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# Crime and Prevention: A Textual Analysis

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# Crime and Prevention: A Textual Analysis

By

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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St. Paul, Minnesota  
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Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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### **Abstract**

This textual analysis study will examine local newspapers to see if they report anything on socioeconomic status, mental health or race when reporting crime or initiatives. Using content analysis, the researcher is able to evaluate any patterns in the newspaper articles and any significant findings. This study incorporated an understanding of labeling theory to gain understanding of how newspaper articles can portray different groups of individuals. This study examined local newspapers available to people in the Twin Cities area and how these newspaper articles portrayed individuals as they were researched in the literature review. In consideration of how race is presented in the media historically, it seems that this research would show a correlation that stereotypes are likely reinforced through the writing of newspaper articles.

## Introduction

The purpose of this textual analysis is to discover whether or not reporters discuss socioeconomic status, mental health, or race when writing articles. More specifically, this research looked at whether reporters of crime or reporters of initiatives discussed these topics more.

In one form or another, newspaper articles influences the majority of the population in the United States because they are easily obtained from the Internet or paper form. The articles that are written impact our beliefs, assumptions, public ideology, as well as our experiences. Happer and Philo (2013) documented the following in their research:

...we found a relationship between the prior exposure to information, often related to strength of attitude, on the subject and the degree to which the information impacted on beliefs and opinions. Those who had been least exposed to either subject were most open to adjusting their views and conversely those who arrived at the groups with most exposure were least likely to have their opinions changed by the new information. This was the case even if the information they had been exposed to was polarized, or inaccurate. (p.332).

Since crime and interventions to prevent crime are often reported in local newspapers, the public's opinion could be greatly influenced through newspaper reporting of race, socioeconomic status and mental health. Academics spotlighted the negative impact of the war on drugs on African American men (Alexander, 2011). State and local authorities developed programs to address concerns about crime.

One in three young African American men is currently under the control of the criminal justice system- in prison, in jail, on probation, or on parole- yet mass incarceration tends to be categorized as a criminal justice issue as opposed to a racial justice or civil rights issue (Alexander, 2011). One specific intervention in Minneapolis is the Minneapolis Downtown 100 initiative. Youth on the list have significant histories of police contact and are eligible to receive case management and other specific services from different agencies. The majority of the list is minority youth, and of those minority youth the majority are males. It could be assumed that when writing reports on crime in different newspapers that the topic of race would arise. With being placed on the list there is the chance that it comes with negative stigma, racial profiling, and harassment from police officers. Black people make up 13 percent of the US population, but account for 37 percent of the prison population. Laws in many states deny those with felony convictions the right to vote and the right to run for office, as well as access to many government jobs, public housing, and other benefits (Goffman, 2014). As social service workers, people need to understand the unjust system that is keeping young African Americans from having a life of opportunity. There needs to be more services available; not only for offenders but for young people before they offend and for young people who have mental health concerns.

## **Literature Review**

Researchers in the criminal justice field have performed a variety of studies regarding the statistics of the number of African American males in prison compared to other races, however the literature fails to show observation of stigma and stereotyping from the interpretation of social services workers and the view of the individuals who are serving time. Previous studies identified several key themes, which will be discussed in this literature review, including racial disparities and inequality, socioeconomic status and mental health.

### **Racial Disparities**

In the 1960s and 1970s, Black Americans achieved the full rights of citizenship that eluded them for centuries. As they successfully defended the right to vote, to move freely, to attend college, and to practice their chosen profession, the United States simultaneously began building up a penal system with no historic precedent or international comparison (Goffman, 2014). “In post- Civil War America, the southern state legislatures were confronted with growing prisoner population consisting of former slaves and an accompanying increase in expenses associated with providing these prisoners with the basic necessities of life” (Midgley & Livermore, 2009, p.466).

Due to the increase of prisoners and the increase in the cost of providing for these individuals, the southern states developed a contracting system and then these states were able to make money for keeping these former slaves. Since contractors were able to make money, the prison system in America began to grow. Fewer than 350,000 people were being held in prisons and jails nationwide in 1972, compared with more than 2 million people today (Alexander, 2011).

