

A Critical Analysis of Violence as a Symptom of Mental Illness in *Orange is the New Black*

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In a review of the first season of *Orange is the New Black* for the *Washington Post*, poet and attorney Seth Abramson suggests that the series offers “the most realistic portrayal of convicts the small screen has ever seen” and that it “fosters a sort of empathy we don’t get in police procedurals.” In “A Critical Analysis of Violence as a Symptom of Mental Illness in *Orange is the New Black*,” Ashley Farrell takes exception to this view, arguing that any celebration of *OITNB*’s “realism” should be tempered by the show’s uncritical representation (and perpetuation) of mental health stigmas. By drawing attention to the various ways in which the series consistently conflates violent behavior and mental illness, Farrell raises important questions about the kinds of “empathy” that *OITNB* actually makes possible.

– Dr. Fontaine

The Netflix Original television series “Orange is the New Black” has dominated the Western World since its release in 2013. The show is based on Piper Kerman’s memoir, *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*, and draws attention to the mistreatment of prison inmates, lack of health care in the prison, sexual harassment and assault, rape, racism, violence, and resulting mental health problems. In the media, the series has received positive reviews for its representations of social issues. For example, it is described as accurately portraying victims of social injustices; demonstrating the intersections of race, ethnicity, and sexuality with mental state; educating viewers on how to identify sexual assault;

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and presenting realities of addiction relapses. In contrast, current academic research focuses solely on the series' representations of queer identity, sexuality, and racism. In other words, mental illness in pop culture has not been a research focus of scholars when considering *Orange is the New Black*. As a result, viewers are unaware of the mental illness stigma presented in the show. Despite some accurate portrayals of mental illness in the series, mentally ill characters are consistently portrayed as violent, which encourages the stigma that those with mental illness pose a threat to others. I will first explore how characters' experiences with drug addiction and mania imply that violent behavior is a symptom of mental illness. I will then compare the frequency of non-violent inmates with the frequency of violent mentally ill inmates to demonstrate that mental illness is excessively, and therefore falsely, associated with violence in the series.

In *Orange is the New Black*, drug addiction becomes associated with violence rather than being seen as a condition whose sufferers may need mental support. In episode three of season three, Nicky Nichols, a recovering heroine addict, assaults a taxi driver and steals the taxi in order to get to a drug dealer's home in a flashback sequence. In the same episode, viewers see her relapse, with no mention of how she might have gotten help for her addiction. This lack of services forces viewers to associate addiction with criminal and violent behavior, rather than seeing it as an illness that deserves support. According to scholar April Terry: "although mental health services are dwindling due to budget cuts, facilities *are* required to

have individuals available [...] to offer such services/treatment. [Therefore,] the lack of services seen in *Orange is the New Black* is extremely problematic" (Terry, 558). Furthermore, Dr. Matt Vogel explores this association in his analysis of mental health and crime. His study reveals that although mental illness does not pose a threat to public safety on its own, "46 percent of Americans consider mentally ill persons to be more dangerous than members of the general population and over two-thirds reported that they would be unwilling to have a mentally ill person as a coworker or neighbor" (Vogel 338). In other words, mentally ill people face the stigma that they pose a threat to society, and *Orange is the New Black* perpetuates this stigma by failing to address addiction as a mental health concern and provide services to inmates.

Similar to the series' portrayals of drug addiction, the show suggests to viewers that people who are emotionally underdeveloped, manic, or paranoid need to be controlled rather than helped. For example, in episode eleven of season four, Suzanne Warren, often referred to by the nickname Crazy Eyes, beats another inmate nearly to death after being taunted to do so. Moreover, in episode ten of season five, Suzanne's friends convince her that a dead guard is still alive in order to prevent her from "going crazy". These examples show that Suzanne has difficulty controlling her emotions. Accordingly, others view her as in need of babysitting to prevent her violent episodes. Therapy is not an option for Suzanne because the prison psych ward is used to punish inmates who do not obey prison rules, rather than to help those struggling with

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their mental health. It is perceived as a place to avoid because inmates in psych are overmedicated and strapped down, like Tiffany Doggett in episode ten of season one. These portrayals belittle psychotherapy and do not display contemporary practices (Terry 557). As a result, “people generally think of the mentally ill as unpredictable and untreatable” (Corrigan) – those suffering from mental illness need to be monitored to prevent outbursts of violence rather than helped through their illness. In all five seasons of *Orange is the New Black*, an educated mental health professional never serves the inmates. The closest inmates get to mental health care is in episode one of season three when a new officer is introduced that has a master’s degree in psychology. She also does not stay in the prison for more than one season of the series. Thus, *Orange is the New Black* suggests that “corrections facilities serve [...] as dysfunctional alternatives to psychiatric hospitals” (Markowitz 38) by failing to display the availability of mental health resources and the assistance that therapy can provide to the mentally ill.

While there are several characters that display symptoms of mental illness and are not portrayed as violent (e.g., Brook Soso, a silent protestor, who, in season three, attempts suicide; Poussey Washington, who, in season three, turns to alcohol to relieve her depression while never harming another inmate; and Alex Vause, who, in season three, develops symptoms of paranoia but only uses violence in self-defense), some characters that are associated with violence are depicted as mentally ill. Along with Nicky and Suzanne, this includes: Tiffany Doggett,

who displays split personalities while physically attacking and manipulating other inmates in season one; Maria Ruiz, who has a baby in season one and, after being separated from her baby, takes an authoritarian role in her prison group; Red Reznikov, who, in season five, is obsessed with getting revenge on a guard; Lolly Whitehill, who, in season four, episode one, hallucinates about the prison being “bugged” and strangles a prison trespasser; and Lorna Morello Muccio, who, in seasons one and two, experiences emotional outbursts and delusions while assuming that she is engaged to a man who filed a restraining order against her for breaking into his house. According to Markowitz, “The nature of mental health care has changed in such a way that has led to more people with mental illness in jails and prisons than in hospitals” (Markowitz 38). Suitably, *Orange is the New Black* encourages this approach to handling people with mental illness by excessively associating violent, criminal activity with mental illness and by failing to address mental illness as something that requires therapy.

In conclusion, while *Orange is the New Black* portrays some accurate representations of mental illness, the series also associates mental illness with violence. This association furthers a stigma: those with mental illness are criminal or violent, or both. It is important to consider that the spectrum and the kinds of mental illnesses are not distinguished in the series or this analysis. Regardless, in relation to peer-reviewed data, the series does not fully tackle the reality of mental health and continues to further stigma.

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