people do not feel comfortable discussing.

Although group dynamics in focus groups offers advantages for the researcher, it can also create challenges (Costigan Lederman, 1990). Participants may unintentionally influence each other's behavior and ability to express themselves, which can intervene in data collection. However, as I became interested in collaborative meaning-making during educational dialogue, this possible limitation turned into an asset. My goal was now to explore how a question-based dialogue can be used as an instructional tool, in line with the core principles of media literacy education—to develop students' critical thinking and intellectual curiosity (Core Principles of MLE, n. d.). The format of focus groups was appropriate for this purpose as it has important similarities with the dialogue described by Freire, Bohm, and Buber. Apart from being question-based, both focus groups and the educational dialogue are guided by

a neutral facilitator (Bohm & Peat, 1987); in case of the classroom dialogue, it is the teacher (Freire, 1970/2000). The current study, thus, drew parallels between the facilitated educational dialogue and focus groups guided by a moderator whose aim is to provoke discussion and tease out participants' implicit knowledge without imposing her or his agenda.

Several studies describe the use of focus groups in schools and universities, to assess the impact of an educational program on students, or register students' and educators' attitudes about it (Brotherson, 1994; Brotherson & Goldstein, 1992; Costigan Lederman, 1990; Vaughn, Shumm, & Sinagub, 1996). However, very little is still known about using focus groups for research and education simultaneously. A notable exception is a study done by Goltz (2009), who explored the creative potential of focus groups for education, exploration, and collaborative generation. The study described on the following pages offers additional insights into the multifaceted potential of focus groups.

I conducted 16 focus groups (about an hour long each) with a total of 93 participants. My subjects were young adults studying in the School of Media and Communication at Temple University. Five of them were graduate students (they participated in two pilot focus groups), and the rest were undergraduate students. The age of my participants ranged from 17 to mid-30s, with the majority being in the late teens—early 20s. Approximately one fifth were male. The undergraduate students were recruited in two classes taught in the School of Media and Communication at Temple University, and they received extra credit for helping me with my research. The number of people in the groups ranged from two to 14, with the majority of groups being comprised of five to seven participants. The fact that my participants were all majoring in media-related disciplines can explain the ease with which they engaged in critical analysis of media representations. I argue that it did not constitute a major limitation to my study, as my goal was to explore effects of educational dialogue that elicits implicit knowledge about media representations, and not to assess participants' knowledge about the media. However, it did limit the study's generalizability. I might have had very different discussions with students who were majoring in Mathematics or Engineering, and had no classes about the media. I discuss this limitation in more detail in the Limitations and Future Research section.

Following the rules set forth by the institutional review board, which had previously approved the study, participants were orally informed about the nature of the study and asked to sign consent forms giving me permission to interview, record, and quote them. While an interview guide was employed (see Appendix for the list of questions), participants were able to explore questions not included in it. Participants' comments were digitally recorded and transcribed. To protect my informants' anonymity, each of them was assigned a pseudonym on the transcript. Transcripts of the focus groups were qualitatively analyzed. The first reading aimed at identifying themes, and subsequent readings aimed at refining these themes and identifying cases in the data that illustrated them.

In the following sections, I discuss themes that emerged during the conversations and quote my participants in order to provide evidence. I do not give any details that would identify quoted informants. However, in order to allow the reader to imagine participating students and prevent the quotes from being “disembodied”, I introduce their words using pseudonyms.

## Starting a Dialogue

I began every focus group by asking participants what media stories dealing with CSA they remembered. At first, many were quiet. However, more confident ones would gradually break the ice of the conversation talking about representations that they had been exposed to. Participants were discovering (some, for the first time) that they can talk about this sensitive issue and benefit from the resulting conversation. Having started by sharing recollections about media representations of CSA, each group would gradually move to discussing what they knew about this phenomenon in general, then to critical analysis of the media, and finally to the issue of civic responsibility.

In the following subsections, I describe (1) knowledge that participants possessed about CSA and media representations of this issue, (2) critical thinking about media representations of child molestation they displayed, (3) discovering/confirming the importance of civic engagement, and (4) enjoying the dialogue. Our conversations did not have explicit instructional agenda, as my role was not that of an expert who brings knowledge into the classroom to share it with passive and supposedly ignorant students. I was a facilitator in a dialogue where participants already had certain (albeit hidden) knowledge about the subject. I was there to help them discover this implicit knowledge and verbalize it—and to see what meaning they will make of this knowledge as a group.

## *Discovering Implicit Knowledge*

Many participants appeared to be surprised by the amount of information they remembered—both about media texts containing references to child molestation and about the phenomenon itself. This surprise revealed that our dialogue tapped into implicit knowledge that participants possessed. During the meetings, they were able to recollect a variety of media texts containing references to CSA. In Table 1, the reader can find a list of media texts my informants named during our discussions.

As the table shows, participants named fictional media texts as well as non-fictional ones. Fictional texts included films, TV shows, books, and songs whose titles students were able to name. Nonfictional texts included many real-life stories and cases that participants learned about from a variety of media sources, including television programs, websites, newspapers, magazines, or documentaries.

**Table 1.** Fictional and Nonfictional Texts Containing References to Child Sexual Abuse That Focus Group Participants Named.

Fictional texts	Nonfictional texts
<p>Films:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Precious</i></li> <li>● <i>The Butterfly Effect</i></li> <li>● <i>The Lovely Bones</i></li> <li>● <i>Forrest Gump</i></li> <li>● <i>Speak</i></li> <li>● <i>Lolita</i></li> <li>● <i>Mean Girls</i></li> <li>● <i>American Beauty</i></li> <li>● <i>Doubt</i></li> <li>● <i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i></li> <li>● <i>That's My Boy</i></li> <li>● <i>Antwone Fisher</i></li> <li>● <i>Madea's Family Reunion</i></li> <li>● <i>Scary Movie-3</i></li> <li>● <i>Taxi Driver</i></li> <li>● <i>Primal Fear</i></li> <li>● <i>The Woodsman</i></li> <li>● <i>Taken</i></li> <li>● <i>The Last House on the Left</i></li> <li>● <i>Bastard Out of Carolina</i></li> <li>● <i>The Basketball Diaries</i></li> </ul> <p>TV shows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>South Park</i></li> <li>● <i>Diff'rent Strokes</i></li> <li>● <i>Law and Order: SVU</i></li> <li>● <i>Family Guy</i></li> <li>● Films on Lifetime Movie Network</li> <li>● <i>The Closer</i></li> <li>● <i>Alcatraz</i></li> <li>● <i>Pretty Little Liars</i></li> <li>● <i>George Lopez</i></li> <li>● <i>Desperate Housewives</i></li> <li>● <i>Criminal Minds</i></li> <li>● <i>Good Wife</i></li> <li>● <i>Smart Guy</i></li> <li>● <i>Private Practice</i></li> <li>● <i>Brickleberry</i></li> <li>● <i>30 Rock</i></li> <li>● <i>True Blood</i></li> <li>● <i>Barney &amp; Friends</i></li> </ul>	<p>Specific stories and cases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sandusky's/Penn State case</li> <li>● Catholic priests scandal</li> <li>● Polanski's case</li> <li>● Michael Jackson allegations</li> <li>● Jaycee Lee Dugard's case</li> <li>● Pete Townshend's alleged abuse</li> <li>● Steven Deuman Jr.'s case</li> <li>● Elizabeth Smart kidnapping</li> <li>● Syracuse basketball coach scandal (Bernie Fine)</li> <li>● Ashley Judd's abuse</li> <li>● The case of Texas man who killed his daughter's alleged abuser (Jesus Mora Flores)</li> <li>● Terrance Williams' case</li> <li>● Fritzl case</li> <li>● Natascha Maria Kampusch case</li> <li>● Elmo sex-scandal</li> <li>● Hollywood sex abuse alleged conspiracy (Corey Feldman and Corey Haim)</li> <li>● Teachers' affairs with underaged students (e.g., Mary Kay Letourneau)</li> <li>● Human trafficking</li> <li>● Child brides</li> <li>● Boy-scout scandals</li> <li>● Child porn scandals</li> <li>● Internet predators</li> <li>● Child beauty pageant abuse stories</li> <li>● Day-care sexual abuse panic</li> </ul> <p>TV programs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Talk shows (e.g., <i>The Oprah Winfrey Show</i>, <i>Jerry Springer</i>, <i>Dr. Phil</i>, <i>The Maury Povich Show</i>, <i>The Steve Wilkos Show</i>)</li> <li>● <i>To Catch a Predator</i></li> <li>● Programs on Investigation Discovery (e.g., <i>On the Case with Paula Zahn</i>)</li> <li>● <i>Intervention</i></li> <li>● <i>Chappelle's Show</i></li> <li>● Documentaries on Lifetime Movie</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 1.** Continued

Fictional texts	Nonfictional texts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>CSI</i></li> <li>● <i>Saturday Night Live</i></li> </ul> <p>Books:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Speak</i></li> <li>● <i>Lolita</i></li> <li>● <i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i></li> <li>● V.C. Andrews' books</li> <li>● <i>Identical</i> by Ellen Hopkins</li> <li>● <i>The Lovely Bones</i></li> <li>● <i>Push</i> by Sapphire</li> <li>● <i>Lost Memory of Skin</i></li> <li>● <i>I am telling</i> by Karen E. Quinones Miller</li> <li>● <i>The Night Listener</i></li> <li>● <i>A Time to Kill</i></li> </ul> <p>Music:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>How to Love</i> by Lil Wayne (video)</li> <li>● <i>Scandalous Scholastics</i> by Gym Class Heroes</li> <li>● <i>Runaway Love</i> by Ludacris ft. Mary J. Blige</li> </ul>	<p>Network (e.g., about Mary Kay Letourneau)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Dateline</i></li> <li>● <i>America's Most Wanted</i></li> </ul> <p>Books:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>A Stolen Life</i></li> </ul> <p>Other media:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Megan's Law websites and apps (e.g., <a href="http://www.familywatchdog.us">www.familywatchdog.us</a>)</li> <li>● <i>Seventeen</i> magazine</li> <li>● Board game <i>Don't Talk to Strangers</i></li> </ul>

The focus groups took place in 2012, when Jerry Sandusky, a former assistant football coach for the Penn State University, was convicted of multiple counts of sexual abuse of children. The Penn State scandal broke in November 2011, so during the time of my focus groups, it was still fresh. This might explain why this story was mentioned in all groups. Many participants also named Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal, most probably because of its world-wide impact. The scandal involving Elmo puppeteer Kevin Clash that the media started to discuss at the time I was collecting the data was mentioned only in one group.

Students mentioned a number of other big media stories involving CSA, such as Michael Jackson allegations, kidnapping of Jaycee Lee Dugard, Fritzl case, and Natascha Maria Kampusch case. Informants also talked in general about several phenomena that involve CSA (human trafficking, child brides) or might involve it (beauty pageants, child actor industry). Several talk shows and TV programs were mentioned, for example, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *To Catch a Predator*, a show featuring the hidden camera that was used to detain male adults who contacted underage people over the Internet. It appears that, in terms of nonfictional media, it was easier for participants to talk about specific cases or phenomena than about specific media texts that had informed their knowledge. This might be explained by the fact that many of these cases and stories have been covered by multiple media sources over a period of time. Another possible explanation could be the influence of word-of-mouth

combined with media representations. As these cases were widely discussed, participants might have heard about them from their friends or relatives who were themselves exposed to the media coverage.

Fictional representations that participants named ranged from explicit ones (where actual or alleged CSA was an important element of the plot) to implicit and vague portrayals (where child molestation was not mentioned but implied, or was mentioned very briefly). The explicit ones included *Precious*, a story of a Harlem girl who has been raped and impregnated by her father; *The Woodsman*, which follows a convicted child molester who must adjust to life after prison; *Doubt*, which tells a story of a Catholic priest suspected of molesting children in his parish; and *Lolita*, whose protagonist, a literature professor, becomes sexually involved with his 12-year-old stepdaughter.

The ability of participants to name vague portrayals showed that at least some of them were able to notice very subtle allusions to CSA in media texts. For instance, students in two groups named *Forrest Gump*, explaining that Forrest's love interest Jenny was likely sexually abused by her father. The students said that, although in this film the abuse is not explicitly shown or mentioned, it is implied by Jenny's behavior. Another vague portrayal named by my informants was in the film *The Butterfly Effect*. It features a brief scene that shows a man about to film what appears to be child porn involving his daughter and a young boy. All we see is the man with a camera, and the two children standing seminaked; the scene is never referenced later in the film.

