

(Countering) Racial Stereotypes in Hollywood:

A Case Study of 'Just Mercy' (2019)



Master Social Inequalities

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Abstract

The Hollywood movie scene has long been and still is to a great extent, dominated by highly problematic stereotypical portrayals of Black males rooted in the slavery era. However, recently new efforts are made to increase ‘diversity’ in Hollywood movie production teams and casts using a so-called inclusion rider to ensure that these are equipped with adequate knowledge surrounding Blacks to accurately represent their reality. Drawing on secondary data using hybrid content analysis, this thesis aims to research *the presence of stereotypes and counter-stereotypes in inclusion rider movies* with *Just Mercy* (2019) as its case study. The findings show that not only does ‘Just Mercy’ contain significantly more counter-stereotypes than stereotypes: it goes beyond this by acknowledging instances of prejudice, discrimination, and racism. By doing so, it addresses the thin line between stereotype reproduction and realism, shows potential for other inclusion rider movies to also weaken the activation of existing stereotypes, and provides a basis for the public to critically reflect on the constructed realities they consume in the entertainment industry.

Keywords: *(Counter-)stereotyping - Hollywood - Masculinity - Racial inequalities - Realism*

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1. Introduction

“The contemporary status of race in mainstream American culture is intimately bound to the process of representations within and through the mass media”

(Glenn & Cunningham, 2009, p. 136).

Cinematic representations of Blacks in Hollywood, especially those of males, are largely based on inaccurate and incomplete information received by the predominantly White majority that produces and consumes such dominant culture (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Taylor et al., 2019). In case of little social interactions with Blacks, Whites gain most, if not all of such interactions through the media, often through extremely stereotypical depictions (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Barnett & Flynn, 2014). Thus, Whites are generally inaccurately informed on the nature and behavior of Black communities in the United States (hereafter: US), hence risking the reinforcement of already highly stereotypical cinematic depictions of Blacks. The White dominated cultural industry, therefore, has an important function in either perpetuating or weakening such socially constructed stereotypes (Cappiello, 2019; Kumar et al., 2022). Hence, it is important that movie production teams and casts contain higher rates of racial diversity than they do now (Miville & Ferguson, 2014; Cappiello, 2019).

Recently, a newly developed concept called ‘inclusion rider’ has been introduced to ensure a proportionate share of, amongst others, Black people in movie casts and production teams (UNC Annenberg, n.d.; Cappiello, 2019; Waldman, 2019). The first movie producer to have used an inclusion rider is Warner Bros with its movie ‘Just Mercy’ (2019), which’ plot is based on a true storyline following a Black lawyer who heads to Alabama to help a Black man who was wrongfully sentenced to death for the murder of a White girl, while afflicted by legal inadequacies and institutional racism (IMBd, n.d.). Being a forerunner in the inclusion rider process (USC Annenberg, n.d.), as well as the non-fictive storyline of the movie concerned with major racial inequalities in the US (IMBd, n.d.), ‘Just Mercy’ was considered an ideal case to investigate the use of (counter-)stereotypes given the moviemakers’ engagement with the topic of race and racism. Since Black males are “the most visibly stereotyped racial group in the USA” (Taylor et al., 2019, p. 213) and given that the main characters of ‘Just Mercy’ are male, Black males have been chosen as the focus of this research. Other researchers have analyzed the movie ‘Just Mercy’ entirely from the perspective of racism and/or racist stereotypes within the US criminal justice system (see e.g., Marquette, 2020; Altschuler, 2021). Albeit very relevant, my research differs from this by considering more general racial (counter-)stereotypes (e.g., socio-economic status, education), likewise going beyond the criminal justice system by addressing (the implications of) stereotypes more generally. Hence, my research allows for the consumption of a broader spectrum of

stereotypes regarding Black males, to shed light on the complexity of racism embedded in our contemporary society. Additionally, the depiction of counter-stereotypes provides room for alternative interpretations of Black males (Kumar et al., 2022). As such, I aim to answer the following research question: ‘What is the presence of stereotypes and counter-stereotypes in inclusion rider movies?: A case study of ‘Just Mercy’’, using hybrid content analysis. To do so, the inclusion rider concept is first further explored. Thereafter, the theoretical section of this research elaborates on Black masculinity, the cognitive nature and implications/advantages of (counter-)stereotypes, as well as discussing in more detail the use hereof in past and recent Hollywood productions and its changing nature (i.e., the thin line between stereotype reproduction and realism). Next, the findings are presented with detailed examples and quotes from ‘Just Mercy’, whereafter they are analyzed more generally in the chapter that follows. Finally, conclusions are drawn and followed up by limitations and recommendations for future research.

2. Contextualizing the Inclusion Rider

The inclusion rider was first introduced by Professor Stacy Smith (2014) (University of Southern Carolina) to address the scarcity of racial and gender diversity in Hollywood. Later, the term gained public attention when actress Frances McDormand mentioned the inclusion rider in her speech at the Oscars (2018), commending a ‘diversity’ percentage of at least 50 in Hollywood casts and crews (Waldman, 2019). More specifically, this refers to the inclusion of a proportionate number of underrepresented communities (e.g., people of color) (Cappiello, 2019).

With the Hollywood movie industry being dominated by White actors and producers, many echo the importance of the inclusion rider in terms of accurate portrayals of historically marginalized and underrepresented communities. In terms of race, White media consumers and hence moviemakers too are for the most part, if not entirely, affected by negative and generalizable portrayals of Blacks in the media, supposedly rightly informing them on the stances of Blacks in US society (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Barnett & Flynn, 2014). Therefore, movies simply contain a mixture of moviemakers’ “popular tastes and desires” (Barnett & Flynn, 2014, p. 28) as well as “thin ideals” (Capiello, 2019, p. 219). In fact, society is largely dominated by patterned human behaviors based on fixed perceptions of social roles, often translating into well-known stereotypes (Biddle, 1956; Miville & Ferguson, 2014). Therefore, the lack of racial diversity in Hollywood coexists with the risk of reinforcing such stereotypes more generally due to wrong- and harmful perceptions, as well as inadequate knowledge of Black communities amongst movie casts and production teams (e.g., the idea that Black people are generally low-educated) (Miville & Ferguson, 2014; Cappiello, 2019).

Despite its relevance, the inclusion rider is also subject to criticism, as some argue that it fuels reverse discrimination (Cappiello, 2019). Consequently, others are concerned with the willingness of movie companies to adopt the inclusion rider as they might fear its restraints (i.e., contractual burdens) or controversiality (i.e., criticisms from the public) (Xu et al., 2019). Hence, critics fear that the inclusion rider is ineffective in the long term, especially given the volume of underrepresented communities in US society (Cappiello, 2019). The latter is especially problematic given that the majority of Hollywood movie producers are and historically have been White, hence powerful in perpetuating existing White dominance in the movie scene (Cappiello, 2019).

2.1 An Introduction to ‘Just Mercy’

Based on a true story, ‘Just Mercy’ revolves around a young lawyer (Bryan Stevenson) moving to Alabama after graduating from Harvard to defend the wrongly condemned, later in cooperation with local advocate Eva Ansley. One particularly peculiar case involves the story of Walter McMillian (‘Johnny D’), who was wrongfully sentenced to death for the murder of a White

woman. Bryan is extremely concerned with Johnny D and he does everything in his power to reopen his case to eventually get him out of prison, while facing severe racial injustices within and outside of the US criminal justice system (IMBd, n.d.). The characters covered in this thesis are listed in Figure 1 (see below).

Figure 1

Overview of Just Mercy's Main Characters

Name	Type of character	Race
Walter McMillian (goes by 'Johnny D')	Inmate on death row (wrongfully convicted)	Black
Bryan Stevenson	Lawyer (amongst others of Johnny D, Herbert, and Henry)	Black
Eva Ansley	Bryan's assistant for the Equal Justice Initiative	White
Minnie McMillian	Johnny D's wife	Black
Herbert Richardson (goes by 'Herb')	Fellow inmate on death row	Black
Anthony Ray Hinton (goes by 'Ray')	Fellow inmate on death row (wrongfully convicted)	Black
Henry	Fellow inmate on death row	Black
Ronda Morrison	The woman who's murder Johnny D is (wrongfully) convicted of	White

3. Theoretical Framework

In short, this chapter explores, in the following sequence: The origins and conceptualizations of Black masculinity; the cognitive nature and implications of racial (counter-) stereotyping (see Figures 2 and 3); the thin line between the reproduction of such stereotypes and New Black Realism; and finally, the role herein of Hollywood movies, as transmitters of culture, throughout history.

