Police Ten 7 feeds racial stereotypes of Māori and Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

In a recent tweet, Auckland City Councillor Efeso Collins asked Television New Zealand (TVNZ) to drop Police Ten 7, arguing that it “...feeds on racial stereotypes”. Both the Chief Executive of the company behind Police Ten 7, and a former host, defended the show by suggesting that it provides an accurate portrayal of crime in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the current study, we coded a selection of episodes of Police Ten 7 from 2011 through to 2021. We had a single hypothesis: that Māori and Pacific peoples will be more likely to be depicted as committing aggressive crimes than Pākehā suspects. Consistent with our hypothesis, Māori and Pacific peoples were markedly more likely to be depicted committing aggressive offences than Pākehā.

In a recent tweet, Auckland City Councillor Efeso Collins asked Television New Zealand (TVNZ) to drop Police Ten 7, arguing that it “...feeds on racial stereotypes” (Figure 1). Police Ten 7 is similar to the US show COPS, with the exception that it follows the day-to-day activities of police officers in Aotearoa New Zealand. Much like COPS, Police Ten 7 is popular and award-winning, receiving Viewer’s Choice awards in 2010 and 2011, and being a 2019 finalist in the New Zealand Television Awards for best reality series.

Figure 1. Screen shot of Efeso Collins’ tweet.

Councillor Collins’ tweet generated a media firestorm. Philly de Lacey, Chief Executive of Screentime, responded by arguing that they try to provide “...an accurate portrayal of what the police are doing out in the streets” (Cardwell, 2021). Similarly, former host Graham Bell argued that the “...police don't select who they are looking for. The people who commit the crimes are the ones that select themselves to be sought" (McIvor, 2021). Despite their contestations, concern regarding Police Ten 7’s depiction of crime is not new (Lawrence, 2020; Podvoiskis, 2012), and concerns regarding how race and ethnicity are depicted in reality-crime shows are not limited to Aotearoa New Zealand (Fishman & Cavender, 2018; Nickerson, 2019).

Much of the literature on how race and ethnicity are represented in reality-crime shows has focused on US reality TV shows, including the long-running show *COPS*. Content analysis of these shows has consistently demonstrated that Black suspects are more likely to be depicted committing violent crimes than White suspects, in relation to the proportion actually carried out (Kooistra, Mahoney, & Westervelt, 1998; Monk-Turner, Martinez, Holbrook, & Harvey, 2007), and that police officers are significantly more likely to engage in aggressive behaviour when the criminal suspects are Black (Mastro & Robinson, 2000; Oliver, 1994). Speaking to the impact of these portrayals on the viewing public, research has demonstrated that exposure to these programmes increases perceptions of danger, and negative evaluations, of Black people (Oliver, 1996; Ramasubramanian, 2011).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, research has conclusively demonstrated that negative portrayals of Māori and Pacific are prominent in discourses on health (Hodgetts, Masters, & Robertson, 2004; H. Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019; Rankine & McCreanor, 2004), politics (Galy-Badenas, Gray, & Cassidy; McConville, Wetherell, McCreanor, & Barnes, 2014), and crime (Barnes, Taiapa, Borell, & McCreanor, 2013; Deckert, 2020; Maydell, 2018; McCreanor et al., 2014; Meek, 2013). However, to our knowledge, only one study has analysed the content of reality-crime shows (Podvoiskis, 2012). In that study, a content analysis was carried out of the 2010 season (15 episodes) of *Police Ten 7*. Podvoiskis (2012) reported that of the offenders arrested for committing a violent crime, 82% were Māori or Pacific. To investigate whether *Police Ten 7* continues to perpetuate these stereotypes, in the current study, a selection of episodes of *Police Ten 7* from 2011 through to 2021 were coded. We had a single hypothesis: that Māori and Pacific will be more likely to be depicted as committing violent crimes than Pākehā suspects.

Method

Sample

In this analysis, we focused on episodes of Police Ten 7 produced in the seasons since those analysed in the work of Podvoiskis (2012), in other words, Seasons 14 through to 28. Episode selection was based on availability, with a total of 25 episodes coded. Specifically, seasons 14 (n = 1), 18 (n = 2), 19 (n = 2), 20 (n = 2), 21 (n = 2), 22 (n = 4), 23 (n = 2), 24 (n = 2), 25 (n = 2), 26 (n = 2), 27 (n = 2), and 28 (n = 2).

Coding

Coding was carried out by two coders, one identifying as Asian and the other identifying as Māori and Pākehā. Each coded each episode for the type of offence committed and for the ethnicity of the suspect involved.

For each episode, each incident was coded for the type of offence the suspects were depicted as committing. These included *aggressive offences* (including, domestic argument, domestic assault, common assault, fighting), *driving related offences* (including, driving infringement, and incidents involving a car crash), *drug and alcohol related offences* (including, drug possession, being drunk in public, and drug distribution), *property related offences* (including, theft, arson, trespassing), and *other* (including being issued a warrant and noise-related offences). The inter-rater reliability for offence type was found to be .95.