Fictional portrayals included not only serious stories but also humorous ones. For instance, *South Park's* take on Michael Jackson and Catholic Church scandals; a comedy *That's My Boy*, which tells about a man who, many years after having an affair with his teacher, realizes that he has a grown-up son; and a pedophile neighbor on *Family Guy*. However, many participants expressed skepticism about the value of such portrayals. They noted that jokes might trivialize this serious issue.

The range of fictional texts named by participants showed that they were aware of different scenarios of CSA. Here are some examples named by students. The film *Taken* tells a story of a father whose teenage daughter was stolen by human traffickers for sexual slavery. In *American Beauty*, the adult protagonist is lusting for an underage girl and flirting with her. In *The Lovely Bones*, a teenager is raped and murdered by a neighbor. In *Mean Girls*, a teacher makes out with his female students. One of the *Desperate Housewives* was molested by her stepfather. In *The Basketball Diaries*, a coach sexually harasses boys on his team. A novel *Lost Memory of Skin* follows a 22-year-old who was incarcerated for his affair with an underage girl. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* shows how the victim's memories about CSA can be repressed for years. Space constraints do not allow me to address every representation that students mentioned. However, it is important to note that in case of every portrayal,

participants were able to explain why they believed that it represented child molestation.

When the conversation moved from describing media portrayals to discussing the issue itself, each group was able to identify key facts about CSA consistent with literature on this issue (e.g., Clancy, 2009). Table 2 represents these facts as well as stereotypes about child molestation that participants were able to name.

Participants were not only able to name key facts about dynamics and consequences of child molestation but were also aware about the complexity of this phenomenon. They pointed out that perpetrators often persuade children that what they are doing is a game, and thus get their “consent”. Participants indicated that mind games that abusers play with children have serious emotional effects: Victims may think that they are to blame for what is going on. As Melissa noted: “A lot of little kids, they won’t tell because they think that it is making them a bad person, or it will show badly on them, so they keep it within.” Talking about situations when the abuser is a trusted adult, Brianna made an insightful remark:

It’s against the child’s will. They don’t understand the situation. And . . . because they are ignorant, a part of them feels comfortable because . . . it’s a person they have seen every single day in their life. But at the same time . . . they would realize, probably, much later in life, that it wasn’t normal, it wasn’t acceptable. And that’s where . . . the emotional conflict within the person . . . can come out.

Michael’s word showed that at least some participants were aware of the phenomenon of repressed memories: “[Victims can] go their whole life and not remember it, until . . . a certain event is brought up and then . . . it collapses on them.”

On the whole, focus group conversations revealed that participants had been exposed to a substantial number of media portrayals of child molestation, knew how to recognize allusions to CSA in media texts, and possessed an impressive amount of knowledge about this phenomenon. As they indicated, some of their knowledge had come from the media, and some from gossip or from personally knowing somebody who had been abused (a number of participants described cases of child molestation in their communities). At the same time, the majority of participants displayed surprise when they started coming up with examples of CSA. Many participants said that they had practically never discussed this issue with anybody, which might explain why prior to our conversations their knowledge had been implicit.

### *Critical Analysis of the Media*

After eliciting answers about CSA and its representations in the media, I encouraged participants to analyze this information by asking whether they believed that the media do a good or a bad job informing viewers. The phrasing of the

**Table 2.** Key Facts About Child Sexual Abuse That Participants Named and Stereotypes They Identified.

Key facts	Stereotypes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● CSA is pervasive, and it is a serious problem in our society</li> <li>● CSA happens in every country of the world, and the United States is not immune to this problem</li> <li>● Anybody can be a victim</li> <li>● Victims and perpetrators can belong to any class and ethnic group, live in any kind of neighborhood, have any kind of job and income</li> <li>● Children are usually abused by adults they know and trust, such as relatives, teachers, friends of the family, sport coaches, priests; this violation of trust can produce serious psychological trauma</li> <li>● You would not be able to recognize an abuser in a crowd</li> <li>● CSA does not necessarily mean coercion, but that does not make it right</li> <li>● CSA survivors experience psychological problems, troubles with relationships, anxiety, and trust issues</li> <li>● Negative psychological effects may be explained by shame and silence that survivors have to keep long after the abuse is over</li> <li>● Victims keep their silence because they are afraid that nobody will trust them</li> <li>● Disclosure for survivors is an important part of recovery</li> <li>● CSA survivors do not want to get emotionally attached because they are afraid to be used again; as a consequence, they can either shun intimate relationships or become promiscuous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● CSA happens only in poor/far away countries, but not in the United States</li> <li>● CSA happens only to children from poor neighborhoods</li> <li>● Most abusers are adults unknown to the child (“stranger danger”)</li> <li>● Children are usually first abducted from home and then sexually abused</li> <li>● Abusers are always men, women do not sexually abuse children</li> <li>● You can always recognize the abuser by a creepy look; abusers do not look like “normal” people</li> <li>● Many gay people are pedophiles</li> <li>● Young handsome men cannot be child abusers; abusers are usually bizarre and unpleasant</li> <li>● CSA is the same as rape</li> <li>● Ice-cream vendors with white trucks are often abusers, and they abduct children by putting them into their trucks</li> <li>● Many priests are child molesters</li> </ul>

question was intentionally neutral as I wanted to see how participants will work with knowledge that they had just verbalized. Table 3 summarizes their arguments.

Without any prompting from me, in all focus groups at some point, the conversation would turn to the question of why the media function the way

**Table 3.** Summary of Responses to the Question: Do You Think the Media Do a Good or a Bad Job Informing Viewers About Child Sexual Abuse?

The media do a good job because . . .	The media do a bad job because . . .
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The media often tell stories about CSA; therefore, we know that it is a serious problem</li> <li>2. We know a lot of facts about CSA from the media: how it happens, signs, consequences for survivors, and so on</li> <li>3. The media tell us that CSA happens in our communities</li> <li>4. The media inform us about hotlines one can call if abuse is happening</li> <li>5. The media encourage victims and survivors to tell about abuse they have experienced</li> <li>6. The media provide a platform for survivors to come out and talk about their abuse, which helps them feel that they are not alone</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The media bombard us with CSA stories so that we become desensitized</li> <li>2. News “jumble” stories of all kinds together: A report about CSA is followed by reports about funny or insignificant events, so that we are not encouraged to reflect on the importance of the problem</li> <li>3. Most of CSA stories we hear from the media are big scandals (e.g., involving child abduction and murder, or famous people like Michael Jackson and Jerry Sandusky)</li> <li>4. Although most CSA cases are very mundane, the media seldom tell “ordinary” CSA stories preferring to focus on bizarre crimes</li> <li>5. The media do not inform us of how we can get involved with organizations fighting CSA or tell us what we can do in our local communities to raise awareness or help survivors</li> <li>6. The media seldom tell stories of survivors who recovered and were able to move on, and do little to explain how they got over their traumatic experiences</li> <li>7. Although there is a lot of information about CSA in the media, you need to be an active media user and go “above and beyond” to find it</li> <li>8. Megan’s Law websites confuse users because they do not distinguish between different kinds of offenders, conflating people who have been charged for urinating in public with pedophiles</li> <li>9. Most media do little to help people understand why CSA abuse exists in the first place</li> </ol>

they do. This may be explained by the fact that these students had been primed to critically think about the media in their classes. Participants pointed out that the media do not always tell stories to inform us. In fact, very often the rationale behind choosing a subject to cover is simple: getting higher ratings and bigger

revenues. To be covered by the media, a story has to be weird, bizarre. "If it's something normal it's not really newsworthy," noted Steve. This is why the media are attracted to people of power, celebrities, and big scandals. Mary pointed out that the media underreport common stories because "this is how media industry works. They are not gonna . . . waste their money and time and energy unless [a story] is gonna get viewers or readers." However, "if it's . . . something horrible and . . . something that's gonna get a reaction . . . they cover it a lot."

Having discovered implicit knowledge that they had about CSA and its representations, my participants were able to analyze it and share ideas about the usefulness of these media portrayals. First, participants concluded that, although the media do provide us with information, they could do a much better job; then, they started to talk about what should be done to fight CSA in our society. Thus, without prompting, every group would turn to the issue of civic responsibility.

### *Civic Engagement*

Discussing media portrayals, participants started to reflect on the effects that the media can have on our ability to deal with the problem of CSA in society. Participants pointed out that, instead of encouraging audiences to engage in collective action to fight the problem, molestation stories produce desensitization. Marsha remarked: "If a young girl was abused today, say it was on the news. Oh, that's bad, OK . . . And now for today's sports. You can't take it seriously. It's seen as: they brush it off too, so why can't we?" However, participants also noted that accusing the media will not help, and in the end of the day what really matters is how we use this information. For example, Peter said: "The media are doing bad job . . . but it's our responsibility to take what they are giving us and either roll with it or push it aside, like most of us do."

Having started by talking about the effects of media portrayals on people's actions, participants began to reflect on the ways our society is dealing with CSA as a social issue. Students asked such questions as: Why do we have the walk for cancer but not for molestation? Why do we need big scandals (like the one around Jerry Sandusky) to start talking about CSA, and why are we so eager to forget about such scandals afterwards? Participants wondered whether there are organizations where survivors of CSA can meet and support each other, similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, and if they do exist, why nobody is talking about them. As Jenna reflected:

There are people that advocate for women who get beaten by their husbands and stuff, and there are places for them to go . . . to help them get through that. But children that are sexually abused . . . Yeah, there is stuff for them, kind of, but nobody talks about it, so they feel hopeless and they feel like they have nowhere

to go, and a lot of people don't know how to handle the issue when it comes [sic], because nobody talks about it.

Thus, although we started our conversation with questions about media portrayals, on their own initiative participants in most groups developed the topic of civic responsibility and civic engagement. They were unanimous stating that something should be done; however, they were not sure what they themselves could do to help. Participants admitted that, due to the taboo status of the issue, it was challenging for them to talk about child molestation with people they knew, which made taking the first step in any civic action problematic.

In two groups, the conversation about CSA and social responsibility led students to talk about the importance of empathy for preventing any kind of sexual assault. Participants lamented that our society does not do enough to develop in young people this important quality. They noted that we still focus more on teaching children how not be hurt than on explaining them why it is crucial not to hurt others. Elaborating on that, Jessica said passionately: "We still live in a society that is... all about 'Don't get raped' versus... trying to instill something in children and younger people as they grow up to not rape!"

Students were quick to connect our dialogue about CSA and its media representations to the issue of social responsibility. Their concern about sexual assault of any kind and their desire to find solutions appeared genuine. However, most of them were unable, or reluctant, to name anything they could realistically do to contribute to this battle. Several participants claimed that our conversation made them realize that they personally wanted to go beyond talking. Unfortunately, I do not have any follow-up information on whether they ended up taking any action. Although participants stated that it is everybody's responsibility to do something about child molestation, they admitted to having no idea what they personally could do about it, especially considering the fact that even broaching this topic with people they knew was challenging for them.

### *Enjoying the Conversation*

Taking into account the difficulty of starting a conversation about child molestation that my participants admitted to having, it might seem surprising that by the end of our dialogues many of them told me how beneficial and informative our meetings were. Moreover, some informants said that they had enjoyed talking about this stigmatized phenomenon. When asked to describe how it felt to take part in our conversations, many characterized the dialogues we had as really interesting, informative, and altogether useful, even though they did initially feel awkward. For instance, Jenna shared: "This was awesome, I really enjoyed it." Helen remarked: "It was nice to talk about something... that's [always] in the back of your mind... we don't really think about it that much." Stan said: "I feel

a little bit more open to talk about it now after this discussion.” And Bert opined: “It seems like a touchy subject but when you actually talk about it . . . it’s not as bad as people make it out to be.” I believe that one of the reasons my informants enjoyed our conversation was their natural curiosity, which should not be confused with morbid voyeurism. As Gloria put it: “It was interesting . . . just because these things you see on media a lot, but I’ve never had conversations about it with my friends or anything. So, it’s interesting to talk person to person.” Overall, participants agreed that having this kind of conversations is very important. For example, Les formulated it this way:

I think it’s good because not many people sit down and say: “Hey, let’s talk about children’s sex abuse” . . . To have a designated time and say: “Hey guys, we’re gonna talk about this. You know, it’s not talked about enough. Let’s get it out there. Let’s make more people know about it, spread the message.”