3.1 Black Masculinity

Black masculinity, generally referred to as the expression of traits attributed to Black males, is intrinsically linked to White masculinity with Whites dominating both society and the movie industry for decades (O'Brien, 2017; Hand, 2018; Capiello, 2019). Consequently, depictions of White masculinity are continuously characterized as 'powerful' and 'being in control' (O'Brien, 2017), whereas Black masculinity often includes negative stereotypical depictions such as Black males being prone to violence and requiring substantial social regulation (Hand, 2018). As the concept of Black masculinity is relatively broad, it invokes stereotypes in various forms, thus going beyond criminality, depicting Black males as an "endangered species" more generally (Hand, 2018, p. 5). According to Richardson (2007), Black masculinity is often linked to Black men being "inherently lustful" (p. 4) and sexually aggressive, with a particular interest in White women. Although the Black male body is also positively associated with elements such as vitality and strength, these are often followed by more negative depictions of criminal and hypersexual stereotypes stemming from Black masculinity. These include (e.g.) eroticism and destructiveness, referring to the Black male body as 'uncontrollable' in terms of both criminality and sexuality (O'Brien, 2017).

In short, Black masculinity continues to be measured according to White standards, wherefore the depictions of Black masculinity by Hollywood producers control and dominate the stereotypical constructions of Black males (Hand, 2018). Nonetheless, contemporary (cinematic) depictions of Black masculinity are gradually becoming more nuanced (O'Brien, 2017; Stamps, 2021), including for instance the portrayal of Black males as ambitious, prestigious, and eager to combat homophobia (Stamps, 2021). The latter is further exemplified in the following chapter.

3.2 (Counter-)stereotypes of Black Males

The roots of stereotyping lay in the categorization of people, often according to physical features (i.e., skin tone) of so-called in and out-groups. This type of categorization remains part of the regular human cognitive brain until it starts involving prejudice, which is when categorizing people turns into stereotyping. In this case, neutral information is neglected and the out-group is perceived as homogeneous to a greater extent than the in-group, thus involving fierce

generalizations (Fiske, 2000; Maddox, 2006; Bonam et al., 2020). Racial stereotyping in particular goes beyond people and also targets physical spaces, such as the stereotype that Black spaces are poverty-stricken (Bonam et al., 2020). Such socially constructed ideas date back to the slavery era, where the superiority of Whites over Blacks was institutionalized, with disparities between the two widening ever since through the use of racial stereotypes (Maddox, 2006). The consistent and intergenerational transmission hereof runs the risk of presenting wrongful stereotypes as factual information (Green, 1998).

Recently, existing literature agrees on several well-known stereotypes of Black males, as presented in Figure 2. Upon acknowledgment that racial stereotypes differ by racial group, without the intention to deem any of them as more or less harmful, this research focuses on Black stereotyping for the sake of ‘Just Mercy’ as the case study decided upon. This is given the gender of the movie’s main characters and because Black males are most visibly stereotyped in US society (Taylor et al., 2019). The following chapters further explore how stereotyping is used by the movie industry of Hollywood throughout history.

Figure 2

Racial Stereotypes

Racial stereotypes		Codes ¹
1.	Black males are either unemployed or have blue-collar positions (Tukachinsky et al., 2017, Taylor et al., 2019)	Poverty
2.	Black males are criminal and/or have aggressive characters, wherefore they constitute a threat (Green, 1998; Tukachinsky et al., 2017; Hand, 2018; Taylor et al., 2019; Bonam et al., 2020)	Criminality
3.	Black males are poor or are from/reside in poverty-stricken areas (Hand, 2018; Bonam et al., 2020)	Poverty
4.	Black males are unintelligent (Taylor et al., 2019; Bonam et al., 2020)	Personality traits
5.	Black males have few social, economic, and educational opportunities (Maddox, 2006)	Poverty

¹ These codes have been developed based on thematic commonalities within the existing stereotypes (e.g., ‘poverty’ in the stereotypes regarding unemployment, poverty-stricken areas, and few socio-economic opportunities).

6.	Black males are inferior (Green, 1998; Maddox, 2006; Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Adams-Bass et al., 2014)	Inferiority (in position and treatment)
7.	Black males often provide services for White characters (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Adam-Brass et al., 2014)	Inferiority (in position and treatment)
8.	Black males are hypersexual (Tyree & Jacobs, 2014; Tukachinsky et al., 2017; Hand, 2018; Rosenthal et al., 2020)	Personality traits

More recently, efforts are made to combat these long-lasting stereotypes using so-called ‘counter-stereotyping’, to visually or verbally weaken existing stereotypes (Finnegan et al., 2015; Tukachinsky et al., 2017). This phenomenon is also known as ‘counter-storytelling’, which too is used for critiquing “normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes” (Ellison & Solomon, 2019, p. 224). In other words, it is a method to have marginalized communities’ voices heard, to then oppose narratives of oppression (i.e., racism, classism), and to eventually pursue social justice (Ellison & Solomon, 2019). Commonly used counter-stereotypes for Black males in current literature have been listed in Figure 3.

Counter-stereotyping can also be achieved through the visual portrayal of Blacks in (e.g.) White people-dominated occupations, likewise lowering the activation of racial stereotypes (Finnegan et al., 2015; Tukachinsky et al., 2017). Counter-stereotypes thus have the potential to alter existing race perceptions, especially when these are predominantly shaped by the media. In fact, compared to interactions with Blacks in person, the media tend to be more negative resulting precisely from the stereotypes used in the digital world to portray Blacks (Halt, 2013). The use of counter-stereotypes in the movie scene can be classified in different ways. Some change the race (i.e., from White to Black) of iconic movie characters (e.g., superheroes) while continuing to reflect their heroic stance (Tyree & Jacobs, 2014). Others focus on Black individuals and the positive portrayal of such minority characters by countering the dominant narrative (e.g., the story of a rural Black man who successfully graduates from a highly-ranked university) (Halt, 2013).

Figure 3

Racial Counter-Stereotypes

Racial counter-stereotypes		Codes ²
1.	Black males have successful professions (Holt, 2013; Tukachinsky et al., 2017)	Respected and successful
2.	Black males are respected authority/heroic figures (Tyree & Jacobs, 2014; Tukachinsky et al., 2017)	Respected and successful
3.	Black males have good moral characters and intentions (Tyree & Jacobs, 2014; Dunn & McLaughlin, 2019)	Good moral character
4.	Black males are law-abiding and peaceful (Tyree & Jacobs, 2014)	Law-abiding
5.	Black males are not defined by their involvement in criminal activities/convictions and are capable of turning their life around (Holt, 2013)	Law-abiding
6.	Black males have the potential to successfully pursue economic and educational opportunities (Holt, 2013)	Respected and successful
7.	Black males are intelligent (Tyree & Jacobs, 2014)	Intelligence

3.3 The Thin Line Between Reproduction of Stereotypes and Racial Realism:

A Historical Overview

Stereotypes of Black males have historical roots in the slavery era and are therefore deeply ingrained in US society, oftentimes held for generations despite their inaccuracy (Green, 1998; Maddox, 2006). Such deeply ingrained beliefs originate from White racist behavior, resulting in decades of ongoing oppression and dehumanization, causing Whites to treat Blacks as one collective, rather than individually (Fiske, 2000; Maddox, 2006; Bonam et al., 2020). Likewise, stereotypes are easily upheld and reproduced as racism has become institutionalized (Taylor et al., 2019).

The portrayal of Black people as inferior to Whites started in the theaters and was later transmitted into the movie scene. Black characters, if at all displayed in the early beginnings of

² These codes have been developed based on thematic commonalities within the existing counter-stereotypes (e.g., 'respected and successful' in the counter-stereotypes regarding successful professions, respected authority figures, and the potential to be successful).

Hollywood, were mistrustfully problematic stereotypical depictions of Black people (Green, 1998; Barnett & Flynn, 2014). This involved Blackface performances by Whites, aiming to humiliate Black people for entertainment purposes of their White public (Cripps, 1993; Green, 1998; Barnett & Flynn, 2014). This was for instance done through the exaggeration of the physical characteristics of Black people, such as the use of woolly dark wigs (Green, 1998). In the 1970s, the so-called Blaxploitation genre emerged in Hollywood, to target a more diverse audience, including historically marginalized groups (i.e., Black entertainment). Already at this point in history, a comparison can be made with the current inclusion rider in terms of the importance granted to Black casts and production teams (Hammond, 2006; Bausch, 2013). Although considered controversial by some for its use of racial stereotypes and the romanticized portrayal of liberation, others praised the Blaxploitation genre for speaking out against institutional racism through the portrayal of storylines in which Blacks create agency in dealing with the implications thereof (e.g., poverty) (Bausch, 2013; Harris & Mushtaq, 2013).

