

Journal of Gender-Based Violence

“Forget TV, it will never show you the experience of the victim”: Representations of Rape in Mindhunter --Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	JGBV-D-18-00036R2
Article Type:	Open Space
Full Title:	“Forget TV, it will never show you the experience of the victim”: Representations of Rape in Mindhunter
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Abstract:	Media depictions of gendered violence often fall in line with negative stereotypes and rape myths. These depictions may influence public understandings of gendered violence and affect societal responses to victims and rape. However, media products such as crime drama can also raise awareness of these issues and be meaningful for victims of violence. The recent Netflix crime drama Mindhunter is analysed in light of these debates and although it presents a progressive, more realistic picture of gendered violence, it omits the voices and perspectives of women and victims.
Keywords:	Media; Violence against women; Rape Myths; Mindhunter
Additional Information:	
Question	Response
Key Messages Please enter 2-3 single sentence bullet points describing the key messages of the paper.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Media depictions of gendered violence often fall in line with societal stereotypes and rape myths.2. The crime drama Mindhunter provides a more progressive depiction of violence against women but omits the voices of women and victims.
Conflicts of Interest Please declare any possible conflicts of interest, or state ‘The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest’ if there are none. Further information about conflicts of interest can be found in our Ethical Guidelines .	The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.
Word Count Academic articles should be between 5000 and 7000 words in length. Policy and Practice articles should be between 2000 and 4000 words in length. Open Space pieces should be between 2000 and 4000 words	3950

in length.	
Special issue	
Is this a submission for a special issue? If so please give details of the special issue, including the Editor if known.	
Funding Information:	
Manuscript Classifications:	Conceptual or discussion piece; Gender; Sexual violence; Sociology
Manuscript Region of Origin:	UNITED KINGDOM
Author Comments:	Thank you for your consideration! NB - two of the included quotes have potentially offensive language as they are direct illustrations of the misogyny I discuss. My apologies if this is uncomfortable to read or is read as discriminatory, please do censor as you see fit for publication. Thank you.
Response to Reviewers:	Thank you to reviewers, I have made changes in line with your suggestions.

“Forget TV, it will never show you the experience of the victim”: Representations of Rape in *Mindhunter*

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Abstract:

Media depictions of gendered violence often fall in line with negative stereotypes and ‘rape myths’. These depictions may influence public understandings of gendered violence and affect societal responses to victims and rape. However, media products such as crime drama can also raise awareness of these issues and be meaningful for victims of violence. The recent Netflix crime drama *Mindhunter* is analysed in light of these debates and although it presents a progressive, more realistic picture of gendered violence, it omits the voices and perspectives of women and victims.

Key words: media; violence against women; rape myths; *Mindhunter*

Word count: 3950

“Forget TV, it will never show you the experience of the victim”:
Representations of Rape in *Mindhunter*

Key messages:

- Media depictions of gendered violence often fall in line with societal stereotypes and rape myths.
- The crime drama *Mindhunter* provides a more progressive depiction of violence against women but omits the voices of women and victims.

The influence and impact of the media has long been debated. People have voiced concerns that mass media such as television and film maintains inequality and prejudice by presenting messages in line with socially-expected stereotypes (Entman, 1993; Caringella-MacDonald, 1998) and that repetition of such homogenous messages can shape how viewers see the world (Parrott & Parrott, 2015). These concerns are particularly pressing in relation to depictions of crime, as the media can dictate what counts as a social problem (and what does not) as well as causes and solutions to these problems (Bern, 2001). In this way, TV and film demonstrate “who gets away with what... against whom” and may influence public attitudes on the acceptability of violence against certain groups of people (Grebner et al, 1980, p.710).

However, others have argued that the media can be a positive agent for change by enabling individuals to “invent their own meanings, identities and forms of life” (Kellner, 1995, p.3). Academic discourses of societal norms are not accessible to everyone (Kelly, Burton & Regan, 1996) and mainstream media representations can raise awareness of social issues such as gender inequality and traditionally ‘private’ events like rape and abuse (Kitzinger, 2001; Custers & Van den Bulck, 2012; Ahluwalia & Jackson, 2017). Crucially, victims may be put off seeking help if they do not see the reality of their experiences represented onscreen (Easteal, Holland, & Judd, 2015), whereas realistic depictions can be empowering for victims and present additional ways of responding, coping and speaking out (Kitzinger, 2001; Ahluwalia & Jackson, 2017).