Students acknowledged the educational significance of our conversations, which not only let them better understand the scale of the problem (“it made me open my eyes more to see how serious it is”) but also helped them realize what they themselves knew and thought about CSA. As John said:

I learned . . . even my [own] opinion because I have never really realized before you asked me the question: “How do you feel about this?” I am, like: “Oh, I’ve never thought about it . . .” Hearing stories [told by other participants] gave me a really good perspective.

It should be taken into consideration that I, as a moderator of our focus groups, took the responsibility of bringing up the uncomfortable issue and asking questions that kept the conversation alive. Question-based dialogue that was started on my initiative uncovered participants’ implicit knowledge and let them work with it, making the talk about the stigmatized subject not only possible but also enjoyable.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

The study described in this article is exploratory, and as such it has a number of limitations. In this section, I describe these limitations and propose additional questions to deepen the inquiry on activating implicit knowledge as both a research method and an instructional strategy.

As it often happens, participants of this study were students from the researcher’s institution. All participants were students majoring in media-related disciplines. If I had interviewed young people who had less experience with media analysis, our conversations might have been very different. For example, informants without background in media studies might not have been able to

recognize subtle allusions to CSA in media texts. Hence, one of the future directions for this project would be to explore how people with more diverse backgrounds discuss media representations of CSA in the inquiry-based classroom.

A future study might also include a preliminary survey containing questions about factors that could impact findings, such as participants' background, their prior experiences with the media and with the discussed issue. This survey could reveal whether participants are frequent media consumers, whether they have background in media studies, whether they have studied the topic before, and whether they have participated in media literacy classes and interventions. It is known that the composition of each focus group influences the discussion within it (Krueger, 1994). Thus, survey findings can be used to create more and less homogeneous groups; for example, a group with participants who are frequent media users, a group with participants who consume little media, and a mixed group. This would allow the researcher to find out how different variables (media consumption, familiarity with the discussed issue, experience with media literacy education, etc.) impact people's implicit knowledge about child molestation and its media representations, their ability to articulate this knowledge, and their opinions about social responsibility.

Several participants mentioned that talking about CSA in the focus groups made them want to do something about this problem. Unfortunately, I was not able to have a follow-up for the study in order to find out whether our discussions have influenced my informants to engage in social action. Future research with a different set of participants may include a follow-up survey, or a set of follow-up focus groups and interviews. These additional data would show whether inquiry-based discussions about media representations of CSA help participants to switch out of spectator mentality—to not only talk about social responsibility but also engage in action.

## Conclusion

For most participants, as they themselves indicated, our meetings were the first time in their life that they were discussing CSA in a constructive way, not in the context of moral panic, or giggling at comic portrayals of abusive priests in *South Park*. For many, it was the first time they heard from others a confirmation to their privately held opinion that, for a problem of such a scope, our society is clearly not doing enough to find a solution.

Although participants knew about dynamics and effects of child molestation, before our meetings, they had mostly kept this knowledge in the back of their minds, seldom reflecting on pieces of information that they had accumulated from the media and people they knew. Participants did not expect to remember much about the issue because they had little or no experience discussing it with others. Our conversations validated their assumptions and showed the importance of critical thinking and dialogue in dealing with this serious problem.

The media can make people feel passive and helpless; bringing to our homes horror stories and scandals, the media often fail to empower us with this awareness. We learn about social problems comfortably sitting in our soft armchairs, socialized to be mere recipients of information and not civically engaged members of a democratic society. As my participants pointed out, media stories about CSA seldom provide guidelines on how they can do something real, measurable, to support survivors or raise awareness in their communities and homes. Bombarding audiences with disturbing facts the media leave them terrified, confused, and silent. For what can they do, besides grabbing remote controls and switching to a different channel?

Sharing and comparing knowledge about CSA, its media representations, and people's social responsibility, my focus group participants created common understanding of these issues. This understanding was a result of intellectual collaboration and cocreation of meaning. Neutral questions that I asked during the meetings helped students verbalize their implicit knowledge and reflect on it in meaningful ways. Although it might not be surprising that participants on their own initiative started to critically analyze media messages (they have been primed for such analysis in their media classes), it is revealing that in every group students brought up the issue of civic responsibility without my prompting. Moreover, many admitted to having enjoyed the conversation despite being initially concerned that it would be unpleasant or awkward. The current study demonstrates that using students' natural curiosity to help them construct meanings out of implicit knowledge they have accumulated from the media has an important potential to encourage civic engagement.

## **Appendix**

### *Interview Guide*

1. What stories about child sexual abuse do you remember hearing from the media?
2. How did you react when you heard/read these stories?
3. Do you feel there is a difference between the way this issue is portrayed in news and in fiction?
4. When you were growing up, do you remember hearing about this issue in the media?
5. When this issue comes up in the media, what aspects of it are usually emphasized?
6. What are some of the things you think you have learned about the issue from the media?
7. Did the media coverage make you feel this was something that could happen in your community?

8. Do you feel that the media coverage helped you understand the effects of child sexual abuse on survivors?
9. Do you feel that the media do a good or a bad job covering this issue?
10. Do you feel that there should be more or less coverage?
11. Do you think that the media are creating a moral panic?
12. How would you prefer the media to portray this issue?
13. Do you feel that the media coverage encourages people to talk about the issue?
14. Have you ever discussed this issue with someone after watching or reading something about it?
15. Do you think that the media create certain stereotypes about child sexual abuse?
16. How did it feel talking in this group about media representations of child sexual abuse?

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### Author Biography

**Elizaveta Friesem** is a PhD student in Media and Communication program at Temple University and a research assistant at the Media Education Lab located in the University of Rhode Island. In her research and outreach, she combines principles of media literacy education, feminist theory, and gender studies in order to help educators teach about issues of media and gender more effectively. Elizaveta also explores the impact of the media on public understanding of sensitive issues connected with sexuality (rape, child sexual abuse, street harassment, revenge porn, etc.). She investigates opportunities of using media literacy education to help people better understand these problems, and connect their knowledge to social action.

# Metropolis and the Hinterland: Community as the Blind Spot of James Carey's Theory of Communication

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Lana F. Rakow<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Cultural studies scholar James Carey is known for an approach to communication that drew on Harold Innis for understanding relations between the metropolis and the hinterland and John Dewey for understanding community and culture. Despite the value of his approach, Carey's theory has a blind spot at the intersection of community and politics. He collapsed notions of community and the public and bracketed the politics of meaning-making at the local level. Consequently, his theory takes the politics out of local community, where identities are formed and political issues identified. Dewey's explanation of democracy as both associated life in the local community and a form of government that grows from it offers a better political vision for a theory of communication.

## Keywords

community, public, democracy, James Carey, John Dewey, metropolis, hinterland

In an interview reflecting on his life and career, cultural studies scholar James Carey explained his move in 1992 from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign to Columbia University in New York City as a move from the hinterland to the metropolis. For 30 years at Illinois, he said, he had been looking at the metropolis from the hinterland, and it was time to look the other way, "to try to see life more from within" (Carey & Grossberg, 2006, p. 27).

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<sup>1</sup>University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Lana F. Rakow, University of North Dakota, Stop 7169, Grand Forks, ND 58201, USA.  
Email: Lana.rakow@und.edu

And so Carey, perhaps best known in the field of communication studies for his attention to Harold Innis on technologies of space and time and his essay inspired by John Dewey on the ties among the words common, community, and communication, revealed much about the significance of his biography to his concept of community (see Carey, 1981, 1989c, 1999). This quintessentially “man of the city,” said John Pauly (2007) in eulogy, was animated in his thoughts by city life in ways that have not been appreciated (p. 183). As the product of life in a working-class Irish Catholic family living in Providence, Rhode Island, Carey’s thinking about communication and culture entangled him in questions about the relations between economics, geography, and meaning; in an appreciation of the grand sweep of history in making and remaking communities and their hold on our imaginations and place in the republic; in an understanding of the long arm of the market and the dignity of ordinary women and men making sense of their own lives. He turned to Harold Innis and John Dewey to draw out those entanglements by way of Innis’ work on the metropolis and hinterland and Dewey’s on community and democracy. Despite his often eloquent plea for the place of local community in the exercise of democracy and for reconstruction of a conversational public articulating public interests, in the end, Carey could not integrate the two sets of insights about geography and community, thus rendering his theory of communication and community incomplete, at best.

For all the good that he did in calling our attention to community, Carey, much as he justifiably accused Walter Lippmann of taking the public out of politics (Carey, 1997a, p. 22), took politics out of the community. Contrary to some recent criticisms, it was not that Carey got Lippmann wrong; he did not get Dewey right.<sup>1</sup> Lippmann drew a conceptual political boundary between public and private on the far end of the spectrum, separating the public (a “phantom”) from the elite, relegating the public to the private realm of domestic spectators with the elite acting in its name (Lippmann, 1922, 1925, 1955). On the other hand, Dewey construed a generous political boundary at the opposite end of the spectrum, incorporating both community and the public into the democratic process. Carey, however, drew his conceptual boundary between the two, community and public. Despite or perhaps because of his fondness for the urban neighborhood, Carey’s increasing disdain of identity politics led him to argue for a line between what he saw as the apolitical and political, severing conceptual ties between community and public, leaving community as the unscrutinized site of identity formation and cultural politics (Rakow, 2010). This was Carey’s blind spot. Disagreements precipitated by his influential interpretations generally fail to see the point at which Carey’s analysis went astray. By collapsing community and public in his historic account, then bracketing questions about the politics of meaning-making in his conceptual account, that is, about the politics of culture, he eviscerated rather than restored democracy at its fundamental level, the local. In doing so, he perpetuated a classical liberal

understanding of the individual and the changing social order (a view not held by Dewey) that arose in the face of industrial capitalism and admission of new groups into public life, from the end of the Civil War through the suffrage amendment for women.

Numerous scholars, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, characterized this period and the response to it in sociological and political terms, frames whose grip has been hard to loosen. For Robert Wiebe, it was a “search for order” (Wiebe, 1967); for Morton White and Lucia White, it was “the intellectual versus the city” (White & White, 1962); for Jackson Wilson, it was the “quest for community” (Wilson, 1968). These sociological approaches have led to continuing dismissal of concerns about local community as an unsophisticated and nostalgic remnant (Rakow, 2002). Other scholars have wanted us to see the period as the heyday of liberalism and progressive reform, usually by zealous social engineers (see Forcey, 1961; Levine, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Most fruitfully, some political scientists viewed it as a clash between theories of democracy, elite or participatory (Bachrach, 1967).

This latter view is most compatible with feminist and critical race scholars who have seen deeper political issues of race, gender, and culture in the new social order, in which local communities as real phenomena survived but were effectively “feminized,” shut off from access to power and politics while relegated to the world of kith and kin, creating an anxiety about loss of (White) masculine status when vestiges of the political citizen were threatened (see Douglas, 1977; Sennett, 1974). Classical Enlightenment liberalism had set the stage, a theory designed to exclude those not in the fraternity of the self-contained individual man, served by his domestic satellite of women and slaves whom he represented in the world of politics and economics (Pateman, 1989, pp. 33–57). The theory needed to be improvised in an American context of an expanding geography, population, and citizenry. Hence, social and political boundaries were redrawn to police differences and defend privileges, as more and more political outsiders were successful in attaining formal recognition. Such was behind the new versions of public and private spheres, in which the private was to be the domestic realm of family, emotion, custom, cooperation, and consumption in contrast to the public realm of economic and political concerns of White male elites, reason, production, and competition (see Elshstain, 1981). Such was behind post-Civil War southern segregation and a system of color lines; shifting policies regarding American Indian relocation to reservations, assimilation, and individual parcel allotments; grudging tolerance of urban immigrant and migrant neighborhoods; the loss of status and independence of rural areas to corporate systems of markets and distribution. These boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, identity and difference, and autonomy and dependence were and continue to be played out at the level of local geographic communities where people live, whether urban neighborhoods, suburbs, reservations, or rural towns and villages. Geographic communities have been made and remade but unfortunately not usually in conditions of their own making.<sup>3</sup>

Innis was correct, in part, in identifying newly drawn metropolis and hinterland geospatial relations of economic and political subordination (Innis, 1950, 1951). Carey, however, set aside the additional grounds of culture and identity on which such relationships were being played out, turning to an apolitical reading of Dewey on community and democracy to argue for a politically and nationally engaged public absent a local context. Thus, Carey's story of community and democracy, while one of the few serious attempts in the field to give credence to these issues, needs careful review and revision. This contribution first presents Carey's theory of community and the public, constructed from three decades of his published work, followed by critiques of his notion of community and public by other scholars. A much-needed close reading of Dewey's philosophy shows that while Carey wanted to reconnect the public to democracy, Dewey argued for the need to connect the democracy of community to political democracy by way of the public, a critical difference. Finally, the implications for communication theory are suggested using Ferguson, Missouri as an example to support the argument that local communities and local governments have not gone away but fall far short—sometimes tragically so—of the democratic model of self-determination that Dewey rather than Carey best articulated.