According to Bausch (2013), the Blaxploitation genre made room for so-called New Black Realism in the early 1990s, which, rather than being “rooted in a fantasy of liberation and Black Power rhetoric” (p. 258), critiqued that fantasy and “revised these images into a gritty reality” (p. 259). The New Black Realism genre was all about creating awareness on understanding the role of racism, as well as addressing the imbalances stemming from that (Hammond, 2006; Bausch, 2013). This combination of the mainstream portrayal of Blacks (e.g., as being dangerous or deviant), yet to show and/or critique this reality to acknowledge its roots in historical domination, discrimination, and racism, contributed to actively humanizing Blacks (Hammond, 2006), especially males (Bausch, 2013).

Herewith, New Black Realism encourages the (White) audience to critically reflect on how such stereotypes and narratives have been and are being constructed (Hammond, 2006; Bausch, 2013). For instance, US urban city centers in the 1970s were indeed predominantly composed of Blacks in blue-collar positions, yet the questions that remain are whether these statistics are still accurate and what historical events contributed to this development (Bausch, 2013). In short, although the popularity of New Black Realism started to decline in the late 1990s due to the emergence of other genres of Black cinema, it has set the stage for alternative depictions of Black males in contemporary Hollywood, including initiatives like the inclusion rider (Bausch, 2013). Most importantly, it draws attention to the importance of distinguishing between the reproduction of stereotypes and racial realism (Hammond, 2006; Bausch, 2013).

3.4 Movies as Transmitters of Culture

Visual media are undoubtedly important in transmitting culture and its depictions on screen are even argued to be the “primary source of storytelling in American society” (Adam-Bass et al., 2014, p. 369) thanks to its increasing accessibility for the public (Barnett & Flynn, 2014). Movies, in particular, are associated with stories consumed as an honest reflection of reality, thus constituting a prime actor in cultivation (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Barnett & Flynn, 2014). The constructions of characters displayed in such movies are therefore crucial in the public’s perceptions of certain communities, thus giving moviemakers a powerful tool to shape societal interpretations (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Barnett & Flynn, 2014).

The latter is tricky, as movies are often found to portray stereotypical characters recognizable to their audience. They, therefore, have the potential to either exacerbate or counter racial stereotypes through storytelling, given the entertainment industry’s influential position in society (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Adam-Bass et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the tendency for moviemakers to stick with the stereotypical portrayal of their characters is evident, as stories that obey existing stereotypical depictions of race and gender have a higher likelihood of appealing to the public because of their recognizable features (Xu et al., 2019). Despite commercial advantages, however, existing literature acknowledges the far-reaching implications of using such stereotypes for storytelling as depicted in the following chapter(s).

3.5 Stereotypes of Black Male Characters in Hollywood Movies

As shown, stereotypical depictions of Blacks are truly intersectional in terms of race and gender, including elements of both racism and sexism. Such ‘gendered racism’ is often communicated by the media using negative stereotypical depictions (Miville & Ferguson, 2014). The following chapter discusses various stereotypical depictions evoking gendered racism, that have eventually been adopted by Hollywood movies after being initially introduced in novels, cartoons, and theatre during and post-slavery era.

Firstly, a problematic portrayal of Black males in the Hollywood movie scene is ‘Sambo’: an obedient slave shown as delightfully serving his White rulers. Moreover, Sambo is portrayed as lazy, wherefore reliant on his ruler for directions, despite the character being initially established as a counter-act to slavery (Green, 1998; Harris & Mushtaq, 2013). Additionally, Sambo is known for lacking intelligence and political potency. Throughout the years, different manifestations of the Sambo character gained popularity, including those of him as a laborer or criminal figure (Tucker, 2007).

Another stereotypical example often used in Hollywood is the so-called ‘Uncle Tom’: A character that is famous for his friendliness and assistance toward White characters, some of whom

have been his former rulers. More specifically, Uncle Tom sacrifices his well-being for the sake of loyalty toward others, often Whites, wherefore loyalty can hardly be distinguished from the character's ignorance (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009). The character of Uncle Tom left the impression that Black manhood could only be achieved through servitude toward Whites. Uncle Tom would therefore never speak ill of anyone, despite all the horrific circumstances that occurred to him (e.g., being chained, separated from his family, etc.) (Thompson, 2021).

A third example is the character of 'Mandingo', which is inherently connected to Black sexuality and Black males' so-called pressing desire for, often resulting in sexual aggression toward, White women (Samuels, 2019). Mandingo is depicted as expressing masculinity and can be visually recognized by his "muscular physique" and "oversized genitalia" (Aultman et al., 2020, p. 7). Similarly to Sambo and Uncle Tom, Mandingo expresses inferiority too, resulting from interracial (sexual) 'relationships' between 'White masters' and 'Black slaves'. This inferiority also becomes clear in movies throughout the 1900s, where, for example, Mandingo is portrayed as useful in assisting to breed 'new slaves' or where they are threatened by White women to be accused of rape if they are unwilling to have sexual intercourse with them (Aultman et al., 2020).

3.6 Current Literature about Black Male (Counter-)stereotypes in Recent Films

This chapter discusses current literature about Black male (counter-)stereotypes in *recent* Hollywood films. The discussion includes movies produced after the Twitter campaign #OscarSoWhite (2015), which largely contributed to the visibility of movies produced by and featuring Black people and was soon followed up by more awareness of the inclusion rider as a means to do so (Buccifero, 2021).

3.6.1 Stereotypes: Inferiority

In an attempt to reflect on the racist realities Blacks have to deal with on a daily basis, 'Get Out' (2017) deliberately uses stereotypical portrayals of Blacks being inferior to Whites. Firstly, in terms of a Black male working as a servant for a White family. Later in the movie, the main character (Chris) discovers that his White family-in-law sells Black bodies to White people through an auction and Chris is in danger of this happening to him as well (Marasabessy & Handayani, 2019). Other movies, like 'Moonlight' (2016), show more systemic instances of Black male inferiority and the aftermath of racial segregation in the US. Similarly, 'The Hate U Give' (2018) addresses systemic Black male inferiority in the context of police brutality, where the responsibility for main character Khalil's murder is not solely placed on the White police officer. Consequently, this exacerbates both the stereotypes of Black males being inferior, as well as being criminal and aggressive.

3.6.2 Stereotypes: Criminality

The stereotype of criminality amongst Black male characters is prominent in recent Hollywood films, to smaller and greater extents. While some movies' storylines evolve completely around the issue of criminality, others address it more briefly or contextually. The latter occurs in the movie 'Moonlight' (2016), which addresses topics such as drug use and trade, as well as violence amongst Black male characters. Similarly, the storyline of 'The Hate U Give' (2018) evolves around drug dealing by Black males, with one of the main characters being an unsympathetic Black male involved in crime, and the other seemingly innocent yet involved in the drug circuit as well. A main turning point occurs when the main character (Khalil) is shot by a White police officer when being pulled over. When Khalil follows the order of the police by getting out of the car, he wants to reassure his friend that everything will be fine, while illustrating his relaxedness by taking out a hairbrush to brush his hair. He is then shot by the White police officer who 'confuses' this with a gun. The movie therefore draws upon the stereotype of the Black male criminal, which is reinforced and exacerbated by the empathy received by the police officer that shot him.

3.6.3 Stereotypes: Poverty

Although poverty is generally widely depicted in Hollywood movies, it often is shown as a background characteristic. 'Get Out' (2017) for instance portrays Black male characters working in blue-collar positions, in this case as gardeners, rather than being intellectually occupied (Marasabessy & Handayani, 2019). In 'The Hate U Give' (2018), Khalil and his friend Starr talk explicitly about his socio-economic background in a scene that reveals that Khalil's reason for selling drugs. This is due to poverty, resulting predominantly from his mother's drug addiction debts (Owen, 2019).

3.6.4 (Counter-)stereotypes: Black Masculinity

The presence of Black masculinity in recent Hollywood films is relatively diverse. In 'Get Out' (2017), Chris is praised for his physical ability and athletic body, which can be interpreted as positive representations of Black masculinity. However, Chris' masculinity later turns into aggressiveness, as he tries to save himself from an auction. 'Black Panther' (2018) addresses Black masculinity in a counter-stereotypical manner, for example through instances of muscularity and strength used to save the fictional African empire of Wakanda. 'Moonlight' (2016) illustrates (the lack of) Black masculinity more subtly, mostly so in terms of physical characteristics of the homosexual main character (e.g., wearing tight clothes, physically small). However, this is also countered by the movie itself through the normalization of two homosexual Black guys falling in

love with each other (Kannan et al., 2017). The latter can be seen as countering a dominant stereotype presented in 'Get Out' (2017), namely that Black males are easily attracted to White women (Marabessy & Handayani, 2017; Boger, 2018).