It is important to note that mass media is not a homogenous entity and audiences are capable of making multiple interpretations of the entertainment that they consume (Kellner, 1995). However, in the era of #MeToo and ongoing discussions around media representation, violence against women is still a common plot device in TV and film (Britto et al, 2007; Finley, 2016) and it is therefore crucial that we engage critically with current media messages about rape, rapists and victims (Henry, 2014). This article will consider some of these debates in relation to a recent high-profile crime drama series: Netflix’s *Mindhunter*.

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***Mindhunter* (2017)**

Mindhunter is an American crime procedural drama that was released via streaming service Netflix in 2017. It is loosely based on a popular true crime book written by retired FBI agent John E. Douglas – which also influenced *The Silence of the Lambs* – and follows two fictional agents, Ford and Tench, as they interview incarcerated serial murderers and rapists whilst developing criminal profiling as a tool to investigate violent crime. Ford is young and idealistic and becomes enamoured with the ‘celebrity’ of the killers that they interview, whereas stoic veteran Tench provides a more thoughtful voice of reason for the show. Other major characters include consulting psychologist Dr Carr (loosely based on Dr Ann Burgess) and Debbie, a sociology student and Ford’s girlfriend. The show is set in the late-1970s and opts for a stylistic slow-burn over high-paced action; there are no car chases, shootouts or last-minute rescues and the inclusion of real-life murderers (such as Edmund Kemper, Jerry Brudos and Richard Speck) adds to the series’ realistic tone.

Mindhunter garnered highly positive ratings (Dietz, 2017) and as one of Netflix’s most-watched shows of 2017 (Dwyer, 2017 – see Note 1) with a commissioned second series due for release in 2019, it is worthy of critical analysis with regards to its representations of violence against women.

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Violence Against Women

Historically, mass media has been critiqued for normalising and distorting the reality of gendered violence, often in line with the ‘rape myths’ which pervaded many elements of society (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1991). Despite being repeatedly debunked, these myths persist in public and professional understandings of victimisation and can lead to the exoneration of rapists, low disclosure and conviction rates and poor treatment of victims by services who are supposed to support them (e.g. Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Jordan, 2004). Media depictions often replicate these myths by glamourising rape and presenting violence against women in a way that is ‘titillating’ to viewers (Reiner et al, 2001; Britto et al, 2007) which reinforces the falsity that such crimes are motivated by sexual desire rather than power or misogyny (Doherty & Anderson, 1998; Custer den Bulck, 2012). TV and film often simplify rape into an ‘episodic’, one-off event occurring outside of the context of the societal factors which underpin and enable it (Britto et al, 2007; Frazier & Falmagne, 2014; Eastal et al, 2015) and there are concerns that audiences have become so used to images of violence against women that it has been normalised as part of the female experience (Jewkes, 2011). This adherence to rape myths places the media as part of the ‘conductive

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1 context' (Kelly, 2007) which enables and maintains violence against women in society (End
2 Violence Against Women, 2011).