### Carey's Geographic Communities

Carey's history of community in the United States is a story of creation and maintenance, destabilization and reformation, beginning in the 19th century and spanning three phases. Notions of democracy were imported to the frontier from their origins in eastern cities in the 18th century, where, Carey (1987) explained, a bourgeois public life was to be found in coffee houses and taverns. The gossip of a crowd of regulars—a society of strangers—both responded to the news of the day and helped supply it. As a bourgeois public, it was restricted by class, race, and sex, a fact that, he acknowledged, now required freeing from its limitations.

Carey characterized this phase of democracy as both a real historic phase and a bucolic ideal that served through the first phase of frontier community building. As he described it:

This image of the pub, the publican, and the publisher all rolled into one, presiding over the meetinghouse where the public gathered to discuss the news, representing in his person the public interest, and publishing a public newspaper that summarized and reprinted public opinion—what people were saying in public—this was the classic conception of democracy and the press . . . (Carey, 1997e, p. 241)

While Carey used the term *strangers* when describing this historic and ideal public, he noted in one essay (Carey, 1987) that those who were gathered were not necessarily in fact strangers, but rather, because of the public nature

of the activity, their presence needed to be taken into account through a particular discourse. This sphere of political power was located in the world between the state and the private sector of the household and the company, the only sphere in which, he said, “private interest might, even in principle, be transcended” (p. 10).

Drawing on the work of Dewey, Carey (1999) explained that on the rural frontier, strangers came together to negotiate a new world and to establish physical communities, with buildings, institutions, manners, and customs that would hold them together as self-sufficient and mostly autonomous towns in new and undefined situations. There was, however, a rootlessness in those communities, a desire to escape from the authority of what had been created, as Carey was fond of pointing out, in that Americans are forever building a city and then making plans to get out of town (p. 88). In this first phase of community building, democracy was confined to small geographic areas and small populations, much as the Greek city-states were limited by the size required for a citizen to travel to the city center and back in a day (Carey, 1989a, 1997e).

A second phase of community building was to change all that at the end of the 19th century, during which the network of communities that had been created was dismantled and cities took on prominence as they grew in size and importance relative to the rural (Carey, 1999). The frontier of *urban* life would henceforth supply the cultural and imaginative materials for a new phase of community and politics. Major cities had been connected by the telegraph and railroad, while “island communities” were tied into a national system of transportation and communication. Carey acknowledged there was resistance, but communities needed to accept the integration or be circumvented and left to die. Local politics, local business, local newspapers, and local culture lost their autonomy and unique identities. Benedict Anderson’s (1983) history of the rise of the nation-state as the imagined communities of modernity provided for Carey (1997f, 2002) the means to show how a narrative of the national and a semblance of commonality across distance became the superimposed representation of the republic, replacing older more local and regional notions of community and democracy.

To understand relations within the nation-state, Carey turned to Innis to explain the reasons and consequences for the shift from rural communities to cities, and with it the creation of monopolies of power and knowledge. To Innis, metropolitanism meant the emergence of a city dominating its surrounding countryside as well as other cities and country sides, controlling communication, trade, and finance. Smaller cities accomplished something similar but less extensive, in a chain of successively smaller center-margin relationships (Carey, 1981). Carey counter posed Innis’ notion of the space binding bias of the technology of print, which made the control of empires possible, with Innis’ notion of the time binding bias of speech, which maintains communities in time, arguing for a return to community and the oral tradition. Such a return is needed to counter

balance monopolies of knowledge and communication, which displace or appropriate local knowledge from direct experience and concrete particulars, he argued.

Carey further drew on ideas about the history and idea of community from Dewey, particularly as expressed in Dewey's 1927 book, *The Public and its Problems*. According to Carey (1989b), Dewey never left behind, in his concern about the eclipse of the public and the decline of face-to-face direct interaction, that whatever the scale of society, "democracy demands and rests upon the foundations of group life" (p. 273). It is the local community which is the medium for the social intelligence required by democracy. Dewey, he believed, saw the network of small-scale groups as a prelude to transcendence, "the capacity to accept but transcend the particular, to join a wider community of citizens without sacrificing our private identity as members of particular, if limited, social formations" (Carey, 1997a, p. 31). Dewey, like Innis, believed that local communal life was necessary if we were to achieve democratic communities and an articulate democratic public, Carey (1997b) pointed out. Carey, while himself sometimes critical of Dewey's romantic ideal of the small town, nonetheless chided modern intellectuals for their disdain for community and the small town, an attack of the later progressive movement that achieved an ambiguous and unquestioned image of the small town as either barren or romantic (Carey, 1989b, pp. 276–277).

Carey's history of community didn't end with this second stage although his analysis of the loss of local community and the publics to participate in democracy remained. In later essays (Carey, 2002, 2005), he picked up changes occurring to community in a third wave, beginning with the satellite era ushered in during the 1970s and the advance of the Internet across the globe. The result has been a world rebordered as the power of nation-states to patrol their borders has declined and advanced electronics invade remaining local and traditional communities. While a new transnational political, social, and economic order redraws the world, no community can remain self-sufficient, and traditional communities no longer provide a satisfactory way of life. Meanwhile, new kinds of community are surfacing in the United States, including affluent nongated communities without schools and with their own police and fire services, reflecting residents who have withdrawn from the social contract (Carey, 2005, p. 453).

## Carey's Concept of Community

Not only did Carey address communities in their geographic contexts in these three successive waves, but he also used ideal types of communities to make an argument for how communities can and should connect to democratic practice. He acknowledged the contested and difficult nature of the word community, as well as observed that Americans apparently want a virtual community that simulates qualities of a common life and culture without the physical or emotional geography of the small town. Maintaining the necessity of the geographic

and local, Carey (1997c) criticized the imagined community of cyberspace, which parasitically lives off geographical communities: “But until we transcend our biology, we will by necessity live in real neighborhoods with real neighbors, real buildings with real tenants, with whom our lives are structurally intertwined” (pp. 13–14).

Drawing from Robert Fowler’s (1991) categories in *The Dance With Community*, Carey described five types of community: participatory, community of roots, religious community, ecological community, and a community of one. He found none of these ideas of community satisfactory because they are utopian and shorn of history, representing too little participation or too much. He settled on a sixth type, the republican community, a type that fit best with his own story of the history of community in the United States. As he described it, the notion of the republican community holds on to the truism that we live interdependent lives:

To live in a community is to be aware that one’s life depends on the uncoordinated decencies and actions of others; that life would constantly fail without the invisible contributions of others who with us inhabit the polity and the economy. (Carey, 1997c, pp. 4–5)

With Dewey, on whom he depended for the insight, Carey accepted a human need for community and culture, saying that community “has the social task of cultivating respect for the intelligence and capacity of ordinary men and women.” If need be, we should overestimate the ability of ordinary men and women because “there is more wisdom in a community of tradition, in the shared and pooled intelligence of people, than there ever can be in any individual or small group, however elite” (pp. 8–9). Carey ascribed both social and political dimensions to this republican community. Socially it calls for common social space as a counter to the exclusive emphasis on private life and provision of human needs in that private life. Politically it would carry out Thomas Jefferson’s vision of democracy through Tocqueville’s insight about little republics within a larger republic (Carey, 1997e).

It is here where democracy originates among ordinary people in acts of conversation, who “begin to question the disparities between their experience and what politicians and intellectuals are currently feeding them” (Carey, 1995, p. 88). The struggle over meaning and the power to define reality can be found in such local contexts. While community is the place for meaning-making, Carey (1989d) seemed to recognize the limitations on that meaning-making at the local level:

It is fine to be told we are the species that actively create the world and then simultaneously to be told that we are part of the subspecies denied access to the machinery by which this miracle is pulled off. (p. 87)

clarifying that he meant class and status divisions. Dewey, on the other hand, seemed so innocent of the role of class, status, and power in communication, Carey concluded, that Dewey's notion of public life was naïve.

But Carey's concern about power in community is limited to this recognition of class, making it clear in especially his later writings that race and gender should be irrelevant both to community and democracy. Despite his earlier assertion that the historic public sphere had to be freed of restrictions of class, race, and gender, his later works show Carey likely meant freeing it from purely formal barriers. He became increasingly insistent that discussion in this republican community needed to transcend *private* identity and that, indeed, there is a biological fixity to identities of race and gender that are trivial and irrelevant to communal life (Carey, 1997d, p. 270). He argued for a politics of the common good over a politics of rights and interests through a return to the civic republican tradition (Carey, 1997d).

### Carey's Community and its Problems

After this reconstruction of ideas from Carey's work, it would seem that Carey has, rather than a blind spot for community, a warm spot for it, or more a passion that places community at the fulcrum of his theory of communication. Culture is formed and expressed through communities and our notions of them; technologies of speech, print, and electronics bind them in competing and relational ways in space and time; and a press is needed that encourages and carries on the conversation of the culture, linking the public to democracy (Carey, 1997g, p. 220). Of value is his concern for local community and the loss of democratic connections of the local to the national and global; his analysis of power relations between the metropolis and the hinterland, margins and centers; his regard for the capacities of ordinary women and men; his rebuke of those who are dismissive, cynical, and neglectful of community and the small town.

But there are gaps, contradictions, and conflation in Carey's account, despite much that is compelling and appealing. In the end, he did not make it possible to move beyond current dismissals of community because he, too, dismissed the political nature of local community, the blind spot in his history and theory of community and communication which occurs at the intersection of the relationship between community and public. Despite his affinity for local community and expressed sympathies for the small town, Carey gave up too easily on local politics and succumbed to his urban view of the republican community in which the private relational and affective world of family and neighbors is bracketed from the public, masculine (if not necessarily male), individualist world of strangers, without the very ties and common meanings from local community that he claimed to be essential to democracy. His republican community transcends the local to attend to political issues of the metropolis and the national, stripping the

local (even within the metropolis) of democratic participation and the national of knowledge from the local. Carey, while using Dewey's work extensively, missed the critical way in which Dewey made a distinction between two conceptions of democracy and the role of local community, with implications for understanding identity, power, and politics.

The argument made here is not the same as the direct or implied criticisms of Carey's ideas about community and democracy by Gretchen Soderlund, Michael Schudson, and Nancy Fraser. Soderlund (2006) asserted that Carey reified the notion of community and neglected the extent to which community is not necessarily a social good with shared benefits, especially for women.<sup>4</sup> If Carey reified the notion of community, he was no more or less guilty than other theorists and the concepts they use. He did, however, strip the concept of community as a lived experience of its inherent political nature and its political potential. He certainly neglected problems of community, especially for women. Soderlund's critique reminds us of the flaw of Carey's essentialist notions of identity and difference. But we do not need to abandon local community because of these problems; rather we can try to rectify the thinking that leads to them.