3.6.5 Counter-Stereotypes: Respected and Successful

Compared to other Hollywood films, 'Black Panther' (2018) is a forerunner in presenting counter-stereotypes, as its entire plot is centered around the positive representation of Black males. This is especially evident from the main character T'Challa inheriting the throne and being endowed with superpowers. Being the ruler and protector of Wakanda, T'Challa, as the Black Panther, can be seen as the first Black male superhero. Current literature on the movie 'Black Panther' (2018) agrees that Black males are depicted as having 'opportunities for growth' and moreover as 'godlike' and heroes (Faithful, 2018). In 'Get Out' (2017), 'power' of Black male characters is portrayed more in the context of employment: Some work in so-called blue-collar positions, while others have somewhat better-acknowledged professions, albeit all related to Black masculinity in terms of physical and athletic ability (e.g., police officers, musicians).

4. Research Design

Existing research on the topic of movie analysis has shown that content analysis is a valuable method to reveal the various aspects of communication (see e.g.: Zhang, 2011; Matthes & Naderer, 2019), wherefore this was considered the most suitable means to answer the following research question: ‘What is the presence of stereotypes and counter-stereotypes in inclusion rider movies?: A case study of ‘Just Mercy’’. The case of this research was decided upon in light of new developments surrounding racial diversity within movie casts and production teams using the so-called inclusion rider, as a first step toward eliminating inequality both on- and off-screen (USC Annenberg, n.d.; Cappiello, 2019; Waldman, 2019). Being the first movie produced with such an inclusion rider, ‘Just Mercy’ is considered by many to have the potential to mark the beginning of a positive change regarding the deliberate use of knowledge about and experiences of Black males regarding racial (counter-) stereotypes in the movie scene more broadly (see e.g., Coyle, n.d.; Cook & Rice, n.d.; Otchie, 2020). As such, ‘Just Mercy’ was chosen as the most suitable case for this study.

4.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Content analysis allows for a hybrid approach, including both qualitative and quantitative aspects (Mayring, 2000). Where qualitative data allowed for an in-depth analysis of the presence of racial (counter-)stereotypes in ‘Just Mercy’ (2019), quantitative coding for frequency allowed to account for the priorities of the portrayal of such (counter-)stereotypes by the moviemakers. Hence, together they depict both the content and density of racial (counter-)stereotypes presented, which helped to develop a more detailed view of the matters at stake. The research process further proceeded with the development of codes for the data analysis, which, as previously explained, was done based on thematic commonalities found within the (counter-)stereotypes.

Firstly, as existing research provides a wide variety of racial stereotypes, deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework of this research (see Figure 2). As for the depiction of counter-stereotypes, deductive codes were constructed prior to the movie analysis based on opposing statements or alternative counter-stereotypes (see Figure 3). As counter-stereotyping is a relatively new phenomenon (see: Finnegan et al., 2015; Tukachinsky et al., 2017), the coding procedure left room for additional (counter-)stereotypes that revealed themselves inductively during the research process. This mostly occurred in terms of alternative ways, hence other than counter-stereotyping itself, to combat stereotypes, later to be addressed in the findings section as the acknowledgment of prejudice, discrimination, and racism³. The coding was then performed on

³ To be referred to as ‘categories’, together with the stereotypes and counter-stereotypes.

the level of sentences (i.e., dialogues in the movie), which allowed for making comparisons with existing (counter-)stereotypes. Each sentence that depicted a (counter-)stereotype or alternative way to combat stereotypes, even if subsequently followed by one of the same nature, was counted as one to reflect on the before-mentioned density hereof.

Finally, different (counter-)stereotypes and alternative ways to combat stereotypes were grouped using one of the codes (see Figures 2 and 3) and discussed in order of frequency, followed by examples and quotes from the movie. Due to the scope of this research and the limited focus on the codes *personality traits* (see Figure 2) and *intelligence* (See Figure 3) throughout ‘Just Mercy’, the following chapters do not further address these and instead focus on codes that appeared at least seven times in total, to highlight their severity. Ultimately, for the sake of intersectionality, the analysis aimed to look for general trends and patterns across the different codes and categories and to reflect on these based on existing literature.

4.2 Positionality and Ethics

In this section, I would like to draw attention to both my positionality as a researcher and the ethics involved in this research. Firstly, given that I identify as female, I have an external opinion on the matter of stereotypes surrounding males specifically and I am aware that this may be sensitive to those that I am targeting in my research. In addition, although Black masculinity affects all of us, Black males are the people who live with the expectations and/or stereotypes of whom they should be/supposedly are. This is something I will never be able to fully grasp, yet I attempted to inform myself, to the fullest possible extent and with great empathy, on this matter to adequately reflect on it in my research. Furthermore, I was fully aware of my privileged position as a White and highly educated person. As, fortunately, I am unfamiliar with the negative outcomes of racism myself, I acknowledge that I will never be able to fully grasp what racism feels like to others. This is despite my fullest empathy toward those that have to deal with it on a regular basis. In fact, with this research, I did not intend to pretend to be a White savior in terms of eliminating racist practices. Rather, I aimed to contribute, even if to the smallest possible extent, to raising awareness surrounding the topic of racism, as a foundation for further development of counter-stereotypes in the movie scene with the potential to inspire the public to adapt their perceptions and behavior accordingly. Given the absence of collaboration with organizations and human subjects in my research and the wide availability of the movie ‘Just Mercy’ as public entertainment, issues of privacy were not applicable (see Appendix). Nonetheless, I aimed to respectfully and responsibly approach the topic of my research, by means of critically reflecting on my privileged position as a researcher at all times before jumping to analyses and conclusions. Finally, I am aware that the

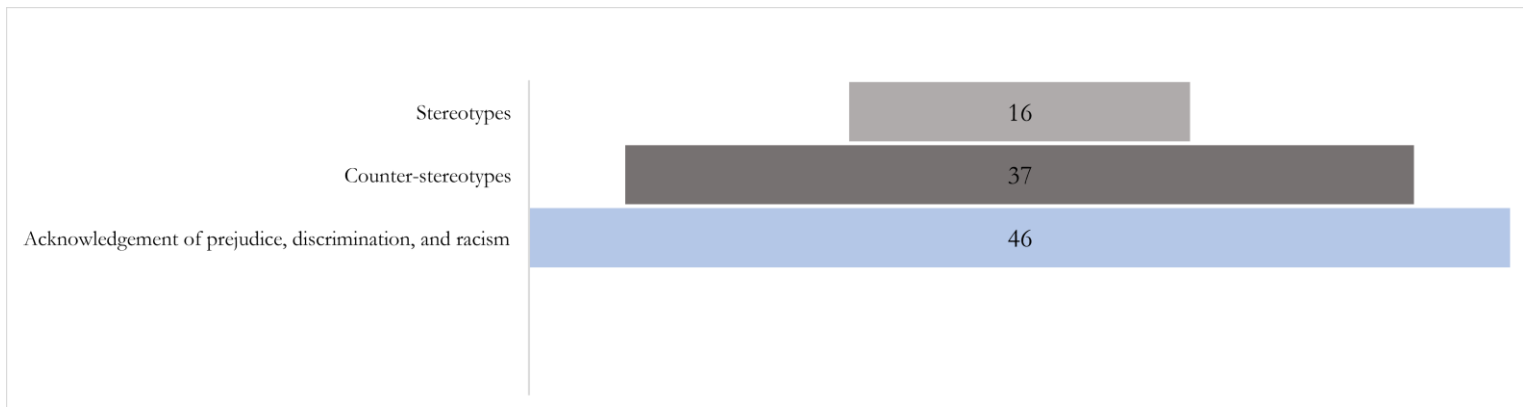
stereotypes, which are crucial in my coding process, might come across as harsh and ill-considered statements. I would like to emphasize that the reasoning behind the use of such stereotypes was never to cause harm to anyone but rather to expose how the current state of racism has unfolded itself in wrong societal perceptions of others, and the urgent need for this to change.

5. Findings

This chapter firstly discusses the codes that occurred in 'Just Mercy', according to the deductively developed (counter-)stereotypes (See Figures 2 and 3). Hereafter, the ways in which the movie acknowledges prejudice, discrimination, and racism directly are discussed, as revealed inductively. This is another way to combat stereotypes other than the use of counter-stereotypes (see Figure 4 for an overview of the number of codes per category). All codes are that occurred at least seven times in total are discussed, in order of frequency.