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5 Crime drama may be especially influential to viewers, as these series often claim to be
6 based on real-life cases which gives their messages validity and credibility (Britto et al,
7 2007). The blurry distinctions between news reporting, dramatic reconstruction and drama
8 make it hard to differentiate between factual representations and creative license (Jewkes,
9 2011); essentially, viewers might believe that crime shows reflect reality more so than other
10 genres. Although *Mindhunter* opts for realism by featuring real crimes and dialogue from
11 original police interviews (Tallerico, 2017), it does not sensationalise violence against
12 women. Rape is not shown on screen but presented through descriptions of acts and
13 injuries, perpetrator accounts and a brief interaction with a surviving victim, all of which
14 highlight the severity and impact of violence without eroticising it.
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23 Victims in crime drama are often reduced to corpses, crime scene photos or forensic
24 evidence (Reiner et al, 2001; Houlihan, 2009). When they are given more characterisation, it
25 is often in line with stereotypical ideals of what makes a 'legitimate' victim: young,
26 vulnerable, attractive and white (e.g. Brinson, 1992; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Custers & Van
27 den Bulck, 2012). Older women, lesbians or women of colour are rarely included and male
28 victims are over-represented, as are female perpetrators; these distortions diminish the
29 realities of gendered violence (Caringella-Macdonald, 1998; Bern, 2001) yet are prevalent in
30 shows which typically focus on violence against women such as *Law & Order: SVU* and
31 *Criminal Minds* (Britto et al, 2007; Houlihan, 2009; Finley, 2016).
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40 Of the victims portrayed in *Mindhunter*, most are female (one is a young boy), two are young
41 and white (Beverly Jean and Lisa) and one is a Hispanic older woman (Ms Gonzalez), which
42 partly challenges the notion of who makes a 'legitimate' victim whilst reflecting the gendered
43 nature of sexual violence. When victims appear in photos the images are non-gratuitous,
44 mostly clothed and in non-sexual positions. It is also common for victims in TV and film to be
45 portrayed as weak and passive creatures or superhuman avengers (Britto et al, 2007; Henry,
46 2014; Finley, 2016) and this simplistic binary overlooks the complex and creative ways that
47 women resist, survive and recover from violence (Kelly et al, 1996; Frazier & Falmagne,
48 2014). Although all but one of the victims in *Mindhunter* are killed during their assaults, the
49 show acknowledges their resistance through fighting, 'playing along' or being emotionally
50 'tough'.
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1 Sexual violence is often framed by the media as 'punishment' for stepping outside of
2 expected gender roles and victims are frequently shown as blaming themselves, which
3 suggests that women *should* feel responsible for what happens to them (Brinson, 1992). The
4 prevalence of these stereotypes in crime drama may complicate society's response to
5 violence by normalising the abuse of women and contributing to a culture of victim blame
6 whilst also socialising women to see themselves as victims (Jewkes, 2011). *Mindhunter*
7 reflects the tendency to blame victims but also challenges it. When speaking with the agents,
8 Ms Gonzalez searches for reasons for her attack: "I never hurt a soul, I don't have any
9 enemies, I don't dress like a whore, I'm an old lady". Although the agents do not directly
10 challenge her attempt to locate culpability within herself, they do shift their focus onto the
11 actions and motivations of the perpetrator.
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20 The interviewed murderers also reflect victim blaming attitudes. Brudos frames his crimes as
21 provoked by his victims' appearance – "that's what you get... when you want people to look
22 at you" – while Rissell use his victim's responses to justify killing them – "I'm trying to rape
23 her and she won't shut up..." and "this blonde chick, she would not stop with the questions".
24 Kemper centres himself as a victim of women's disinterest – "women were initially indifferent
25 to me" – and ultimately blames his mother for his crimes: "if a woman humiliates her little boy
26 he will become hostile and violent and debased." By putting such statements in the mouths
27 of odious, manipulative men, the show highlights the ridiculousness of blaming victims (or
28 mothers) for the actions of perpetrators.
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37 A recurrent theme in the show is the linking of rape and murder with the negative attitudes
38 that men have towards women and this devaluation of women is repeatedly challenged by
39 Tench. When mothers are blamed for their sons' violence, he refers to the absent fathers.
40 He defends women's rights to drink alone in bars when other officers speculate as to their
41 worth or character. He dismisses the perpetrators' justifications for their crimes – "he's telling
42 you what he's guessed you want to hear... he tailored his bullshit to fit" – and openly
43 challenges Ford's use of misogynistic language when attempting to build rapport with Speck