Just like the Jim Crow system stigmatized African Americans in the South, so too did these systems impact individuals living in the North. Even though, Northern African American's were not subject to its formal control, society continues to stigmatize black men through mass incarceration- and the social construction of the "criminalblackman"- whether they have ever been to prison or not (Alexander, 2011). The stigmatization and stereotyping of African American males in the United States needs to be reviewed and addressed.

As stated earlier, studies show that there are profound race and ethnic differences in the representation of citizens in the United States criminal Justice system. Race and ethnic disparities in violent offending and victimization are profound and long standing (Smapson & Lauritson, 1997). "A 2005 study by Steen, Engen, and Gainey found that among felony drug offenders, the odds that a black defendant will be sentenced to prison are 62% greater than the odds for similarly situated white defendants" (Research Working Group, 2012, p. 26). This is just one of many examples that show the racial differences represented in the criminal justice system.

Across the country, African Americans, Latinos, and other minorities are still overrepresented at each stage of the adjudication process (Jones, 2012). There are individuals who say that this is due to the fact that minorities just commit much more crime or that judges and other officials are racist and punish minorities more severely.

"While minorities have a higher rate of criminal activity in some crime categories, this does not explain why minority defendants who commit the same crimes and have the same criminal history as white defendants are more likely to be denied pretrial release and are sentenced more harshly" (Jones, 2012, p.1).



### **Socioeconomic Status**

Individuals of low socioeconomic status are more likely than members of the high socioeconomic status to receive a severe disposition at each of the three stages of the juvenile justice system: remedial arrest, probation, and institutionalization (Thornberry, 1973). This is also true for individuals who are African American, as stated earlier. The study done by Thornberry found that African Americans and members of low socioeconomic status are more severely punished than Whites and high socioeconomic status subjects.

Recent research suggests that individuals are generally not incarcerated because of their mental illness; rather, they land in jail and prison because of social and economic conditions (Midgley & Livermore, 2009).

“Factors that contribute to non-white persons with behavioral disorders constituting a disproportionately high percentage of the incarcerated population include: vulnerability to incarceration minor types of offenses, nuisance crime, or crimes of survival due to their illnesses; living in low-income communities targeted for aggressive policing efforts; high rates of substance use and sale coupled with discriminatory criminal sanctions; and institutional racial discrimination” (Drug Policy Institute, 2004, p. 2).

While minority youth are over represented in the justice system, research suggests that minority youth and youth of low socioeconomic status are less likely to have a history of using mental health services (Pumariega et al., 1998). The majority of youth who are from a low socioeconomic status are of a minority race therefore these two categories usually go together. The reason that these specific youth do not access mental

health services is due to their low socioeconomic class and the stigma that comes with having a mental disorder. Due to not accessing mental health services these youth are at a much higher risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

To continue, a large percentage of the homeless population have at least one diagnosable mental disorder or a substance use disorder and of this population minorities are over represented (Primm et al., 2005). This relates to the lack of services that are available to individuals who may not have health care, jobs, or stable living situations.

Policy decisions related to drug use have had a significant impact on the number of individuals who are in the criminal justice system.

“There were 154,361 more offenders sentenced to prison in 1995 than 1985, for an increase of 84 percent. The vast majority of this increase consisted of nonviolent drug and property offenders; drug offenders alone accounted for over half the increase. Less than one-in-four of the increased, involved a violent offense” (Mauer, 1999, p. 87).

The bulk of this rapid increase in incarceration rates can be traced to the “War on Drugs” and associated sentencing practices, not to changes in the level or nature of crime itself (Tonry, 1995). The “War on Drugs” targeted a population of people who were below the poverty line, these individuals were committing drug crimes because they were trying to survive and provide for their families.

### **Mental Health**

The growing number of prisoner suicides and mentally disturbed inmates seen from 1960 to 1975 spurred the courts into a reformation mindset. The courts found that prisoners have fundamental constitutional rights to basic medical and mental health care

while held in the custody of a corrections system (Midgley & Livermore, 2009). The basic medical and mental health that prisoners received was not the best care, but it was better than the services they had been receiving previously.