Figure 4

Frequency of Codes Across Categories in 'Just Mercy'

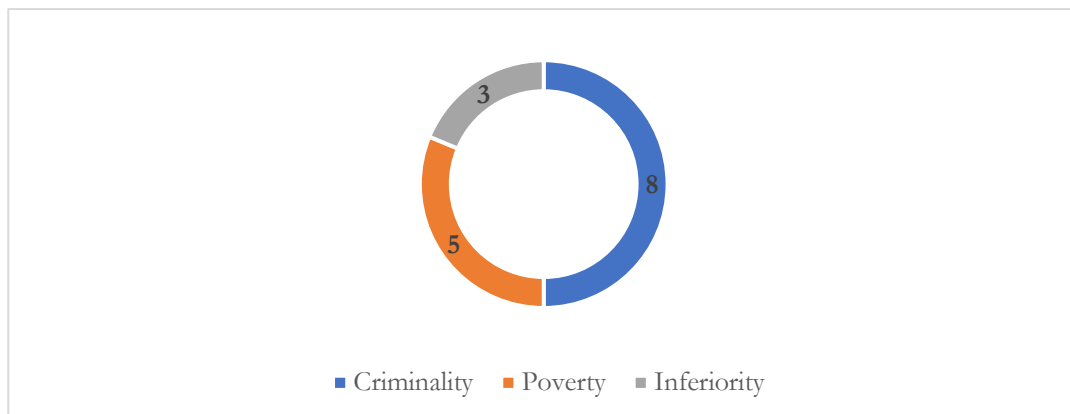


5.1 Stereotypes

In total, 16 codes occurred in the category of stereotypes (see Figure 5). The following chapters exemplify and elaborate on these instances according to the following codes, in order of frequency: criminality, poverty, and inferiority, together combining all stereotypes presented in Figure 2.

Figure 5

Division of Codes in the Category of Stereotypes

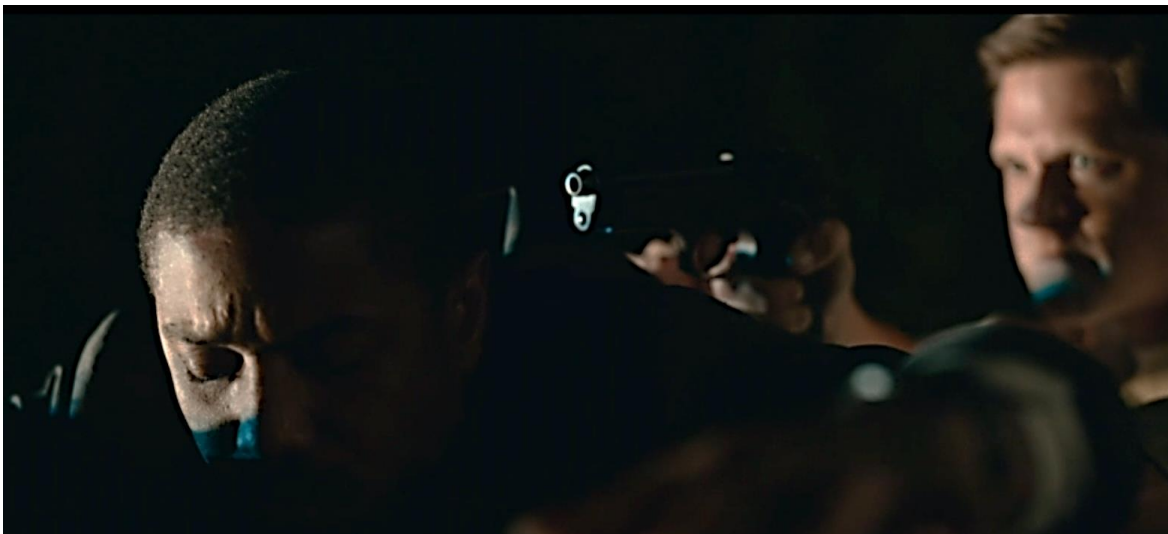


5.1.1 Criminality

The most encountered code regarding stereotypes is *criminality* (8), relating to the deductively established stereotype that ‘*Black people are criminal and/ or have aggressive characters, wherefore they constitute a threat*’ (see Figure 2). Firstly, this stereotype is clear from the plot of ‘Just Mercy’, which revolves around the story of a wrongfully sentenced Black male. In fact, Johnny D is pulled over by a White policeman who promptly presumes that he wants to flee, thus already suspecting him to have committed the crime they just started investigating. Ironically, later, Bryan is also randomly pulled over by two White police officers, and taken out of the car with force (see Figure 6). Additionally, many storylines of side characters touch upon the topic of criminality, such as those of Johnny D’s fellow inmates Herbert and Ray. The presumed criminality of Black males is also evident from the large number of Black inmates, and subsequently the minor presence of Whites in prison. This too stands out during Johnny D’s last moments in prison, where he gets to shake hands with predominantly Black inmates.

Figure 6

Bryan Being Randomly Pulled Over by the Police on his Way Home



Note. Retrieved from: Cretton, D. D. (2019). *Just Mercy* [Film]. Warner Bros. Copyright 2023 by Marit Lamers.

5.1.2 Poverty

This chapter combines the stereotypes: *Unemployed/blue-collar positions, poor/from poverty-stricken areas and few socio-economic opportunities* (5) (see Figure 2). The stereotype of poverty is evident from the opening scene, showing the younger version of Johnny D, when he was working as a logger in the wood. This situation refers to blue-collar positions, or in other words: jobs that include predominantly manual labor. This code also appeared when White people were both verbally and visually unpleasantly surprised to see a Black lawyer (i.e., Bryan), indicating that they wondered

how a Black man managed to get a successful professional position like that. Later on, the stereotype of poverty for Blacks more generally is confirmed by Johnny D’s family, after Bryan offered to help them set up the trial again for free: “Well I don’t know about the rest of y’all, but I was sold on ‘Y’all won’t pay a penny””.

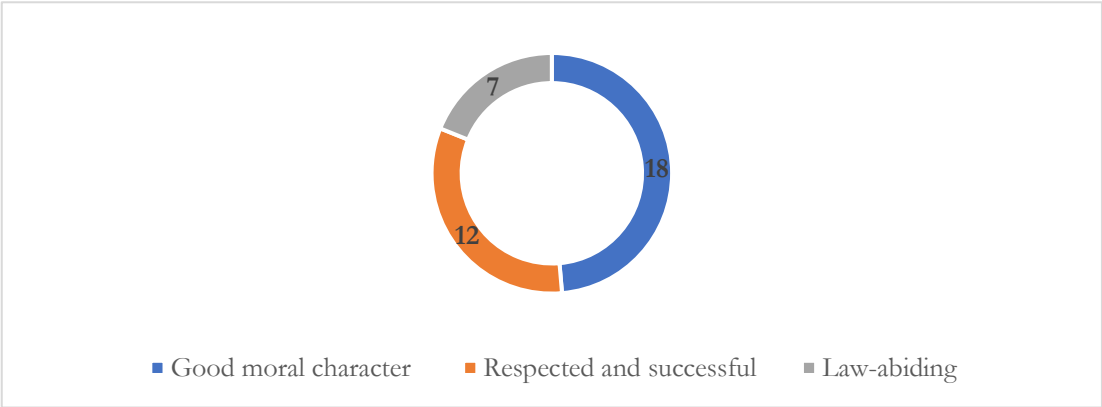
5.1.3 Inferiority

The code that least frequently occurred in the category of stereotypes is *inferiority* (3), stemming from the deductive stereotype that Black males *are inferior (to White people)* and *provide services for Whites* (see Figure 2). The latter stereotype, however, was not addressed in the movie, wherefore the focus is entirely on the former. Firstly, White people evidently are in powerful positions throughout the movie, often in the criminal justice system (e.g., police officers, prison guards). This shows the image of inferiority of Blacks over Whites in society more generally. This too is illustrated when a White guard expected Eva (Bryan’s assistant), rather than Bryan himself to be the director. Lastly, the jury has based Johnny D’s conviction solely on the testimony of one White inmate.

5.2 Counter-Stereotypes

In total, 37 counter-stereotypes occurred in ‘Just Mercy’ (see Figure 4), exemplified and elaborated on according to the following codes: good moral character, respected and successful, and law-abiding (see Figure 7 for an overview of the frequency of codes), together combining the majority of counter-stereotypes presented in Figure 3.

Figure 7
Division of Codes in the Category Counter-Stereotypes



5.2.1 Good Moral Character

The most frequently used counter-stereotype in ‘Just Mercy’ occurs in the category of *good moral characters/intentions* (18) (see Figure 3) and is predominantly embraced by the character of

Bryan. Early on in the movie, he tells his mother: “You always told me to fight for the people that need help the most”, simultaneously illustrating that Bryan was raised in a family/community with good moral intentions. Subsequently, Bryan moves to Alabama to represent inmates sent to death row, where his good moral character, sometimes at the cost of his own peace of mind, is repeatedly addressed. For example, Bryan works all night to prevent Herbert from getting executed, albeit unsuccessfully. He then agrees to be in the execution chamber to support Herbert, who had asked him to. Furthermore, Johnny D’s wife Minnie and Eva appreciate Bryan for his personal engagement with the family during the trial, as “most lawyers barely make time to call”.