44 and Devier. It is considered especially important for male characters to speak out against
45 gender inequality in media (Ahluwalia & Jackson, 2017) and through Tench, *Mindhunter* is
46 able to reflect sexist attitudes whilst simultaneously condemning them.
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55 Similarly, the link between violence and the sexualisation of women is explored without
56 sexualising the characters. The rape and murder of 12-year-old Lisa is used to highlight the
57 eroticisation of youth and when Ford sexualises Lisa to extract a confession from her
58 murderer ("you got to make it with that young pussy before it turns into mom"), he is
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1 condemned by the other officers. Tench compares photos that Brudos took of his victims to
2 *Playboy* shoots and the sexualised female form in adverts, querying the impact that such
3 everyday images may have on how men see women: “sex is our trigger”. When Beverly
4 Jean’s sexuality is questioned – highlighting a male entitlement to sex that is not afforded to
5 women – Ford defends female desire: “girls like fooling around just as much as boys”.
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7 Debbie corrects Ford’s view of sexual violence but pointing out that it is a result of the way
8 that men view women, not how they view sex. Again, having sympathetic characters
9 question sexist attitudes adds more weight to the validity of these challenges.
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15 As Tench provides some challenge to the devaluation of women, the show also uses Ford to
16 explore more subtle forms of sexism and misogyny. He repeatedly dismisses Debbie’s
17 thoughts and feelings (“could you just listen?” “you mean shut up and adore you?”, “well, you
18 could try it”) and shows little empathy for the female victims. The character with whom he
19 develops the closest bond throughout the series is not Tench, Debbie or Dr Carr but
20 Kemper, who expresses extreme justifications for gendered violence: “women are born with
21 this little hole between their legs, which every man on earth just wants to stick something
22 into. And they’re weaker than men, so they learn strategies. They deploy their minds, and
23 their sex, and they intuitively learn to humiliate”. Rather than challenge Kemper’s women-
24 hating sentiments, Ford encourages the conversation. His willingness to express
25 misogynistic attitudes (“what gave you the right to take eight ripe cunts out of the world?”)
26 while building rapport with the perpetrators – ostensibly in the name of science – blurs the
27 distinction between the show’s ‘good’ and ‘bad’ guys and illustrates the ways that individuals
28 and institutions can be complicit in the devaluation and oppression of women (Campbell,
29 2017). Although the show suggests that Ford’s willingness to ‘gaze into the abyss’ will be his
30 downfall, it is problematic to explore an issue such as misogyny through the protagonist, as it
31 is his perspective and development with which the viewer is most encouraged to empathise.
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45 Although *Mindhunter* endeavours to portray sexual violence in a more realistic way, it still
46 follows crime drama tradition of omitting victims’ voices. It could be argued that it is
47 inevitable for victims to be absent in a show whose focus is serial murder yet there could
48 have been more effort to paint them as rounded, living people who deserve sympathy and
49 outrage at their deaths. There is brief suggestion that this omission is recognised, however,
50 through a female district attorney who entreats jurors to “forget TV, it will never show you the
51 experience of the victim... when you go from the abstract idea of murder to the visceral
52 reality, you can no longer be objective.” However, *Mindhunter* still ends up translating the
53 experiences of women through the voices and actions of men.
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Sadly, the omission of victims' voices can be extended to women in general. *Mindhunter* is set in the 1970s, when gender equality was especially contested and Debbie and Dr Carr consistently challenge the patriarchal structures they exist within. Debbie confidently confronts Ford's sexist attitudes and eschews societal expectations of women as obedient, polite and 'smiling'. She questions law enforcement's black and white view of criminality by discussing Durkheim and guides Ford's application of sociological theory to investigation. Similarly, Dr Carr challenges dominant understandings of violence by focusing on the wider applications of profiling and striving for "a deeper impact than solving a single murder". She recognises the need to look beyond simplistic versions of rapists ("they need to be seen to have power over someone") and compared to her male counterparts, she remains objective and emotionally unaffected by the graphic content of their interviews. Additionally, her sexuality is briefly referenced – she has a female partner – to add to the complexity of her decision to move to Washington DC rather than to make her 'edgy' or titillating. Dr Carr is not sexualised by the show, other than through a brief observation from Ford ("Wendy has something... maybe a little sexual") which is immediately dismissed as inappropriate by Tench.