Jails and prisons are becoming repositories for individuals with severe mental illness or individuals who present threatening personal characteristics (Midgley & Livermore, 2009). When officers arrest these individuals with mental illness, the officers perceive them as dangerous and out of control and may not be aware of their mental state. So it is by the perception of the officer, the stigma of mental illness and inexperience with a diverse population, that many of these mentally ill individuals are of certain racial backgrounds, ethnic groups, or homeless. “The ‘urgent problem’ of the increasing number of persons with severe and persistent mental illnesses housed in local jails may be attributed to the perception of jails as being safe havens when there are inadequate community-based mental health services” (Midgley & Livermore, 2009). Based on a 2006 sample, Midgley and Livermore (2009) reported that between 55 and 63 percent of male inmates in jails and prisons had a mental health problem and, in most cases, these inmates also had a substance dependence or abuse problem as well.

Young African American men need to be given resources and help with their mental and chemical health, which in turn may help prevent these young men from getting into the criminal justice system. The City of Minneapolis agrees by stating, “Obtaining social services for chronic offenders is key in reducing crime, and those services include things like chemical dependency and mental health services, along with employment assistance. In the first year, 36 percent of offenders on the Minneapolis

downtown 100 list were provided with chemical dependency services, and 32 percent were provided with mental health services” (The City of Minneapolis, 2011, p.1).

### **Conclusion**

According to Severson (2009) many jurisdictions no longer support the incarceration of the individuals who commit misdemeanors, unless she or he committed a politically volatile crime such as drunk driving or domestic assault or is someone with an apparent mental illness for whom necessary services cannot be easily accessed. Although these specific jurisdictions are trying to keep the number of prisoners down there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in relation to race, socioeconomic status, and mental health represented in the criminal justice system in America.

When discussing this issue, it is important to look at labeling theory outlines stigma of the criminal status may increase the possibility that the individual becomes involved in deviant social crowds (Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006). To continue, according to Ward, an important aspect of the labeling theory is the argument that the process of labeling may essentially reinforce deviant behavior (Ward, 1971). This can be an issue when labeling individuals with deviant behavior and grouping them together, because they can form these “criminal” groups.

Labeling theory argues that the deviant reputation may become standard material for others in their attribution of motives to an actor (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). “The negative stereotypes associated with the criminal label may create feelings of fear and mistrust among peers and other members of the community toward juveniles known to have been officially treated as criminals” (Dodge, 1983, p.1390). There is an inadequate

amount of research with juveniles from the labeling perspective. Of the studies reviewed, the major emphasis has been on police work (Ward, 1971).

It is clear that the research that has been done shows the inequality of African American men in the United States and that social work practice and social service agencies can work to change that. It will be important for future research to look more closely at mental health in individuals who are involved in the criminal justice system. This study however serves to add to the previous research by exploring the perspective of a multidisciplinary team on the stigmatizing effects of being labeled a criminal.

## **Methodology**

### **Textual Analysis**

A Textual Analysis Method was used for this research. This method is generally used to address a research question by analyzing public texts such as newspaper articles, media stories, and journal articles. For this research, only newspaper articles were utilized.

The reason for using a textual analysis method was generated as a result of this researcher wanting to utilize newspaper articles to examine how crime is portrayed in the writing and what initiatives are being put into place to combat crime. This research did not have to be reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of the University of St. Thomas because human subjects were not utilized as a part of this research.

An inclusion criterion was used to narrow the scope of research relevance and a time frame. The inclusion criteria were also used to identify what type of media was used to conduct research.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

For the purpose of this research, the first inclusion criterion is relative to article topics. The topics included: Crime in Minneapolis, Criminal activity in the Twin Cities, Crime initiatives in the Minneapolis area, Minneapolis 100 list initiative. The types of media sources were limited to local newspaper articles. The time frame used was, January 1, 2011 until present when looking at initiatives and October 15, 2015 to present when looking at crime. Crime involving gun violence or gangs and initiatives that were preventing violence or helping the community were used. The sources for the articles include Star Tribune, Pioneer Press and MinnPost.