Schudson (1999), on the other hand, criticized Carey for retreating to community from the politics of the public. Schudson set community and public against each other, "better understood as opposites than as twins" (p. 128). Despite what Schudson saw as differences from Carey, he both agreed and disagreed with Carey in contradictory and equally disturbing ways:

James Carey writes that we must recognize the story of our lives is both "part of a narrative of a public community, a community of general citizenship rather than one restricted by class, race, gender, and so on" and at the same time that "our lives are also embedded in communities of private identity—family, city, tribe, nation, party or cause." Here Carey states the problem exactly right. But then, almost immediately, he subordinates the community of general citizenship to the richer, warmer communities of private identity. For him, "the expansion of individual rights and the erosion of common identifications, the growth of entitlement and the erosion of common judgment, is not a recipe for social progress." (p. 129)

Even with what Carey would call the politically correct position on the rights of women and people of color, Schudson himself did not recognize, as Carey did not, that these political movements are not about individual rights but group rights and that there is no private identity to be had, no ideal public where private identities can be transcended or private interests set aside for the greater good or greater identity of citizen-at-large. It was always a fallacy that privileged men were setting aside private interest in the public sphere. Gender and race are social categories that have their expression at the intersection of experience and

meanings. In the end, then, Schudson, like Carey, also got the relation between community and public wrong.

Nancy Fraser's (1990) relevant critique of Habermas' civil republic ideal takes us further in understanding Carey's blind spot. She saw that public spheres are not places of "zero degree culture" but places for identity formation and enactment (pp. 68–69). The formal removal of restrictions on participation on the grounds of gender and race do not obviate other ways in which, by way of social identity, people are marginalized or silenced. The private or personal cannot be an arena of freedom for women because the personal is where gender identities are produced and where the structure of society is reproduced by the labor of subordinated economic and cultural classes. Public spheres, except those counter spheres identified by Fraser, have traditionally been built on the backs of those who are denied or have limited access to the very arena in which the subject of their condition can be discussed and revealed. Carey, who criticized Dewey for an analysis that seemed innocent and naïve of class, status, and power in communication, provided an analysis himself that is suspicious of any political claims to it, blind to the ways in which social identities structure the public and private distinctions that undergird his theory. Dewey's analysis, on the other hand, makes such an insight about power and culture possible, through his argument for local face-to-face community as a necessary condition for a participatory democracy.<sup>5</sup>

## Dewey's Community and Public

Dewey's work on the problem of community and democracy neither began nor ended with his landmark 1927 *Public and its Problems*, despite those who start and stop with it. From his earliest work on democracy, he was laying the cornerstones of his public philosophy, which included the notion of human nature as open and contingent, of associated life as the only universal of the human condition, and the necessity of each person having "a share in determining the conditions and the aims of his own work" (Dewey, 1903, p. 233). His theme from early on was that there are two ways to understand democracy, as a form of government and, more broadly, as a principle of social organization.<sup>6</sup> Democracy as a form of government grows out of and into democracy as a form of social organization (Dewey, 1892–1893, p. 178).

Later, Dewey (1916) explained it this way:

Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activities . . . (p. 94)

Democracy is a name, Dewey argued, for the fact that human nature is developed only when its elements take part in directing what is held in common: “The principle holds as much for one form of association, say in industry and commerce, as it does in government” (Dewey, 1922, pp. 309–310). Commerce needs to be released from bondage to private interests; political democracy is only one form of democracy although the most commonly associated with its failures (Dewey, 1920, p. 200).

Dewey’s theory of the individual, at odds with classical liberalism, is critical to understanding his theory of democracy. The individual is never autonomous, never preexisting associated life but derived from it. He said, “An individual is nothing fixed, given ready-made. It is something achieved, and achieved not in isolation but with the aid and support of conditions, cultural and physical . . .” (Dewey, 1935, p. 291). From social institutions, proverbs, laws, language, and literature, the individual obtains convictions and habits, but the mind is not an empty vessel, it develops its own theories and ideas. “Reflective intelligence” is needed to question and point out inconsistencies, incoherencies, compromises, and failures between the actual practice and the theory at the basis of this practice (Dewey, 1891, pp. 357–359). Consequently, a reflective education that critiques existing theories and histories is necessary for the kind of social intelligence needed for a democracy. The capacities of each individual are to be set free to develop, Dewey said, “without respect to race, sex, class or economic status” (Dewey, 1920, p. 187).

Dewey told us that a community is not just a physical juxtaposition but a number of persons with an awareness of shared interests and a common end. It is in the everyday affairs of a community that these common feelings and understandings are generated (Dewey, 1949, p. 245). Democracy is the idea of community life itself, he reminded us. In fact, “democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community” (Dewey, 1927, p. 368). There are, however, many modes of such community life, according to Dewey. Friendships and other attachments and associations result from local contiguity producing consequences different from those of isolated behavior. The nature of the interconnected behavior is transformed when the consequences are appreciated. The public as a state derives from the characteristic of consequences that involve others beyond those directly engaged. The public is not, then, the community as a whole, but rather the community is the source of a public, which, when the consequences are projected beyond those directly concerned, becomes organized into a state with special agencies created to take care of or regulate the consequences. As he said, “Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences” (Dewey, 1927, p. 314). The organized public, distinguishable from other modes of community life, gives a community its political dimension, a link to or expression of democracy as a form of government. Democracy as community life is tied to democracy as government through its bridge, the public.

Of course, Dewey, as Carey explained, saw that such consequences had multiplied as changes brought about by industrialization and national systems of communication and transportation overwhelmed local community life and eclipsed the ability to respond to so much of consequence across such distances of geography and understanding. The public is in eclipse because local community life is no longer available to supply the basis for understanding and action. Because conditions and consequences are so diffuse and unintelligible, social inquiry and “full and moving communication” are essential to provide the social intelligence needed to address the conditions that affect association and to function as the precondition for formation of a true public and a democracy (Dewey, 1927, p. 350). But because the community is the medium for such social intelligence and local community life is disrupted, the public cannot form, and participation in democracy as a political form is severed. Hence, Dewey’s analysis and solution: “Unless local community life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself” (pp. 371–372). Only then can democracy in both its forms, as community and as government, be realized and joined.

### **Carey’s Blind Spot of Community**

Carey of course was under no obligation to adopt Dewey’s ideas whole cloth. Nonetheless, he did draw on Dewey in significant and influential ways and apparently believed he was being faithful to Dewey’s conception of community and public. What he did not see was how Dewey made the connection between the two. Dewey’s local community is not innocent of social identity and social conflict but provides the means for addressing both if the conditions of social inquiry, social interaction, and other conditions of full communication are present. Indeed, Dewey (1927) told us that addressing the conditions of participation of all members in the life of the community is critical for reaching the understanding that makes community and hence a public possible: “Systematic and continuous inquiry into all the conditions which affect association and their dissemination in print is a precondition of the creation of a true public” (p. 350). Dewey’s local community provides for participation in local political life and beyond, through formation of the public to act on those issues with consequences beyond those directly involved. Hence, the public can and should act locally as well as be tied to other local publics to carry concerns and local knowledge forward and to achieve the perspective and discussion relevant to democracy as government at a national level. To complete the cycle, social inquiry and full communication are needed to bring back to the local community knowledge from beyond its purview to inform its understandings and its actions, connecting the geography, knowledge, and participants of the local and the distant.

And so we have Carey's blind spot of community. Carey's republican community, by claiming it could transcend so-called private identity and interest, is disconnected from the democracy of local meaning-making and connected primarily if not only to the democracy of the metropolis writ large. The common good that Carey believed could be addressed through a republican community can be established only when the needs and interests of all of a community's members are known and taken into account, not bracketed and ignored. The republican community is an urban one and not particularly communal because Carey assumed that the participants are strangers, as least in principle, to each other. But strangers who engage in conversation in local (rural or urban neighborhood) settings either move on or they are no longer strangers. In any event, as strangers they fail to share the meanings of the local context. Yet, this is precisely the problem of local democracy. When people living in proximity are strangers as the result of inadequate or nonexistent means for coming to know and understand each other, no community of shared meaning exists, and no political public representing its interests can emerge. This is the first communication problem that needs to be addressed, if we follow Dewey's reasoning.

In the face of such an unlikelihood of routine urban stranger civiness for local political purposes, a return of attention to local communities (rural and urban) is in order, to ground democracy in local knowledge and local meaning-making. Attention to local communities does not mean that other kinds of communities should not be of interest and of value and that democracy cannot and does not benefit from them (e.g., Antonova, 2013). Local community life, in all its social, economic, and political dimensions, has been derailed because of the structuration of the built environment, closed and established political processes, private decisions by business and industry, and inadequate and ineffective means of communication. Yet, the makings are there. Many people do feel they live in a community, not just a setting. It is a term that is dear to people around the globe, even if misused for political and rhetorical purposes and difficult as an analytical category (see Goodwin, 2012). Worries about loss of community continue. The popular book by Marc Dunkelman (2014), *The Vanishing Neighbor*, like Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* before it, decries the loss of connections at the middle ring of associations with shopkeepers and other local relations between the personal and the distant, the result of new economic and social relationships fostered by changing technologies, accomplished with little reflection and certainly without local public discussion. Meanwhile, changing patterns of migration and immigration continue to bring more strangers together but with little attention to the need for Dewey's "full and moving communication" that would make entrance into an existing community possible, enriching it in the process.

But, with or without communities of shared meaning with the capacity to direct their efforts, political units of democracy grind on—units that are local and dispersed from the federal government and large city centers. Political decisions are accomplished in townships and incorporated towns,

cities, and states across the country. Besides 50 states functioning as governments with their various internal county governments, the U.S. Census Bureau (2013) tells us that incorporated towns and cities numbered 19,516 in 2012, of which only 289 were cities above 100,000 residents, or fewer than 1.5%. In addition, there were 16,519 town or township governments in 20 states, with some geographic overlap with municipalities in 11 of those states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). What, we should ask, is the connection between local community and these many units of governments? What is the connection between democracy as community life and democracy as local government? For all the critiques made of the fallacy of thinking of communities as geographically bounded, government *is* a geographically bounded, nested layer of institutions.

### Implications for Communication

These gaps between political decision making and people's experiences make Dewey's analysis of the eclipse of the public because of failures of community all the more relevant today. Consequently, we are unlikely to find existing models of his vision for how democracy could work, but examples do abound of failures of local democracy as the result of disconnection from the lives and meanings of residents. It took national media coverage of resident outrage in Ferguson, Missouri in the past year to call attention to the failures of democracy and local communication in that community of 21,000, a suburb (hinterland) of the metropolis of St. Louis. A police officer shooting of unarmed Black teen Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, dramatized the relation between city government and its agencies and its residents. According to the city's website, the community is 70% African American, but it had only one seated African American among its six city council members until the April 2015 election galvanized voters to elect two more. An NBC News story about the time of the shooting reported the police department had only three Blacks on its 53-member police force (Blankstein, Winter, & Seville, 2014). The story painted a picture of the Ferguson police against the public, quoting the president of the St. Louis County Police Association saying the department had "no established lines of communication with community leaders." The blog of a past president of the Public Relations Society of America lamented the lack of public relations preceding the events that would have built "emotional and cultural bridges during moments of calm, connecting people and ideas, communicating, joining to address weighty issues and building credibility and trust between and among citizens and government." He concluded, "Ferguson is but an extreme example of a community's failure to communicate" (Cherenson, 2014). These samples of public discourse suggest it is obvious to many that some derangement of community and communication is at play in the ongoing and not isolated controversy. More efforts by city officials and agencies to bridge the gap between government and citizens might produce some palliative effect, but those efforts

will not change the model of democracy behind it and replace that model with one of communal self-determination through participation. Outsider attention from national news media and citizen-generated social media certainly was important to making the problem a public issue beyond the city limits of Ferguson, but community members lacked the prior means—resulting in protests and demonstrations—to become a public, to be heard, to inform and be informed of the issues that affect them, and to direct officials to their remedy.

It was John Dewey who best understood these problems of local community and democracy. Dewey reminded us that the local is the only universal. Local community, growing out of the human condition of associated life, gives or should give democracy its legs. Carey reminded us that we need local communities, but he abandoned both the local and community, the place of what he considered private interests, in favor of his republican and urban version of a discourse of strangers. But strangers are not a community and cannot become a public that represents the shared meanings from which it derives. What happens at the local level is of tremendous import to those who live there, which is all of us, and to the interrelationship with those terrible and seemingly intractable issues played out at the national and global level. The metropolis and the hinterland is not simply a spatial metaphor; it is a political one that has been used to conflate the urban with national interests and the hinterland where most of us live (whether near or far from those seats of power) with local and irrelevant interests. For all his insights, Carey's blind spot obscures rather than clarifies the point. What will we do to revive community and its connection to democracy at the local level and then to the national and beyond? Identity formation and politics begin at home, to paraphrase Dewey, and that home is the local community. While Carey was blind to such politics of meaning-making, it was Carey (1995) who gave us our charge: "The aim of cultural studies is to renew a democratic conversation outside of the media, and to begin that renewal in the universities, but it extend it to a wider civic and civil discourse" (p. 88). In doing so, we need to remember that civic discourse must begin in the hinterland, tying local communities of meaning to local, national, and global politics.