Yet despite the inclusion of complex, intelligent women who challenge the status quo, *Mindhunter* replicates the gender inequalities it highlights by sidelining these characters in both screen-time and development. Dr Carr is pivotal in the profiling research yet does not take part in the interviews and is repeatedly dismissed by other agents. Debbie's empowered sexuality is presented solely from Ford's perspective; when he rejects her intimacy after being reminded of Brudos' paraphillic obsession with high-heeled shoes, her physical and emotional needs are also ignored by the camera and director who cut to another scene. It could be argued that the downplayed roles of these characters is indicative of the inequality of the time period but as Dr Carr is based on a real influential person (who pioneered treatment programs for victims of abuse), more of the narrative could have been told through her perspective. The female characters have little growth throughout the show, do not interact with other women and act primarily as allies or challengers to their male counterparts. It is interesting that a show which explores the treatment of women by men and the ways that society enables such behaviours ends up mostly marginalising its own female voices.

Perpetrators

Some consideration should be given to the perpetrators. Extreme forms of sexual violence such as serial murder are over-represented in drama (Brinson, 1992; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Custers & Van den Bulck, 2012) and do not reflect the continuum of behaviours that

1 are experienced by women as harassment and violence (Kelly, 1988; Henry, 2014). The
2 men who commit violence are usually shown as sadistic, out-of-control and mentally ill
3 (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Reiner et al, 2001; Parrott & Parrott, 2015) or as suave and
4 charming Hannibal Lectors and Dexters (Houlihan, 2009); this othering obscures the fact
5 that most perpetrators are 'average' family members, partners and friends (Kelly, 1996;
6 Houlihan, 2009) and focuses on individual pathology rather than the societal factors that
7 enable sexual violence (Kelly, 1988).
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13 Despite the show's inclusion of real murderers, *Mindhunter* eschews the 'cult of serial killer'
14 by focusing on the investigation and aftermath rather than the violent acts themselves. The
15 murderers are not shown as monsters but neither are they glamourised; they are
16 unattractive, unremarkable and self-deluding and Tench repeatedly dismisses Ford's
17 apparent admiration of them. Kemper describes himself as "a regular guy" but despite his
18 charms we are shown his lack of remorse and manipulative nature. Similarly, the agents also
19 investigate victims who are attacked by boyfriends, family members and acquaintances
20 (Beverly Jean, Lisa), reminding us that violent men live in our communities and are not just
21 random strangers.
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30 Interestingly, *Mindhunter* does feature one female perpetrator (Rose) who is coerced by
31 Beverley Jean's murderers to cover up the crime. She is especially vilified by the police,
32 which is in line with society's tendency to demonise female more than male criminality
33 (Jewkes, 2011), yet Rose is depicted in a sympathetic – if not blameless – light. The show
34 also reinforces the gendered nature of violence when Ford talks to a classroom of children
35 about deviancy; when asked if only boys are disturbed, he answers "yes".
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42 Finally, although the show's decision to present violence through perpetrator accounts rather
43 than victims' voices does omit the female perspective, it also centres rape with the rapists.
44 By giving the murderers ample time to express their misogynistic views, *Mindhunter* clearly
45 posits gendered violence as the result of male entitlement and devaluation of women rather
46 than dismissing it as the action of a few deviant individuals. As public discussions around
47 sexual violence are shifting to consider the role of societal attitudes more so than individual
48 victims and perpetrators, media representations of these factors may be particularly
49 important.
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57 **Conclusion**

58 To return to the notion that the media presents selective messages in line with social
59 stereotypes, *Mindhunter* can be seen as a progressive addition to crime drama. It is a show
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1 about misogyny but is not misogynistic as it repeatedly criticises the attitudes it presents.

2 The show demonstrates the ways that individuals and institutions – such as law enforcement
3 – may be complicit in gendered violence by adhering to and replicating stereotypes and rape
4 myths. Although set in a previous era, the show’s exploration of more insidious forms of
5 sexism as well as outward violence against women is just as relevant today.
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10 However, the show does have limitations. Rape is shown as synonymous with murder and a
11 crime which still affects mostly young, white women. Regardless of the more complex
12 exploration of sexual violence and victim blame, the victims are ultimately denied a voice.
13 The female characters may be progressive and challenging to the status quo but are passive
14 and secondary to their male counterparts.
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20 As a final note, *Mindhunter’s* credits feature stark images of female bodies interspersed with
21 investigative equipment, a brief reminder to the observant viewer that behind crime drama,
22 there are real women and real victims. To return to the show’s appeal to “forget TV, it will
23 never show you the experience of the victim”, media products like *Mindhunter* may provide
24 more progressive and nuanced representations of gender inequality and gendered violence
25 but they do not fully reflect the lived experience of women and victims.
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31 Notes

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35 1. Netflix does not publish official viewing figures for its content.
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37 **Funding details:** no funding support has been obtained for this work.

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39 The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

40
41 **Acknowledgements:** The Author would like to thank Dr Maddy Coy (University of Florida)
42 and Professor Liz Kelly (London Metropolitan University) for their support and
43 encouragement in the production of this article.
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