In addition to the nature of the offence, the ethnicity of the alleged offender was coded. Following Podvoiskis (2012), ethnicity was classified using three methods: 1) self-identification, 2) narrator identification, and/or 3) researcher observation. Initially, an attempt was made to code ethnicity under the categories of Pākehā, Māori, Pacific, Asian (incl. Indian), and Other. However, after viewing several episodes, it became clear that reliable differentiation between Māori and Pacific peoples was extremely difficult. Thus, Māori and Pacific peoples were subsequently coded into a single category. There is obvious potential for misclassification

(or racism) when using this approach; some participants we identified as Pākehā may in fact self-identify as Māori and vice versa. However, the ethnicity with which the offenders identify can be considered as of lesser relevance than the ‘lay classifications’ made by members of the public when watching Police Ten 7. These lay classifications play a key role in the stereotypes the general public may form. The inter-rater reliability for ethnicity was found to be .89.

Results

Overall, 81 offences were coded across the 25 episodes. Suspects were primarily Māori/Pacific ($n = 42$) or Pākehā ($n = 32$), followed by Asian ($n = 3$) and a small group for whom ethnicity could not be determined ($n = 3$). With respect to the type of offence, the most common category depicted was *aggressive offences* (Table 1 and Figure 2). When classified by both ethnicity and offence type, Māori/Pacific peoples (Māori/Pacific) appear to be over-represented in a single category, namely aggressive offences compared with non-aggressive offences when combined.

Table 1. The number offences broken down by offence type and ethnicity.

Offence Type	Māori/Pacific	Pākehā	Asian	Unknown
Aggressive	19	8	1	1
Driving-Related	10	10	2	1
Property-Related	8	7	0	1
Drug & Alcohol-Related	4	5	0	0
Other	1	2	0	0

To assess Graham Bell’s argument that “...people who commit the crimes are the ones that select themselves to be sought” (McIvor, 2021), we drew on data provided by the New Zealand Police (“policedata.nz,” 2021). Specifically, focusing on aggressive offences, we calculated the total number of aggressive crimes committed by Māori/Pacific and non- Māori-non-Pacific, between 2014 and 2020. As shown in Figure 1, Māori/Pacific are over represented on Police Ten 7 (69% vs 53% of aggressive crimes) and non- Māori/Pacific are

underrepresented (31% vs 47%). Statistical analysis of these data is limited by the relatively small number of incidents included in the 25 episodes that were coded.

Figure 2. Percentage of aggressive crimes depicted on Police Ten 7 and the New Zealand Police database ("policedata.nz," 2021).

Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, Māori/Pacific were more likely to be depicted committing aggressive offences than Pākehā compared with the proportions of non-aggressive offences. Although we identified a slightly less extreme bias compared to that of Podvoiskis (2012) in the analysis of the 2010 season (69% vs. 82% of aggressive offences), our data still supports Auckland Councillor Efeso Collins' contention that Police Ten 7 "...feeds on racial stereotypes". Before discussing our results, it is important to call to attention the fact that Councillor Collins comments, in addition to generating a great deal of media attention, have resulted in him and his family receiving death threats (Latif, 2021). This response only adds to the burden of speaking out against social injustice, a burden that is disproportionately carried by the victims of that injustice.

To address Bell's argument that Police Ten 7 reflects reality, focusing on aggressive offences, we demonstrate that Māori and Pacific peoples are over-represented on Police Ten 7 relative to national crime statistics ("policedata.nz," 2021). Beyond numbers, Bell's argument ignores the contextual factors that contribute to offending, continuing the colonial tradition of depicting indigenous people as inherently violent and aggressive (Farr, 2019; Jackson, 1987; McCreanor et al., 2014; Morrison, 2009). Indeed, Bell's 'reality' is a construction built upon the hegemonic discourse of colonialism, with the depiction of Māori (and other indigenous peoples) as inherently violent (A. Moewaka Barnes et al., 2012), something that has been broadcast through communication systems of anglophone and other European empires since they broke through their horizons (Abel, McCreanor, & Moewaka Barnes, 2012).

Discourse regarding indigenous people has provided the rationale for continental scale appropriation, brutality and destruction, and has been a key driver of repressed nightmares, guilt, paranoia and, defensive hatred ever since (McCreanor, 1997). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the mass media can be seen as a key instrument of Crown policy and its enactment (Ballara, 1986; McGregor & Comrie, 2002; Spoonley & Hirsh, 1990). To this day, with an expanding presence through social networking sites, mass media can still be viewed effectively as agents of the Crown, actively maintaining and defending the colonial state (Nairn & McCreanor, 2021).

Conclusion

Police Ten 7 screens on Television New Zealand (TVNZ), a free-to-air public broadcasting network. As the name intimates, public broadcasting networks have the ostensible aim of providing a public service and engaging citizens. As a public broadcasting network in receipt of public funding, TVNZ is obliged to honour the Treaty of Waitangi by broadcasting content that protects Māori people and culture. New Zealand On Air's funding strategy 2017 and Rautaki Maori plan specifically states a values-based approach and commitment to the

Treaty of Waitangi (*NZ On Air Funding Strategy*, 2016; "Rautaki Māori," 2018). In particular, New Zealand On Air's Rautaki plan recognises that funded content should "*uphold the mana tangata and mana iwi*" ("Rautaki Māori," 2018, p. 2). By broadcasting Police Ten 7, it is clear that it is not fulfilling this commitment and time that TVNZ took this responsibility seriously, prioritising their role as a public service above their profit margin.

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