## Author Note

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## Notes

1. On Carey's analysis of Lippmann, I am in agreement. Carey decried Lippmann's elitist notion of democracy and articulated in memorable terms what was at stake epistemological and politically for the field of communication in following Lippmann (see Carey, 1982, 1987). I have argued elsewhere that recent attempts (e.g., Jansen, 2008, 2009, 2012; Schudson, 2008) to discredit Carey's reading of Lippmann are unfounded (Rakow, 2015).
2. Dewey is too often uncritically labeled as a liberal and progressive. As Manicas (2008) explained, Dewey was a critic of liberal individualism and favored a radical alternative (p. xxiv). Levine (2000, p. xi) differentiated various strands of progressivism, suggesting the term has been used indiscriminately. Dewey's biographer Robert Westbrook (1991, p. 189) labeled Dewey a radical progressive. Dewey certainly was not in favor of social engineering as a tool of elites (Dewey, 1927, pp. 358–359).
3. For one case study of a rural community and how it was shaped through the 20th century by external forces and eventually, as a bedroom community, left in the hands of women, see Rakow (1992).
4. See Day (2006) for a comprehensive review and response to concerns such as geographic essentialism leveled against those who use the concept of community.
5. A return to Dewey's work is evident in the current revival of interest in participatory democracy. See Hildreth (2012), Kadlec (2007), Levine (2000), McAfee (2008), Putnam (1992), Visnovsky (2008), and Whipple (2005). Additional testament to the value of participatory democracy for a feminist agenda can be found in Deshmukh-Ranadive (2008).
6. A reviewer offered the intriguing notion that Dewey actually defined democracy in a third way, as the means for individual fulfillment. This seems to me a positive outcome of participatory democracy rather than a definition, so I will confine my analysis to his view of it as associated living that should lead to political problem solving.

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**Author Biography**

**Lana F. Rakow** is professor of communication and director of the Center for Community Engagement at the University of North Dakota. She earned a PhD at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, under the direction of James Carey. The author or editor of four books on gender, feminist theory, and technology, she is currently working on a book about John Dewey and communication.

# Power, Gender, and Ethnic Spaces: Geographies of Power in Roma Communities

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Adina Schneeweis<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This study examines the inextricable (and understudied) link between ethnicity, gender, power, and space, to assess how gender and power relations operate in, and mark, the ethnic spaces of one community of Roma in Romania. Drawing from ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with Romani women who work as health mediators, this article identifies and theorizes the negotiated meanings that arise among the mediators' roles and spaces. I argue that perceptions of the mediators' power roles change between institutional landscapes (spaces of hegemonic directives), Romani communities (conceived space where the women have symbolic control), and the lived space of resistance and internalized discrimination; the latter is both an active constituent of, and a challenge to, racism against the Roma.

## Keywords

gender, ethnicity, power, space, resistance, Roma/Gypsy, ethnography, interviews, fieldwork

Roma<sup>1</sup> communities—commonly known as Gypsies—continue to be one of the poorest and most criticized, scrutinized, and marginalized ethnic minorities (Erjavec, 2001; Hancock, 1985, 1987, 2008; Kenrick & Puxon, 1972; Lemon, 2000; Richardson, 2006; United Nations, 2001). While ethnic spaces inhabited by the Roma *other* have been a focus for state control, the Romani culture (music, art, food, and crafts) has been appropriated and rendered appealing

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Communication and Journalism, Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Adina Schneeweis, Department of Communication and Journalism, Oakland University, 317 Wilson Hall, Rochester, MI 48309, USA.

Email: [schneewe@oakland.edu](mailto:schneewe@oakland.edu)

as an ethnic curiosity, while the brown body of the Romani woman—or Romni<sup>2</sup>—has been exoticized, sexualized, and fantasized over. Such constructions have contributed to further discrimination and, not coincidentally, to Romani feminism. At the intersection of the realms of ethnicity, gender, and space is the noteworthy case of Romanian Romani women who work as health mediators, who are intermediate between minority communities and the public health system. I set out to Romania to examine the Romni's groundwork as they navigate different spaces and assumptions about their roles. I began from the concern that scholarship has typically treated marginalized groups "in ways that do not do justice to their sense of reality" (Saukko, 2003, p. 55) and examined, in this spirit, the Romni's stories as instances of communication that manage various cultural positions, each with its own power dynamics. The case of the Romanian Romni mediators is theoretically noteworthy because they offer much needed complexity to the popular understanding of race and gender: The study of these women's social practice as mediators highlights how they develop, enact, and inhabit several identities in the different realms they navigate, and therefore are seen by their publics as more than one thing, more than having just one role (i.e., the empowered mediator, the at-risk Romni, or the subjugated Romani woman), a contribution and an awareness that critics have long called for.

Beginning with Foucault's (1972) take on power as a productive relation that contributes to the construction of knowledge, I observed the shifts and challenges in power dynamics intricately tied to space. As women crossed work and home spaces, they changed roles, and shifts in power dynamics became apparent. Each landscape seemed to be accompanied by different perceptions of power. My focus in this project became about the way in which power relations are negotiated in different spaces, the mobility of the mediators' roles and perceived power, and their agency<sup>3</sup> in the spaces they navigate. This article, therefore, has two main objectives: To describe how gender operates in specific spatial contexts, and to attempt to evaluate the effects of such mobility. In what follows, I begin by providing context about Romani women in Romania, followed by a theoretical grounding of the project in feminist critical scholarship and spatial theory. After methodological remarks, I present my observations on changing power dynamics and the ethnic or gendered spaces in Romania, as I suggest ruptures in traditional understandings of space. I argue that perceptions of the mediators' power roles change between institutional landscapes and Romani communities, while others serve as both resistance and enacted internalized discrimination.

It is not my intention to glorify the experience of an integrated Romni, or of a struggling Romni either; nor is it to generalize or essentialize as "true" for all Romni the stories shared here, nor as forever "true" for the women in this study (also see Litwin & O'Brien Hallstein, 2007; Stephenson-Abetz, 2012; Thiel-Stern, Hains, & Mazzarella, 2011). Rather, I sought to find what one might learn from women who have been virtually absent from public discourses.

## Romni Health Mediators in Romania

Images of Romni continue to be primarily stereotypical in dominant discourses (Hancock, 2008). The feminist positioning—that ethnicity, race, class, and gender are inextricably linked and cannot be analyzed apart from one another (Stephenson-Abetz, 2012)—is useful in understanding the case of Romani women in a contemporary Eastern European society affected by international challenges and interethnic conflict and marked by patriarchy and severe discrimination (as is the case of Romania). This framework suggests that women occupy distinct positions in culture and share collective experiences of oppression, exclusion, devaluation, exploitation, and domination (Litwin & O'Brien Hallstein, 2007). Investigating commonalities as well as differences in women's experiences entails also recognizing the hierarchies and priorities embedded in the group relationships and identities surrounding the Roma women (also see Schneeweis, 2015). At the same time, one must draw from ethnographic research to problematize the portrayal of the Roma woman as metonymy for all Romani experiences (Blasco, 2011).

To begin, various meanings are associated with womanhood and motherhood in Romania, a patriarchal culture with specific gender roles and hierarchies, where heavy responsibilities are attributed to mothers, wives, and women workers. The society generally rewards men with better-paid jobs and the status of the “head of the family” (Kligman, 1998; Palmer-Mehta & Haliliuc, 2011; Verdery, 1994). Second, Romani customs directly apply to gender roles and relations (Askola, 2011). The Romni interviewed in this study<sup>4</sup> explained that in more traditional families women must walk behind their husbands, but not in their shadow; they cannot eat with their husbands; and they must give respect to women elders in the family, including decision-making power about finances and children. Third, the Movement for Roma Rights has advocated for Romni rights but not without complications. Some advocates and Roma intellectuals and leaders have sought to separate themselves from the connection to women's rights—depicted frequently in advocacy documents as a *distraction* from work for all Roma. For the more traditional advocate, emancipation of women stands in direct contrast to the structure of the Roma family and community (European Roma Rights Centre, 2000). Gender and Romani feminism have thus been minimized and deemed irrelevant, even “dirty” in some recent contexts (Askola, 2011; Brooks, 2012), in favor of emphasizing culture, ethnicity, and race. Finally, throughout modern Romanian history, Romni have been the direct target of sterilization and eugenics policies under Communism but also after Communism (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1997). It is at the intersection of these forces of culture, gender, ethnicity, race, the institution of the public health system, and the various ethnic spaces in Romania that the stories of the Romani women must be examined and understood.

As Romania has struggled to democratize since the fall of Communism in 1989, social ills such as crime, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and poor

health have increased in Roma communities, contributing to the solidification of the (perception of the) ethnic group as an at-risk minority. Of the various intervention projects and campaigns conducted as a result, the program of health mediation has been among the most successful. Started in 1996 by the Romanian nongovernmental organization Romani CRISS,<sup>5</sup> the program has trained over 500 Romani women across Romania<sup>6</sup> to maintain a permanent connection between the Roma and public health services. Despite organizational, political, economic, social, and cultural challenges, the program has been deemed by officials, practitioners, and Roma alike to be a success and escalated into public policy by the early 2000s (Centrul Pentru Politici și Servicii de Sănătate, 2006; Romani CRISS, 2007, 2010; Romaworld, 2011). With the decentralizing of the public health system in the mid-to-late 2000s, mediators were relocated from the jurisdiction of departments of public health to local governments. The decentralization and the economic crisis have both contributed to fewer working mediators, increased bureaucracy, and lower, and sometimes sporadic, pay (Local Director of the Department of Public Health, personal communication, January 2009, May 2011, June 2013; Romaworld, 2011).

## Geographies of Power

This research is theoretically grounded in three interrelated frameworks: Foucault's conception of power, spatial theory, and feminist critical scholarship. I use gender and ethnicity as fluid, constructed concepts meant to be suggestive of roles and expectations in permanent, ongoing motion and transformation, and never as static structures (Mahler & Pessar, 2001). As social constructions, they become implicated in institutions and policies and are rendered meaningful as people are socialized to view gendered and ethnic distinctions. Space has also been understood as socially constructed, contextual and historical, not just "there" (Cornwall, 2007), and ascribed cultural significance as urban or rural landscapes (Kitchin, 1998). Foucault argued that space is central in the exercise of power (1972), a starting point in understanding Mahler and Pessar's framework of gendered geographies of power (2001)—which I expand here to mean gendered *and ethnic* geographies of power. I use this conceptualization to analyze agency and power in the spaces that Romani women navigate. Mahler and Pessar (2001) use the construct to suggest that gender—and I argue ethnicity, too—"operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales" (p. 445). Such scales, or locations, these authors write, refer to persons' positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based, and other socially stratifying factors... For the most part, people are born into a social location that confers on them certain advantages and disadvantages. (pp. 445–446) The processes of constructing meaning and knowledge within and about ethnic spaces rely on the specific definitions given liberally, popularly, or strategically to gender and gender roles, to ethnicities as

groups, and to ethnic practices. As certain definitions become reified over others as natural, immutable, unchangeable, and unavoidable, so do social practices enact and mimic a restricted repertoire of attitudes and actions (Foucault, 1972).

Social theorist Henri Lefebvre's three-part conceptualization of space (1991) first describes (a) *the spatial practice* to mean the physical, perceived space, which is bounded and limited, and in which bodies operate and interact with one another in everyday routines; for the purpose of this study, the perceived space is that of the doctors' offices, the city halls, the meeting rooms at the Direction of Public Health, or the homes of the Roma. Second, Lefebvre describes (b) *the conceived space* that is imagined, communicable, and symbolic; for the mediators, this is their work, the practice of being a "Roma health mediator," complete with codes, rules, expectations, and routines. Third, (c) *the lived space* or *the spaces of representation* combines the first two, for Lefebvre, and constitutes the realm of "social struggle, counter-discourses and resistance . . . of discriminatory practices such as racism, sexism and homophobia and is where marginalization is produced and enforced" (van Ingen, 2003, p. 204). Since space is also experienced bodily, feminist geographers have noted that spatial arrangements are reflective of, and reinforcing, gendered power relations (Mahler & Pessar, 2001).