Johnny D and his fellow inmates as well are numerous presented as characters with good moral intentions, despite the severities of racial injustice that they have been subject to. For instance, upon Herbert’s execution, a White officer asks if there is anything left he would like to say, to which Herbert replies: “I have no ill feeling and I hold nothing against anyone”. While Herbert was perhaps rightfully convicted of the murder, this statement seems impressive given that his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was completely disregarded in his trial and sentence. Similarly, after Bryan’s motion to get Johnny D’s case to the Supreme Court initially got declined, Johnny D mentions to him: “But if they take me to that chair tonight, then I’m going out smiling. Cause I got my truth back. You gave it to me. To me and my family”.

5.2.2 Respected and Successful

This section combines the occurrence of the counter-stereotypes: *Respected authority/heroic figures, successful professions* and *the potential to pursue economic/educational opportunities* (12) (see Figure 3). Firstly, when Eva attempted to book an office for her and Bryan to start working on Johnny D’s case, the White owner refuses to give it to them upon discovery of who they represent. Eva then tells the owner that he makes her look bad in front of her boss Bryan (see Figure 8). Others too admire Bryan and his work, like Eva’s (White) husband: “I am excited about what you are doing”. Furthermore, Herbert asks Bryan in the execution room if he is okay with the army sending his flag to him, to which he replies: “I’d be honored”. This shows that Bryan respects Herbert as an authority figure who has served in the military, rather than someone who is punished for the consequences thereof (i.e., his PTSD causing him to place the bomb). Finally, Bryan himself can be seen as a respected heroic figure throughout the whole plot, especially when he gets Johnny D’s case suspended at the end of the movie.

Figure 8

Eva Accusing White Office Owner of Making Her Look Bad in Front of Her Boss Bryan



Note. Retrieved from: Cretton, D. D. (2019). *Just Mercy* [Film]. Warner Bros. Copyright 2023 by Marit Lamers.

Furthermore, several Black characters are portrayed in what one could consider successful professions, starting with Bryan as a certified Harvard lawyer, which is repeatedly highlighted throughout the movie and verbally emphasized by inmate Henry: “That is White boy status, bro”. Other qualified positions of Black male characters include a receptionist of the Equal Justice Initiative set up by Bryan and a prison guard guiding a White inmate. As for Blacks’ potential to pursue socio-economic and educational opportunities, this is solely evident from Bryan as a Harvard graduate.

5.2.3 Law-abiding

This section combines the counter-stereotypes: *Law-abiding and peaceful* and *not defined by criminal involvement* (7) (see Figure 3). As for the former, multiple occasions show the calmness of Black characters during unnecessary forceful treatment by White police officers. For example, when Henry is arbitrarily, yet forcefully handcuffed by a White prison guard, he does not defend himself physically nor verbally and acts cooperatively. Furthermore, while acknowledging his own mistake, Herbert believes Johnny D and Ray are innocent: “I ain’t like you guys. I deserve what’s coming”. This refers to his date being set for death row, while Johnny D and Ray are still awaiting theirs despite being innocent. Toward the end of the movie, Johnny D’s family wants to enter the courtroom, which the White police guard only allows them to when there are no seats left, causing Eva to get mad, whilst Johnny D’s wife Minnie remains calm: “It’s okay. We will find room”.

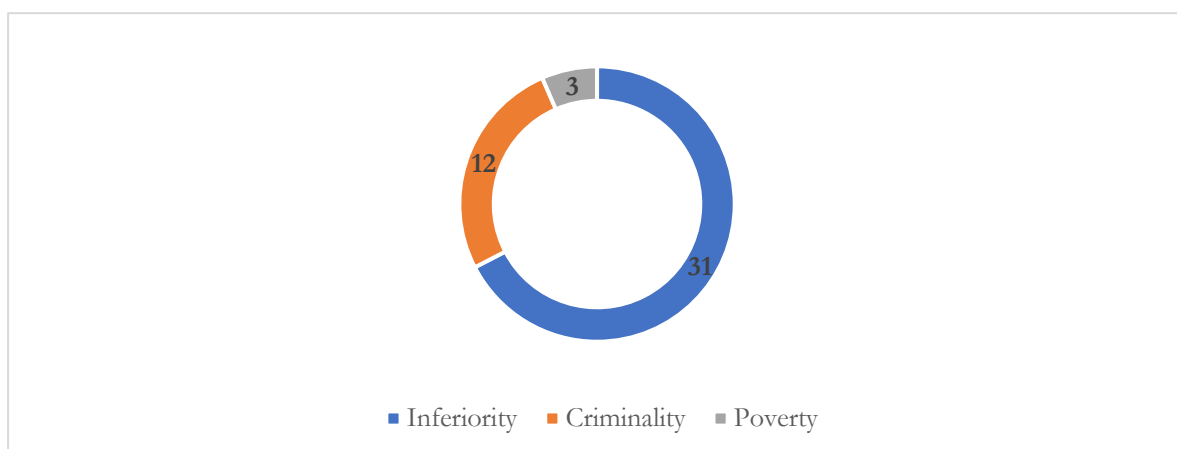
'Just Mercy' also addresses instances in which Black males are *not defined by criminal involvement*, meaning that they can turn their life around (see Figure 3). This is particularly evident when Herbert deeply regrets placing a bomb at a girl's veranda after returning from the Vietnam War with PTSD issues. Bryan comforts him by saying: "Whatever you did, your life is still meaningful and I am going to do everything possible to keep them from taking it". Fellow inmate Ray too mentions to Herbert: "You are supposed to be in a hospital, not here", after Herbert was incarcerated without treatment for his severe trauma. Others thus believed, if not executed, that Herbert could have bettered his life with the right treatments, as he acted out of mental trauma rather than out of intrinsically violent motives.

5.3 Acknowledgment of Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism

This chapter discusses an alternative way to combat stereotypes in the form of acknowledgment of prejudice, discrimination, and racism (46) (see Figure 4). Firstly, prejudice refers to negative evaluations of others based on their membership in a social group, oftentimes stemming from stereotypes and leading to discrimination. The latter is defined as inappropriate and unjustified negative behavior toward the members perceived as belonging to such a social group (e.g., gender, race) (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). Finally, racism is directed specifically at the race of social group members, hence referring to the prejudicial or discriminatory treatment of these people rooted in the racial superiority of Whites (Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010). Please note that the categories of inferiority, criminality, and poverty consist of the same stereotypes as presented in chapter 5.1 (see Figure 2) (see Figure 9 for an overview of the frequency of codes).

Figure 9

Division of Codes in the Category of Acknowledgment of Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism



5.3.1 *Inferiority*

A second type of *inferiority* (31) visible in ‘Just Mercy’ is the acknowledgment of prejudice, discrimination, and racism by the characters themselves. Firstly, White prison guards regularly discriminate against their Black inmates. The idea that this solely stems from the relationship between inmate and prison guard is quickly abandoned by the moviemakers. In fact, when visiting the prison, Bryan repeatedly experiences a fierce sense of inferiority, for instance when a White prison guard thoroughly searches Bryan: “I’m gonna have to search you, just go to that room over there and take everything off. [...] You ain’t going to see shit unless you get in that room and strip”. The White guard is accompanied by another, who silently continues reading his newspaper, seemingly remaining completely unbothered by the situation. Subsequently, during their first encounter, Johnny D tells Bryan: “You can buddy up with these White folks [...] but when they show turn they ain’t got a hand on fingerprints”. Similarly, Ray states that the police officer was sure “one of them ‘n*****s’” had committed the crime and if it was not Ray, he would “take one for his homie” when being arrested. Even moments before Johnny D’s release, a White guard refuses to let his family into the courtroom, leaving them no choice but to stand, while the rest of the room is filled entirely with seated White public (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

The Striking Image of Black Inferiority in the Courtroom



Note. Retrieved from: Cretton, D. D. (2019). *Just Mercy* [Film]. Warner Bros. Copyright 2023 by Marit Lamers.

5.3.2 *Criminality*

The prejudice of Whites toward Black people being criminal (12), is also pointed out by (Black) characters in 'Just Mercy'. Firstly, Johnny D is much aware of this, which is evident from statements like: "You are guilty from the moment you are born". This is illustrated when Bryan is taking photos of the laundry shop where Ronda Morrison was presumably murdered, while he sees a White police officer watching him thoroughly from his car, quickly driving away upon Bryan noticing his presence. Other characters, including fellow inmates, also notice signs of prejudice, discrimination, and racism: "Johnny D's prosecutor said he knew he killed the girl because of the way he looked in his mugshot". Johnny D's wife Minnie too mentions how her husband was judged by his presumed victim's (Ronda Morrison) community: "He went from being a cheat to being a drug dealer to the head of a Dixie Mafia. So by the time someone calling him a murderer, ain't nobody thought twice about it". Later in the courtroom, Johnny D's son gets verbally aggressive for a moment toward the judge who asks him to sit down: "Not if you want to kill my dad for no reason", whereafter he is unjustly arrested by the police despite not being resistant nor physically aggressive.