## **Search Strategy**

Google and University of St. Thomas Library; subscription journals and Ebooks were used to search for newspaper articles. The words that were used for the original search included: Crime in Minneapolis, Criminal activity in the Twin Cities, Crime initiatives in the Minneapolis and St. Paul area, Minneapolis 100 list initiative. This researcher tracked the number of newspaper articles screened, reviewed, rejected and accepted for the textual analysis.

## **Data Abstraction**

Initially, the researcher keyed words into Google and University of St. Thomas Library; subscription journals and Ebooks to search articles. The amount of articles reviewed was 38 separate stories. This researcher used inclusion criteria to determine if the article met the basic criteria. This researcher then printed all articles that met criteria. Articles were rejected if they did not meet criteria. The researcher narrowed the search criteria according to the findings. There were ten articles that were placed in the crime category and eleven articles that were placed in the prevention category. There were many articles that did not make it into the research; specifically, non-gun related crimes. One article did talk about a case where a father and daughter died because of a drunk driver; this article was left out because it was not a gun related article.

## **Obtained Sample**

The sample for this research started with 38 articles obtained from Google and Skateway; search terms included: Crime in Minneapolis, Criminal activity in the Twin Cities, Crime initiatives in the Minneapolis area, Minneapolis 100 list initiative. After reviewing the articles to determine whether they met inclusion criteria the researcher

ended up with 21 articles that met the criteria for the data abstraction. MinnPost published four articles, the Pioneer Press published one article and the Star Tribune published twelve articles. Each article was recognized as local news and the articles were read several times.

### **Content Analysis**

This researcher conducted a content analysis that considered facts and themes in regard to the way a story is presented. According to Sandra Mathison, content analysis is a research strategy that examines the presence of concepts in texts, such as newspaper headlines and articles, historical documents, advertisements, etc. A content analysis may be conceptual or relational and is useful for directly and unobtrusively analyzing language use, meaning, relationships, and changes over time. Roel Popping uses a definition from Shapiro and Markoff to define content analysis as:

...any systematic reduction of flow of text to a standard set of statistically manipulable symbols representing the presence, the intensity, or the frequency of some characteristics relevant to social science.

First, this researcher tracked the articles that met the research criteria for the research. Then, this researcher documented significant pieces of the relevant article. The key factors this researcher looked for were, any mention of race, socioeconomic status, mental health, and initiatives. The articles were checked a second time against the inclusion criteria stated above.



## Findings

### Crime

When looking at articles on crime, this researcher identified if the articles that met the inclusion criteria mentioned anything about socioeconomic status, substance health, mental health, or race. It was also noted as significant if there was no mention in the articles of any of these categories. (See table below).

**Table 1.**

Newspaper Articles	Socioeconomic status	Substance Health	Mental Health	Race
Teen robber guilty of random, execution-style murder in NE Minneapolis.		Dope dealing and selling Marijuana		Showed a picture of the perpetrator, African American male
Another Minneapolis homicide sparks a cry: Stop gun violence				Victim was a Somali man.
Minneapolis homicide victim was a teen shot in head while in car with baby, others				
Leading Minneapolis gang figure convicted in gun scheme				
2 dead, 1 critically hurt in two St. Paul crimes				
Twin Cities endure a week of deadly gunfire; five people have been shot dead in three days, and no arrests have been made				
Four charged in a chilling spree of murder,				Perpetrators targeted Hispanics

mayhem; Random victims were young mother who pleaded for life, man gunned down in alley				
Second shooting rocks East Side; First victim was at a vigil for a woman who was killed three years ago				
Murder, gang charges filed in St. Paul teen's death				Picture of perpetrator- African American male
Murder charges filed in St. Paul Hazel Park shooting death				Picture of suspect- African American male Picture of victim and his father- Both African American males

### **Socioeconomic status**

In all ten articles there was no mention of socioeconomic status. This researcher found this to be an interesting finding due to the fact that there were articles, such as 'Four charged in a chilling spree of murder, mayhem; Random victims were young mother who pleaded for life, man gunned down in alley'. This article discussed that these four people were robbing the individuals that they killed. So, one would assume that these four individuals were of lower economic status and having to steal money to survive. Another article, 'Teen robber guilty of random, execution-style murder in NE Minneapolis', states in the title that it was a robbery, so again a means of getting money to afford living.