It follows that gendered and ethnic subjects are born and continue to be tied throughout their life to distinct social and spatial locations, which in turn hold social meanings and power. Each space is associated with particular roles, each signifying varying degrees of power, initiative, or control. Space has been defined and appropriated politically—and simplified, I suggest—to mean the dyads of private or public, city or country, urban or rural, with distinct meanings and roles—public or domestic, home or work (Tuhiwai Smith, 2007). In thinking about the space inhabited by the Roma, concepts such as inside or outside, boundaries, borders, in town or out of town, "out there," center or outskirts, and so forth, become relevant. The choice of location for Roma communities—whether chosen, accidental, consequential, or assigned—denotes relationships of power, where the "center" and "in town" are hierarchically higher, more respected, safer, cleaner, easy to access, and so forth, in sharp contrast to the Romani-inhabited spaces, which are "out there," apart, typically avoided, unkempt, hard to access, ignored, or invisible altogether (also see Mignolo, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 2007).

Examining questions of agency and power inevitably invokes the contested concept of empowerment, which others have problematized as one intimately tied to space (Cornwall, 2007). Empowerment has meant helping marginalized groups toward having agency, which in turn evokes expansion (of reach, of access, of spaces to occupy in the "new," empowered roles). Others have argued empowerment resides internally and intervention must nurture subjective agency and cultural sensitivity (Dutta, 2007). Conditions of modernity have

contributed to solidifying distinct meanings and roles of spatial locations (Massey, 1994) via modernization projects of development that have attempted the physical relocation of the poor and downtrodden, of “those with less power in society . . . to less desirable environments” (van Ingen, 2003, p. 207). Feminist accounts of empowerment have explained the reclaiming of spaces, as creation of new ones, occupation of existing spaces, or “revalorizing negatively-labeled spaces” (Price-Chalita, 1994, p. 239). Bell Hooks (1990) assesses that marginal spaces, more than sites of devaluation, are spaces of possibilities and resistance. Distinctions and boundaries between spaces are unstable, however, perpetually negotiated, always sights of ruptures, affected by a confluence of factors, political, contextual, and changing (Blasco, 2011; Cornwall, 2007).

## Methodology and Procedures

This ethnographic project began inductively, formulating research questions from the field (Mayer, 2003), and draws upon a long-term study of ethnicity in Romania that began in 2008. I observed and accompanied eight Romani women in their work in small towns and villages and interviewed them in both formal and informal settings. I sought to understand the women’s experiences as they are grounded in their own environments. Critical ethnography and life story scholarship call for more attention to communication of one’s own journey, especially significant in contexts where the subjects have been mis- and underrepresented (Linde, 1993; Saukko, 2003).

As I attempt to understand the power dynamics characterizing Romni’s roles and interactions, it is imperative to reflect on my positioning as insider (wife, mother, daughter, upwardly mobile Romanian woman) and outsider (non-Roma, educated, middle-class communication scholar from the United States) among the health mediators in urban and rural Romania. This article is based on my earlier introduction to the group of Romni mediators, so I was not a stranger to the women. My role as outsider was more pronounced in Romani communities, where I was a newcomer, an “American,” and sometimes even a “lady doctor.”<sup>7</sup> I was also aware of my formation as a scholar shaped by Western knowledge and of criticism to “the return of ‘natives’” to study homeland societies, to “authentic” accounts, and to “the hybrid identities of ‘native’ scholars” (Parmeswaran, 2001, p. 72). Such awareness is more familiar to post-colonial scholarship, which describes a wave of intellectuals “by liberation” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2007, p. 69). Although Roma-non-Roma relations do not have a root in imperial history per se, the resemblance to colonial and post-colonial legacies (such as internalized racism) is striking and has been argued before (e.g., [Author]; Brooks, 2012). I argue that the same must be recognized in research focused on postcommunist European spaces (as Romania is), which have seen heavy emigration. In this context, I am conscious of the practice of

articulating “original,” repressed voices, of speaking for the *other*, of articulating Romani practices and cultures for a non-Romani audience.

### *Participants*

Nine Romni health mediators from one Romanian county consented to participate in the study and be interviewed, of which eight were available to share their time in the field with me.<sup>8</sup> Their age ranged between 29 and 57, with a mean age of 44.3 and a median age of 42. All women held a high school degree and lived in either the localities where they served as mediators or in neighboring villages. Three of the women have worked as mediators since the early years of the program in 2002, while the others started in 2006. Seven were Romni and two were married into Romani families. The latter were included in the study because of their status (and employment) as “Roma health mediator” because of their self-positioning as part of the community, and because of the Romani families’ treatment of the mediators as one of their own. As the only mediators working in their county, these nine women together represent a microuniverse during this time of political attention to the Roma problem.

The mediators walk the miles from their homes to city halls, to doctors’ offices, to the community, and back-and-forth; only one drives her own car, though she pays the diesel fuel herself. The Roma are integrated to varying degrees in non-Roma Romanian localities; some live in interethnic, comfortable neighborhoods, equipped with the perks of “good living” by contemporary Romanian standards (cable TV, leather couches, granite tile, with refreshments ready for guests); other communities match the horror stories of humanitarian nongovernmental organizations, the forgotten dwellings at the margins of society. Although none of the mediators live in the slums, six of the women took me to these secluded, hard to reach areas, with unpaved and broken roads, in homes with no electricity, gas, or running water, with leaking roofs, dirt floors, little to no food to spare, and too many children sharing one bed. The other two health mediators explained that they wanted to show me the better-off families and not the poorest.

### *Tacit Practices*

I met the Romni at the county’s Department of Public Health, where I unobtrusively observed a routine meeting with the staff, and then interviewed them in two groups, of four and five members, respectively, and without officials present.<sup>9</sup> I came with some prepared questions, but let the conversations move to topics that the participants wanted to discuss, often with little of my prompting. A few days later, I met each of the eight women who consented to my accompaniment in their communities and always drove or walked to Romani homes.

I shared meals with some of the Romni and joined others on short stops at their homes or their parents' home and business. Throughout the workdays (usually 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.), we spent quite a bit of time talking, while walking, driving, or sometimes sitting in the car, or in their office at the city halls. I only recorded the women if we intentionally set time to talk, during pauses from fieldwork. Before parting with each mediator, I often asked clarification or follow-up questions, to check my impressions. In what follows, I offer quotations<sup>10</sup> to ensure accurate representation of the women's words. My goal in the interactions was to earn the Romni's trust, enough for their stories to be sincere and true *to their own lives*, and not to the expectations of a researcher, as much as I realize that any exchange is complicated and mediated by the ethnographer-participant dynamic.

### **Power Shifts, Romani Spaces, and Lived Spaces**

I forward two arguments: First, that power relations are space-dependent—and elusive across space; and second, that space has an active role in maintaining processes of exclusion and also offers opportunities for resistance and subversion of discrimination. To construct these arguments, I lay out three moments in the production of ethnic and gendered space, each associated with different power roles: (a) Institutional power in the perceived space, which is perhaps the most expected; (b) mediator power in the conceived space, which is perhaps a mark of successful intervention toward ethnic empowerment; and (c) resistance and internalized discrimination in the lived space. While I provide my interpretation of each, the three spaces do not have clear boundaries and are constitutive of one another.

#### *Institutional Power in the Perceived Space*

In the most literal and perhaps expected sense, authorities hold the most power in and over Romani spaces—doctors, mayors, social workers, and nurses exert influence across physical boundaries and over Romani homes. Sometimes, such figures assert their direction and control overtly and discriminatorily, through what they say or do. In earlier research, I offered extensive stories that authorities have demanded work of the Romni that was beyond the job description or below their training. Mioara,<sup>11</sup> one of the first mediators in the county, spoke of being asked to provide day care; Liana and Claudia were asked to do secretarial work in the past; and two others shared their struggles to refuse custodian work. The women said it has been most common since decentralization to have to justify and explain their time spent in the community—and their absence from the offices of city halls.

Other times, the influence of institutional forces is not present, but instead projected, from the office, from the shadows, a threat felt and not seen. Valeria's

relationship with the family practitioner in her community speaks to both dynamics—covert and overt discrimination and control:

Valeria: [During the changes around the decentralization of the public health system,] the doctor told me to my face, “You’re the first to go.” . . . She also asked for my salary reduction, but it wasn’t her decision. She tried to harm me in any way she could . . . She insulted me over and over, she told me my clothes smell of Gypsy. I didn’t want to go to work; I felt I was going to my death. She told me, “We don’t have to put up with you.” . . . Now, she’s happy I do the fieldwork. She doesn’t go see the kids in their homes; I go alone.

*Researcher: Should she go instead?*

Valeria: Yes, she gets paid for it. She writes down that she does the home visits, but she only goes to those that can pay her.

*Researcher: Have you thought to tell anyone?*

Valeria: No, no; it would only harm me. I can lose my job, and then what do I do? I just do my job . . . They ask us at the Department of Public Health, but I don’t say anything, I don’t want to lose my job . . . But the people that can afford it in the community aren’t really bothered by it. Those who can’t afford it go in to the clinic [to see the doctor].

*Researcher: Does she share the money with the nurses?*

Valeria: No, no, it’s all for her. [The nurses] are afraid they’ll be sacked [if they say anything]. She can [fire the nurses]. She did it before [when she heard about a former nurse voting for a certain local political candidate] . . . There is much injustice and there will always be injustice. And this injustice is accepted by the community. They don’t revolt. So why should I? . . . I try to open their eyes a bit, but if this is what [the community wants] . . . They want to be seen [by the doctor], they want to be treated properly . . . People are used to it.

When Valeria spoke up in the past, she was counseled to “just do her job well, or even better than before” and things will change. The democratization struggles in Romania since the fall of Communism gain an ethnic dimension here. Although corruption and bureaucracy is not unusual (including paying above the required fees for doctors’ and other medical services), and although this practitioner’s conduct affects Roma and non-Roma alike, Valeria’s story speaks of power over the ethnic space as she is instructed to ignore and silence the discrimination. It is also important to note the absence of an actual interaction here with a superior, as Valeria assumes any comments would poorly affect her, and the intensity of Valeria’s fear of retribution, even though she has had positive intervention on her behalf in the past from Department of Public Health officials.

In Romani communities, the role of the mediator is affected by a shifting perception from insider to outsider in some of the locals’ eyes, as the mediators become identified with interference from the non-Romani world. The shift was

most evident one morning, when I arrived with Dorina in a secluded neighborhood of her village. While a pregnant woman was hanging clothes to dry, Dorina approached her about her health and her children's vaccination schedule. Although at the time, the woman assented to all of Dorina's advice, the mediator later told me about her struggles with this woman, how little she listens, and how her husband controls the household, sending his wife to do hard, physical labor. That afternoon, Dorina pondered on the uselessness of her attempts, wondering why the health advice she brings seems collapsed with authority intervention—and as such rejected by this particular Romani family. She did not question that the medical information is needed and should be welcome; she did not wonder whether the family has a “right” to reject it, or whether she herself was “right” to judge the family's decisions, to admonish them, and to continue to try to intervene. The situation reminded me of the difficulty of deciding “which voices to listen to, and how to adjudicate between different voices” in the act of doing fieldwork (Saukko, 2003, p. 67); it is also reminiscent of the complications of attention to cultural sensitivity in health intervention (Dutta, 2007). At the same time as Dorina's insider position aids her in relating with families, her presence seems to be deemed as an outsider body, sent into the community from the outside; in this family's space, the authority intervention was rejected.