5.3.3 *Poverty*

The acknowledgment of prejudice, discrimination, and racism when it comes to *poverty* is exemplified on three occasions. Firstly, one of Johnny D's neighbors seriously doubts that Johnny D could have committed the crime due to impoverished means: "Now how he is supposed to [...] drive back to Jackson Cleaners to kill that girl at 10.15 if his truck ain't got no transmission?". Eva too acknowledges that Johnny D comes from a poor community which may have contributed to people's belief that he is rightfully convicted: "And the guy he says did it happens to be a Black man from a poor community that no one will think twice about". Finally, a White prison guard addresses Black males' poor socio-economic and educational opportunities when extensively checking Bryan's papers while asking him in a denigrating way: "Are you really a lawyer?!". This indicates, in an offensive manner wherefore considered discrimination, that Black males are not supposed to have such high-ranked professions or educational opportunities.

6. Analysis

This chapter takes a step back from the detailed occurrences of stereotypes, counter-stereotypes, and alternative ways to combat stereotypes (i.e., the acknowledgment of prejudice, discrimination, and racism) by linking these findings to the literature that was previously presented. Hereafter, 'Just Mercy' is reviewed in the context of realism, the inclusion rider, and society more broadly.

6.1 (Countering) Institutionalized Marginalization and Racism

The presence of stereotypes in 'Just Mercy' has been found to be only less than half of the number of counter-stereotypes presented in the movie. Nonetheless, they provide a realistic view of ongoing problematic stereotypical portrayals of Black males as a homogenous out-group in US society (Fiske, 2000; Maddox, 2006; Bonam et al., 2020). Firstly, this occurs in terms of inferiority of Blacks over Whites, directly relating to institutional inferiority, as well as deeply rooted prejudice, discrimination, and racism in the US society (Maddox, 2006). Throughout the plot, Whites are depicted as inherently and institutionally powerful in their professions and therewith in controlling the lives of Black male characters in the movie (Maddox, 2006; O'Brien, 2017). When looking at the Black male characters in 'Just Mercy' more specifically, however, they bear little resemblance with (post-slavery) stereotypical characters used in cinematic portrayals (e.g., Uncle Tom, Sambo) (Green 1998; Glenn & Cunningham, 2009). However, just like Uncle Tom, Bryan too is sacrificing his own well-being numerous times throughout the movie, albeit interested in helping Black, rather than White males. Similarly, both Johnny D and Herbert have mentioned not having any ill feelings toward anyone, despite both characters being treated poorly by the justice system. Contrary to the character of Uncle Tom, however, they are aware of this, wherefore the element of delightfully serving Whites remains uncovered in 'Just Mercy'. In short, the extremely historical stereotypical portrayals of Black males are covered to a very little extent and by no means with a level of inferiority as described in existing literature.

Racism portrayed in 'Just Mercy' predominantly revolves around the male gender, depicting both Black males as inferior and White males as superior, indicating so-called gendered racism (Miville & Ferguson, 2014). Depictions of Black masculinity in the movie are extremely stereotypical in nature, portraying Black males as criminals and in need of social regulation. Even positive elements associated with Black masculinity (e.g., strength, vitality) (O'Brien, 2017), if at all displayed, are shown as leading to short resistance of Black males against White authoritarian characters. However, such instances are often immediately countered by the idea that Black males have good moral intentions and are law-abiding, for instance by being cooperative upon instances of, albeit unjust, White authoritarianism. The latter is in line with what Stamps (2021) describes as

a new trend of more nuanced depictions of Black masculinity, by shining light on the positive characteristics of Black males, such as them being ambitious and prestigious. These are represented in the movie to a far larger extent than are their ‘negative’ aspects. Such counter-storytelling is also evident from the plot of the movie, wherein Bryan and his team eventually manage to get Johnny D out of prison, and therewith have his story, and those of Black males that are similarly mistreated by the criminal justice system, get heard (Ellison & Solomon, 2019).

6.2 New Black Realism: Acknowledging Discrimination and Racism

The number of stereotypes (16) versus the number of counter-stereotypes and alternative ways to combat stereotypes altogether (83) (i.e., counter-stereotypes, acknowledging prejudice, discrimination, and racism), shows that ‘Just Mercy’ is very much concerned with the gravities of Blacks males’ marginalized position in US society. These findings also indicate that we should not consider the presence of stereotypes and counter-stereotypes solely in a binary way, as this would not cover the efforts made by ‘Just Mercy’s’ moviemakers to provide its public with a realistic, or as Bausch (2013) calls it: “a gritty reality” (p. 259), yet alternative view on contemporary race issues in the US. In fact, there are many occasions in which characters, also Whites, acknowledge Black males’ marginalized position or make note prejudice, racism, and discrimination directed toward them.

The awareness amongst ‘Just Mercy’ characters and them bringing up actual instances of prejudice, discrimination and racism is especially evident in terms of racial injustices in the criminal justice system, although they go beyond that (e.g., poverty) to smaller extents. A distinction can be made between scenes where racism is extremely obvious, to the extent of humiliation (e.g., when Bryan is forced to strip in front of a White prison guard) and more subtle hints of racist practices (e.g., when Bryan notices a police car keeping an eye on him while he is taking photos of the laundry shop where Ronda Morrison was presumably murdered). Hence, ‘Just Mercy’ does a good job at the mainstream portrayals of Blacks as we know them (e.g., as ‘the criminal’), to eventually either critique this constructed reality through the use of counter-stereotypes, or by addressing the historical root causes and implications hereof. This so-called New Black Realism, therefore, contributes to encouraging the public to critically reflect on the socially constructed behavior of Black males more generally (Hammond, 2006; Bausch, 2013).

As such, ‘Just Mercy’ moves away from the debatable stance of a romanticized version of Black power and authority (Harris & Mushtaq, 2013), which has its origins in the Blaxploitation genre but is still applied in contemporary cinema. For instance, Black Panther has found to be consisting of a diverse range of counter-stereotypes (e.g., Black males as superheroes), yet superficially seems to lack a realistic portrayal of Africa as it is in our contemporary world (Faithful,

2018). 'Just Mercy', on the other hand, shows the gravities of racism and that much work is needed to be done for this to change, particularly amongst Whites.

6.3 The Inclusion Rider

Although the aim of this thesis was not to investigate the effectiveness of the inclusion rider, but rather what the presence of stereotypes and counter-stereotypes is in 'Just Mercy' as an inclusion rider movie, this section superficially reflects on the presumed role of the inclusion rider in weakening stereotypes and presenting alternative realities.

Making a change in the ongoing use of stereotypes in the entertainment industry (Maddox, 2006; Taylor et al., 2019) with the maintenance of production teams and casts dominated by Whites with inaccurate or insufficient knowledge of and empathy toward Blacks seems unworkable (Barnett & Flynn, 2014; Glenn & Cunningham, 2009). Especially with racially sensitive topics like those covered in 'Just Mercy', it is of utmost importance that these are realistically and adequately reflected, without running the risk of potentially perpetuating already deeply ingrained and wrongful stereotypes, or presenting these as factual information (Green, 1998; Miville & Ferguson, 2014; Cappiello, 2019). 'Just Mercy' contains a large number of counter-stereotypes and instances of acknowledgment of prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Chances are high that this would not have been possible with a White cast and production team that generally solely, if not entirely, bases itself on fixed or digitally-shaped perceptions of Black males in the US (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Miville & Ferguson, 2014; Barnett & Flynn, 2014).

For example, the movie depiction of 'The Hate U Give'⁴, which similarly to 'Just Mercy' is based on a true story, portrayed a completely different reality because of a minor change in the movie plot in comparison to the initial novel. Namely, in the scene where the main character (a Black male) was shot, the moviemakers added a moment where he took a hairbrush out of the car to illustrate his relaxedness in the situation to his friend Starr, who was clearly upset. This movie scene was constructed in a way, that the hairbrush could have been confused with a gun, wherefore the White police officer immediately shot the main character. The remaining scenes of the movie showed an alarming sense of empathy toward the police officer, rather than the Black victim (Owen, 2019).