### **Mental health and Substance use**

Out of all ten articles there was only one article that mentioned substance health when the author described the perpetrator as a dope dealer and stated that he was selling

marijuana out of his trunk. This researcher thinks that this is a significant finding in the fact the mental health or substance health was not mentioned in more articles.

### **Race**

Five of the ten newspaper articles pertaining to crime have some mention of race, whether it is the race of the perpetrator or the victim. Also, there were different ways in which articles mentioned race, some of the articles wrote about the race of an individual within the text, while other articles displayed pictures. Of those five articles, four mentioned African American or black males, whether the perpetrator or victim and one article mentioned Hispanics being the target of crime. This category was the most mentioned through the articles which the researcher was expecting. As stated in the literature review, research shows that there is a stigma and stereotype when it comes to minorities and the criminal justice system. There is an overrepresented number of minorities, specifically African Americans, in the criminal justice system, therefore, this researcher was expecting a high number of articles to mention race.

### **Articles that didn't match identifiers**

Overall, there were five of the ten newspaper articles that did not mention socioeconomic status, mental health, substance health, or race. In order to get a better understanding of the crime and why individuals are committing crime this researcher thinks that it is important for newspaper articles to report on the whole story, including factors such as socioeconomic status, mental and substance health, and race, so that the readers get a better idea of why these individuals are committing these crimes.

In the end, there were not as many mentions of these themes as the researcher first believed that there would be. In watching the news or listening to the radio, individuals

are more likely to hear and see more about these themes and so this researcher thought that this would be carried over into the writing of these articles.

### Initiatives

When looking at articles on initiatives, this researcher identified if the articles that met the inclusion criteria mentioned any thing about socioeconomic status, substance health, mental health, or race. It was also noted as significance if there was no mention in the articles of any of these categories. (See table below).

**Table 2.**

Newspaper Articles	Socioeconomic status	Substance Health	Mental Health	Race
Minneapolis public-private partnership finding dramatic success in reducing 'livability crimes'	Livability crimes Homeless persons	Chemical dependency	Mental health treatment	
St. Paul schools launch initiative to address safety concerns				
It's 'Lights On Afterschool Day' in Minnesota				
Minneapolis progress: 'Downtown has never been cleaner, safer or greener'	Livability crimes Housing	Drug treatment	Mental health evaluations	29-year-old white male 33-year-old black male 19-year-old black male
Get tough with downtown violent offenders- and work on preventing youth violence				
Enforce gun laws already on the books				
Gun at school prompts action; Mpls. District announces anti-				

violent campaign after discovery at Henry High				
Mpls. Reveals new unit tackling violent crime; Six veteran investigators are tasked with looking into every shooting incident.				
Minneapolis Downtown improvement District	Chronic livability crimes			
March against gun violence				Mentions Black St. Paul organizer. Picture of 3 shooting victims- all African American males.
Internal review shows major racial disparities in Metro Transit arrest and citation rates				[title of article -- central theme of article]; black adults 5x higher than White; blacks arrested 7x more often; Native Americans 5x more; arrested 8x more likely; black riders issued ticket for non-payment 26% higher than white; NA 152% more likely than White. Most serious offenses no difference in rates of warnings, citations, or arrests. Metro transit - 35% racial minority workforce (comparison with MPLS Police Dept. with 21% non-white rates)

### **Socioeconomic status**

Three of the eleven articles mentioned socioeconomic status; all pertained to livability crimes. This is important to consider when talking about interventions for preventing crime. When individuals understand why crime is being committed it helps professionals help people in lower economic statuses better. This research was expecting

there to be more newspaper articles mentioning socioeconomic status, however, there were many articles that dealt with marches, and school based crime, so socioeconomic status was not relevant in those specific articles.

### **Mental health and Substance use**

Two of the eleven articles mentioned mental health and substance health together. When talking about interventions this researcher thought that there would be more discussion on mental health and substance health.