### *Mediator Power in the Conceived Space*

Although at face value power comes top-down from official institutions, perceptions shift as mediators reach communities. In these conceived areas (Lefebvre, 1991), the Romni are the “powerful” ones. While to me “community” is an “out there” space of fieldwork (Tuihawai Smith, 2007), the Romani women invoked “community” repeatedly as an intimate site where they return to for respect, recognition, and validation—and where they exert power and feel empowered. Although there are corresponding physical spaces, areas, and neighborhoods where the Roma live, the “community” to the Romni is self-defined as “my community,” “the community that's mine,” “my people,” “my co-villagers,” and “my Gypsies.” They describe their relationship to this community in warm terms: “I don't know what to call them, they are so familiar to us” (Mioara); “They call me ‘Aunt’ and other endearing words” (Dorina); “I'm Mrs. Nurse, Mrs. Doctor, Our Mrs., the Mrs. of the Gypsies . . .” (Liana). It is at this conceived spatial level that the mediators imagine their work and their belonging.

The conceived space of the work of the mediator includes trust, respect, repetition, the women's physical presence, and routine visits. The women's “community” as defined by them is one that is “imagined . . . constructed through discourse” (van Ingen, 2003, p. 203). If we take Lefebvre's (1991) view that this is the most dominant form of spaces, then the women mediators

hold a great deal of power—and exert a great deal of agency in Romani communities in Romania. When I first met the mediators, they spoke at length—and almost in an attempt to convince (me, as listener and outsider) of the accomplishments achieved on the ground, and of their skill in earning the community's complete trust. Now, they spoke again about the difficulties they first encountered on the job and the differences in their relations to the communities today. Claudia, for instance, described how skilled she is today at approaching families and at reading the truth: "I first go in the house, I ask how they are, what they're cooking. I sit, I watch, we talk. Then they start complaining. And then I see the real deal. Very few have lied to me."

Their skills include diplomacy—what van Ingen (2003) referred to as "codes." Sorina spoke of how she must speak indirectly to some Romani families:

I can't tell them to clean up [because] they get upset. I tell them instead how others handled say, a social worker's visit well, to give an example. "Don't clean for me," I tell them, but when others stop by, do it.

In another exchange, one mediator, Mioara, spoke in "code" during a home visit in order to achieve her goal (to speak of contraceptives and the Romni's health). Although during the visit Mioara seemed to nurture a trusting, open relationship with her host, praising and agreeing with the host's boasting, she later dispelled to me in confidence a few things that she knew were not true (including the host's income and reason for what seemed to be comfortable living conditions).

### *Understanding the Struggle Within the Lived Space*

In the communities where I spent time, resistance took various forms, some more direct than others. This third space of power relations was the more difficult to conceptualize without interpretation and assumption on my part. I witnessed expressions of resistance as defiance of the system, as outcry against anti-Roma discrimination, but also internalized discrimination, and efforts to withhold reactions and information from me. The first two of these manifestations were the most clearly expressed. Before decentralization, several women said they trusted the public health officials to share their concerns when they arose. Mioara, as a more outspoken personality, spoke also to doctors in her town, revolted by comments made about Romani patients being dirty or smelly. Most of the mediators, however, shared a variety of veiled ways in which they show their intervention. Nicoleta and Liana both talked about having to intervene in schools (where they were conducting hygiene workshops) against the discrimination against Romani children. A common discriminatory practice in ethnically mixed classrooms has been to have Romani children sit in the last row, at the back of the classroom. However, the discussion may not be direct: "I don't make it be about discrimination," Liana said. "I say, instead, that a

child can't see very well, could they move him from the last row closer in the front?" Another mediator said she silences herself out of fear of authority, as is Claudia's experience: "The social worker is racist . . . I'm afraid to bring it up, to insist with authorities to help some families, because [the social worker] will find out." In Claudia's case, her fear translated into silencing and trying to work around the system, as the only way to subvert the discrimination.

A focus on explaining anti-Roma discrimination led to me to wonder about the mediators' internalized discrimination, and about resistance through adaptation at the same time. The eldest mediator, Dorina, was one to repeatedly appease. To a doctor's comment about the Roma as illiterate, Dorina explained, "It's because they can't send their children to school." When the doctor scoffed that, "[The Roma] want rights, but they don't . . . wake up to feed their children before sending them to school," Dorina apologetically explained, "We have big issues in our community, with many problems, and much poverty." In an earlier conversation, Dorina denied having issues in her community, by comparison to another woman's experience with racism: "I think I am a happy one . . ." In my observation, I could deem Dorina's contentment to be naïve, blissful denial, or intricate adaptation to a denigrating environment. The same could be true for Stela's relationship with the medical staff in her community. During her routine stop at the village clinic, the practitioner exclaimed, "I'm sick of them all, poor and stinky." Stela smiled awkwardly, but said nothing. I later spoke with Stela about the comments in the office:

[The doctor and staff] are intolerant. They are bothered when people move a lot, between [the county capital] and back here [in the village], with no stable address. It's hard to keep track of the vaccination schedule that way. [The doctor and staff] have their bad parts, but they're also right . . . I can't side with one or another. I just can't.

The refusal to speak firmly against racist remarks reminds of Lefebvre's (1991) position that the lived space can be experienced passively. As several mediators (Stela, Dorina, Liana, and Claudia) frequently sought excuses and explanations for the community's faults *and the doctors' discrimination*, their passivity can be judged as self-enforced silencing or a strategy of resistance, one of adaptation to a blatantly unequal power system. This space was not fully clear to me, recalling to mind van Ingen's words that the lived space is "never fully knowable" and is "both oppressive and enabling" (p. 204).

A subtler form of power is one that several of the mediators tried to keep hidden from me. On occasion, I suspected that the Romni normally answer more questions about health, more medical questions perhaps, and that they give more advice in the community than they did in my presence. At times, Mioara and Claudia for instance waved away a question, interrupted a community member in louder voice, or laughing, to ask the doctor—and not to expect

an answer from her, the mediator. The exchanges always drew my attention as forced, perhaps acted out. In these moments, my outside status felt reinforced. An alternative space of resistance opened in the women's attempts to impress me (i.e., to perform well in my eyes as outsider) and in their seeming effort to conceal certain social and power dynamics from me. In several spaces visited, I noted stolen eye contact, side body language, and a change from Romanian to Romany for brief exchanges. On some occasions, in response to my probing, some of the women said they are indeed more direct or more critical when they work alone, but not when I was with them (Sorina, Mioara, and Claudia). This alternative geography, this counter-space became shut off, closed off, forbidden for me. Drawing from Foucault (1990), however, "There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say . . . There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse" (p. 27). As such, the boundary set up by the women is intrinsic to lived space, which can never be completely known or understood (van Ingen, 2003), and especially not by an outsider.

The mediators' approaches include both conveying knowledge and concealing their own power. Such is their intervention: Direct and veiled, and everything in between. Seen together—denials and justifications, stories of racism and discrimination, the imparting of health knowledge (e.g., teas to drink for upset stomach, how often to change a diaper, or what to feed a toddler) and healthy living tips (e.g., to air out the room, to clean out the apartment before the social worker arrives, or to wash the children)—these practices render evident that "lived space is both oppressive and enabling" (van Ingen, 2003, p. 204). Discrimination comes from outside officials, it is tolerated ("[the community is] used to it," in Valeria's words), and self-enforced, all at the same time.

## **Conclusion**

I argued in this research that perceptions of power relations and roles, dependent on space and mobile across ethnic spaces, change between institutional landscapes (perceived spaces of hegemonic, dominant directives), Romani communities (conceived space where the Romani communicate their knowledge and have symbolic control), and the lived space of resistance and internalized discrimination. The ethnic space emerges as an active constituent of interethnic social relations, which enforces racism in two ways: First, ethnic and gendered space is organized to keep the Roma in their place, secluded in their communities, outside of town, on the outskirts, monitored and monitorable; and second, ethnic and gendered space is a means to discursively communicate to the Roma (communities and mediators alike) that their ethnicity is out of place (also see Kitchin, 1998). At the same time, the gendered power of the mediators suggests a challenge to racism against the Roma. The Romani resist the system, the control that is felt coming from officials in both the conceived space of their

work routines, and more discretely in their silence to outsiders, within the bounds of lived space.

When studying marginalized groups, scholars of resistance have approached findings such as these in three distinct ways, according to Saukko (2003). One could dismiss the women's attempts at silencing their reaction or frustrations with a discriminatory context, including their attempt at shutting out my observation, as ultimately a powerless act over social structures, as a weak resistance that does not challenge social relations. One could, conversely, react overly positively about their agency in formulating and expressing a reaction to the system, to the forces from outside, and deem these acts as discursive transformations. A third approach to resistance—and one that is less judgmental than the first, and perhaps less naïve than the second—is one that is contingent. In this vein, instead of calling the mediators either rebellious or subjugated, I propose to contextualize their power as contingent on the spaces they occupy. I argue that this approach is innovative for the critical communication scholar, already accustomed to contextualize language and cultural practices as symbolic and ideological, in that it complicates the attention given to the dyad of dominant-subjugated (also see Dutta, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 2007) by adding the factor of space to the social construction of power relations and also by suggesting complications in the resistance of the ethnic woman. The Romni in this study attach themselves to diverse landscapes, with diverse agendas, and explicit attention must be paid to the ways in which “space not only represents power but materializes it” (van Ingen, 2003, p. 207).

While the Roma have continued to have their spaces and resources reorganized by state intervention, leading to further physical and symbolic marginalization (at the outskirts of localities, or in the hidden alleys of urban downtowns), and continued discrimination and racism, early academic writing focused on explaining cultural demise, on documenting poverty or other social problems. Recent scholarship has moved to contextualize poverty, or illiteracy, or truancy, and so forth, instead of merely explaining it away as a cultural trait (also see Tuhiwai Smith, 2007). What spatial theory contributes to the study of ethnicity and gender from a communication perspective is that power relations are inscribed in space (Lefebvre, 1991) and must be understood as dependent upon, and constrained by, spatial arrangements. As language and communication practices fix meanings into place, examining shifting power roles along spatial dynamics will be productive not only for the health communicator but also for any member of the structures within which Roma—and minorities in general—live.

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## Notes

1. Roma groups use, and are called, different names in different regions and countries. Some use tribe names (such as the Romanian Căldărași), others adopt wider group names (such as the British Travellers), and yet others opt for “Roma” (or “Rroma” in Romania). Roma is most often used in reaction to the commonly used “Gypsy,” with its linguistic variants of tsygane (the German Zigeuner, the Hungarian Cigany, the French tzigane, or the Romanian țigan, to name a few), and is considered most politically correct.
2. For consistency, I use “Roma” to signify the plural for the ethnic group, “Romni” for the feminine singular, “Rom” for the masculine singular, “Romani” for the adjective, and “Romany” for the language (Lemon, 2000)—recognizing at the same time the diversity of spelling and preferences across the various Romani groups.
3. I defined agency to mean, “any measure of resistance and self-determination used... to regain control” (Connell, 1997, p. 118).
4. Romanian Roma communities across the country are integrated to various degrees into the mainstream and adhere differently to tradition; yet, some of the customs still shape and affect the Romni in this study.
5. Romani CRISS started the program in partnership with, and financed by, The Catholic Committee for Fight against Hunger and for Development (in Romanian, Comitetul catolic de lupta impotriva foamei si pentru dezvoltare).
6. The exact number of health mediators is difficult to assess, as some organizations have reported the number of practicing mediators at about 500 (Romaworld, 2011), whereas others have recorded the number of trained mediators to be at 570 (Romani CRISS, 2010). These numbers have also been negatively affected by decentralization.
7. Despite no relation to the medical staff, or to city hall personnel for that matter, my association with the health mediator and the perceived hierarchy between the mediator and myself led to my label on several occasions.
8. The ninth woman had scheduling conflicts for the duration of the project.
9. All nine women who came to the meeting agreed to participate in the study and gave permission for tape recording; informed consent procedures were followed.
10. All interviews were transcribed. All translations from Romanian into English are the author’s. The women’s use of colloquial Romanian and vernacular and their free flow of ideas do not always respect grammatical or sentence-structure rules. The translation aims to convey both the content and the emotion the women’s speaking expresses.
11. All names are changed to protect the women’s confidentiality and identity.

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### **Author Biography**

**Adina Schneeweis** is an associate professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA. She specializes in international communication, with focus on Eastern Europe, ethnicity and race, advocacy communication, and the analysis of institutional discourses. Her research examines the constructions of the Gypsy or Roma communities in the press, within the advocacy movement for Roma rights, and in worldwide popular culture.