Although by no means evident that this would have changed the outcome and public perceptions of this specific scene, the inclusion rider at least has the potential to critically reflect on such changes in a movie plot and the severe implications regarding how such scenes are perceived and interpreted as reality by the public (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Barnett & Flynn,

⁴ 'The Hate U Give' is not an inclusion rider movie and has been produced by a predominantly White team.

2014; Owen, 2019). On the other hand, the controversial Blaxploitation genre was also praised for its Black casts and production teams, yet according to many was unable to critically reflect on the realities of racial segregation to the extent that New Black Realism movies were later able to (Bausch, 2013; Harris & Mushtaq, 2013). It can be argued, however, given the diversity-oriented nature of the inclusion rider, that other movies with inclusion riders similarly are expected to contain larger numbers of counter-stereotypes and alternative ways to combat stereotypes, than stereotypes perpetuating the already racially segregated reality of the US (UNC Annenberg, n.d.; Waldman, 2018; Cappiello, 2019). However, this goes beyond the scope of this research and will therefore be later addressed as a recommendation for future research.

6.4 Societal Implications and Foundations

The importance of so-called diversity in the Hollywood movie scene goes beyond cinematic portrayals of marginalized groups, given that society more generally is shaped by fixed perceptions of other human beings (Miville & Ferguson, 2014). This happens primarily through cinematic depictions, which are considered prime actors in American cultivation (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Barnett & Flynn, 2014). Reflections of fixed societal perceptions in movies can be reinforced, perpetuated, or weakened through moviemakers' choices in the portrayal of their characters from marginalized groups in society (Cappiello, 2019). Movies like 'Just Mercy' dare to move away from mainstream stereotypical depictions of Black males as we know them, despite the commercial advantages to stick with these (Xu et al., 2019). Therefore, this thesis can be considered a means to raise awareness of the use of stereotypes in the movie scene, as inaccurate reflections of race, gender, and beyond have the power to wrongfully inform the public on the stances of these groups in society more generally (Green, 1998; Bonam et al., 2020). In fact, Black males are just one of the numerous social groups that are subject to ongoing and severe stereotyping (see e.g., Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Bonam et al., 2020), as also becomes clear from the stereotypes and examples from 'Just Mercy' that target Blacks more generally (see Chapter 5.1 and 5.3).

The public, in its perception hereof, is to a certain extent dependent on moviemakers' sensibility to adequately reflect the realities of such marginalized communities (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Barnett & Flynn, 2014). In fact, although stereotypes of, in this case, Black males are rooted in the slavery era wherefore extremely institutionalized and ingrained in (US) society (Green, 1998; Maddox, 2006), they can be weakened or altered by means of visual counter-stereotyping (Halt, 2013; Tukachinsky et al., 2017). Hence, visual media is just one way, albeit an extremely popular one, to critically reflect on what reality looks like for marginalized groups in the US (Adam-Bass et al., 2014). The public is encouraged by the increasing popularity of counter-stereotypes and realism in 'Just Mercy' and the Hollywood movie scene more generally, to critique

inadequate reflections of these groups' realities (Hammond, 2006; Bausch, 2013; Ellison & Solomon, 2019). Knowledge and lived experiences by the production team and cast can therefore help to maintain or increase critical stances in other movies as well so that this becomes the norm in Hollywood (Miville & Ferguson, 2014; Cappiello, 2019). Existing literature agrees that actually critiquing normalized narratives can lead to lowering the activation of widely known stereotypes and altering societal perceptions regarding marginalized groups (Halt, 2013; Finnegan et al., 2015; Tukachinsky et al., 2017; Ellison & Solomon, 2019).

7. Conclusion and Discussion

To conclude, a common practice in cinematic depictions of Black males in Hollywood is to portray them as stereotypes recognizable to their audience. Such stereotypical depictions are extremely problematic as they are rooted in the slavery era wherefore they are transmitted across generations and generally consumed as objective realities, especially by those that are insufficiently informed on the nature of Black males through other means. Recently, new efforts are made to bring more diversity to Hollywood production teams and casts using the so-called inclusion rider, to ensure that such teams are knowledgeable about the marginalized position of Blacks in society, to then be capable of adequately reflecting on this in their productions. 'Just Mercy', as the first movie to adopt an inclusion rider in Hollywood, was then analyzed to indicate the presence of stereotypes and counter-stereotypes.

Consistent with previous research and existing literature, 'Just Mercy' has been found to contain a significant number of stereotypes surrounding Black males' presumed criminality, although these are often greatly opposed by counter-stereotypes characterizing them as law-abiding and having good moral characters. All in all, the presence of counter-stereotypes is much greater than that of stereotypes, which have been supplemented by inductively revealed alternative methods to combat stereotypes, including the acknowledgment of prejudice, discrimination, and racism. The latter findings are particularly relevant in terms of realism, as they emphasize the thin line between the reproduction of stereotypes and either critiquing this constructed reality or addressing its historical roots. This thin line was already reflected upon during the research process, as many of the codes that ended up in the category of acknowledgment of prejudice, discrimination, and racism were initially wrongfully coded as stereotypes. 'Just Mercy' has therefore moved away from portraying Black males as extremely and historically stereotypical characters, while simultaneously avoiding depicting an overromanticized reality of Black power as many other producers in the Hollywood movie scene tend to do. In accordance with existing literature, the latter has been found to be crucial in weakening normalized racial stereotypes and having the public reconsider the construction thereof.

More broadly taken, the inclusion rider seems to have played an important role in at least ensuring the presence of knowledge and familiarity regarding racial issues faced by Black males in the production team and cast, which was then adequately and critically reflected on in the movie 'Just Mercy'. For inclusion riders to potentially have a larger societal impact, however, other producers too should have the courage to move away from commercially beneficial stereotypical portrayals of Black characters. On a positive note, 'Just Mercy' has set the stage for future movie producers to do so, given its extensive use of counter-stereotypes and the even larger presence of

instances of acknowledgment of prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Existing literature agrees that visually and verbally countering and/or critically reflecting upon stereotypes present in cinematic depictions, lowers the activation thereof by the public, which ultimately can alter intergenerationally ingrained societal perceptions of marginalized groups. Therefore, the presence of such counter-storytelling in 'Just Mercy, should encourage the public to critically reflect on such socially constructed narratives in the Hollywood movie scene more generally, rather than conceiving anything displayed in visual media as factual realities.

Finally, something that was both a process lesson for me as well as a recommendation for other researchers, is to always keep an open mind toward the topic you are researching. While I did so in terms of my positionality, I was very narrowly focused on the stereotypes and counter-stereotypes present in 'Just Mercy' based on my research question. Yet, after reviewing my coding procedure, as well as the movie, I noticed that my findings go beyond just these two categories, and, in fact, address a much larger debate surrounding the thin line between stereotype reproduction and the portrayal of realism. Secondly, a limitation of this research is that it is limited to one case only. This means that statements on the role of the inclusion rider, in the largely present counter-stereotypes and alternative ways to combat stereotypes, remain limited to expectations, rather than hypotheses. As the inclusion rider is gradually gaining more public attention, it is therefore recommended for future research to continue exploring the role of the inclusion rider and whether or not it is the main incentive behind alternative approaches to Blacks' reality. Future research could also further explore the role of intersectionality in terms of race in combination with other social identities and/or characteristics to capture an even wider depiction of stereotypes. Finally, drawing on the perception of the public, as introduced in this research, this could further be investigated in more detail and regarding other cinematic depictions. Thus, although I acknowledge that there is room for further research on this topic, this thesis provides a basis for an open-minded approach toward alternative portrayals of Black males in the Hollywood movie industry and hence, for a reminder for the public to critically reconsider how the visual realities they consume are constructed.

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Appendix: Ethics and Privacy Checklist



CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: (Countering) Stereotypes in Hollywood: A Case Study of 'Just Mercy'

Name, email of student: Marit Lamers, 586805ml@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Bonnie French, french@essb@eur.nl

Start date and duration: April-June, 3 months

Is the research study conducted within DPAS YES - NO

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. YES - NO

If 'NO': skip to part V.

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? YES - NO
Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

- 1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? YES - NO
- 2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? YES - NO
- 3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? YES - NO
- 4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? YES - NO
Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).
- 5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? YES - NO
- 6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? YES - NO
- 7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? YES - NO
- 8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? YES - NO
- 9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? YES - NO
- 10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES - NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

- Digital data files will be stored on my personal computer with password protection. Paper data, for instance including content analysis notes, will be stored in a physical folder at my desk.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

- I myself am responsible for day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from my research as my research does not involve cooperations with others.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

- I will back-up my research on a weekly basis, both online and on my personal computer in order to ensure that no information runs the risk of getting lost. Both back-ups are secured by a password check.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

- This is not applicable to my research.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Marit Lamers

Name (EUR) supervisor: Bonnie French

Date: 20/03/2023

Date: 21-3-2023