### **Race**

Three of the eleven articles mentioned race. One of those three articles mentioned African Americans, Native Americans, and Whites while the other two articles mentioned African Americans. This researcher assumed that there would have been more mention of minority groups when discussing interventions to prevent crime, due to the fact that there is more mention of minority groups when talking about crime. In order to decrease the overrepresentation of minority groups in the criminal justice system there needs to be interventions that are targeting at risk minority populations; this would also include looking at socioeconomic status and mental health.

### **Articles that didn't match identifiers**

Overall, there were six of the eleven articles that did not mention any of these categories. This is a significant finding due to the fact that preventions and interventions should be providing services to at risk individuals who include, but are not limited to, minority groups, individuals who are in a lower socioeconomic status, individuals with severe and persistent mental illness, and individuals with chemical dependency issues. In

order for individuals to be successful they need to be provided the resources and treatment necessary for meeting their needs.

There were two articles that mentioned socioeconomic status, substance health, mental health, and race in congruence. When coming up with interventions and crime prevention it is important to look at all aspects in the lives of the individuals you are trying to serve. This researcher thinks that it should be more prominent that all of these categories are mentioned together and there are interventions that cover each of these categories.

## Discussion

This study examined the information that was available to readers in the Twin Cities area and how that information portrayed crime and crime prevention. The findings brought attention to the significant finding that there was less mention of socioeconomic status, mental and substance health and race throughout the articles that were assessed. As the literature review discussed, between 55 and 63 percent of male inmates in jails and prisons had a mental health problem and, in most cases, these inmates also had a substance dependence or abuse problem (Midgley & Livermore, 2009). When writing about individuals who commit crimes there should be more reference to mental health and/or substance health to give a better picture of why the crime is being committed and to better educate the public.

Individuals who have mental health and substance use issues are highly represented in the criminal justice system as it was mentioned in the literature review, and it is important for individuals to get mental health and substance health evaluations and treatment. Midgley and Livermore (2009) stated that, the increasing number of persons with severe and persistent mental illnesses housed in local jails may be attributed to the perception of jails as being safe havens when there are insufficient community-based mental health services. When newspapers are discussing interventions to crime there should be more emphasis on mental health and substance health. Through the literature review there were connections between socioeconomic status and mental health that were referenced, so when discussing one of these in newspaper articles it would be important to also reference the other.



The lack of reference to any one of the categories can have positive and negative aspects. It is positive in the fact that writers are giving straight facts about the crime or what the intervention is doing, rather than who specifically it is helping. The negative to this is that it leaves the reader guessing and making assumptions about who was involved in a crime, leaving an open-door for stereotyping, and in the same light, making assumptions about what groups of individuals the interventions are aimed at. A way to reduce stereotyping is to have equal representation of all cultures as well as reporting at proportionate rates would promote a more accurate representation of a community as a whole.

In consideration with how race is presented in the media historically, it seems that this research should show a correlation that racism is likely still reinforced through newspaper articles, whether conscious or not. This research displayed this; only the race of people of color were mentioned in the articles, none of the articles included discussion/inclusion of White individuals. Race was mentioned in less than 50% of the articles, crime and prevention, there was no evoking language used or descriptors or violence in relation to African American men.

As labeling theory suggests, the self-identity and behavior of individuals may be determined or influenced by the terms used to describe or classify them. It is associated with the concepts of self-fulfilling prophecy and stereotyping. This theory could have fit in this research when looking for different ways that journalists would label different individuals, however, this was not present because there were no stereotypical phrases or references used in the articles that were reviewed.

### **Implications for social work practice**

Understanding how individuals or groups of people can be portrayed through newspaper articles is an important contribution to many professions, including social work. Reading articles objectively and not making assumptions about who is being talked about is important. It is also important for social workers to educate communities about the diversity that is in Minneapolis. People who know each other and have an understanding about different cultures are less likely to jump to conclusions and stereotype. Having knowledge about socioeconomic status, mental health and race could have a positive impact on how society beings to write articles and portray different culture groups.

“Ignorance and prejudice are the handmaidens of propaganda. Our mission, therefore, is to confront ignorance with knowledge, bigotry with tolerance, and isolation with the outstretched hand of generosity” (Kofi Annan).

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