Analyzing prisoners', law enforcement agents', and civilians' moral evaluations of *The Sopranos*

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A B S T R A C T

According to Zillmann (2000) viewers function as "untiring moral monitors"; relentlessly coming to moral judgments about the actions and motives of protagonists and antagonists. How does this "moral monitoring" apply to morally ambiguous crime TV drama that features unlawful protagonists? The current exploratory study is based on qualitative interviews ($N = 3 \times 20$) that aimed to provide insight in the grounds of moral evaluations of three selected episodes of mobster drama series *The Sopranos*. Viewers of three distinctive moral subcultures (i.e., prisoners, law enforcement agents, and civilians) were interviewed. The results revealed that the majority of prisoners and law enforcement agents grounded their moral evaluations mostly in their professional opinions and experiences, and came to fairly strict, yet different moral evaluations. In contrast, most of the civilians had a more "lenient" association with narratives and characters. Civilians generally based their evaluations on the morally ambiguous story world, and therefore showcased more nuances in their moral judgments.

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1. Introduction

American cable television networks, such as HBO, Netflix and AMC, have become increasingly popular, partially because they are pushing the traditional barriers of television series' content and form (Willis, 2002). These cable networks are lauded for featuring original programming, such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire, House of Cards,* and *True Detective*. These shows are characterized as challenging for the viewer, with a patient style of storytelling that revels in loose ends and morally complex characters (The Economist, 2011). These new shows – and crime shows in particular – are full of violations of moral standards. As a result, in both public and academic debates the view is advocated that moral violations, such as the use of violence, stimulate – if not cause – immoral behavior in society (e.g., Comstock & Scharrer, 2003; Haridakis, 2004). Conversely, studies based on a Durkheimian functionalist perspective have argued that norm violations in the media are not a threat to moral values; as long as those violations are condemned in an unambiguous manner, they actually function to uphold the moral order (Grabe, 1999, 2002; Klapper, 1960; Krijnen & Costera-Meijer, 2005; Reijnders, 2005). Classical police procedurals (e.g., *CSI, Criminal Minds*), for example, make clear-cut distinctions between "right" and "wrong" because every violation of the moral order is rectified by the actions of the hero (Lane, 2001). These types of crime shows, therefore,

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function as a contemporary public scaffold where gross norm violations, such as murder, are publicly denounced, and society's norms and values about justice are unmistakably reaffirmed. This straightforward *moral reasoning* in the narrative is argued to create moral certainty for viewers (Lane, 2001).

The last decades have witnessed a growing array of popular crime drama that articulates much less clear-cut moral messages (Lane, 2001). Particularly, these new cable network shows are not centered around classic morally good heroes, but feature anti-heroes or even criminals as (main) characters. These *morally ambiguous characters* [MACs] (Daalmans, Hijmans, & Wester, 2016; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2011; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Shafer & Raney, 2012) often behave in immoral ways, even though they also have redeeming qualities that differentiate them from traditional villains (Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2011). The Italian-American mobster Tony Soprano, the protagonist in the American crime drama television series *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), is a notable example of a MAC. As a criminal who commits explicit and severe moral violations, such as murder, he is at first glance a difficult character to relate to. Nevertheless, Tony Soprano is not just a hard-hitting criminal, given that he also suffers from panic attacks, and struggles trying to balance the conflicting requirements of his criminal organization and his beloved family members (Willis, 2002). His inner moral deliberations are explicitly discussed with his therapist, and more implicitly with other MACs within the cast. Because the MACs are engaged in multiple, morally complex, long running and character-driven storylines (Willis, 2002), series such as *The Sopranos* continuously articulate a wide variety of compound moral dilemmas that stay unresolved by the narrative (Dant, 2005). Whereas morality in traditional police procedurals and crime dramas is often self-evident and ritualized, morally ambiguous drama lacks this sense of moral certainty (Lane, 2001). Therefore, the continuous discussion in series such as *The Sopranos* about values connected to criminality, loyalty and justice, "demands some complex judgment on the part of the viewer" (Dant, 2005; p.6).

Given that the narrative of *The Sopranos* presents moral ambiguity and lack of moral closure regarding the MACs actions, how do viewers come to "moral judgments about the action and motives of the protagonists" (i.e., *moral evaluation*, Raney, 2005; p. 351–352)? Raney (2004) questions if viewers' moral judgments arise mainly out of the narrative experience – via a notion of closeness with the narrative, which Bilandzic (2006) termed *mediated closeness* – or as a result of viewers' self-morality. Bilandzic (2006) further explored how viewer characteristics might affect moral evaluations, by emphasizing the viewers' personal biographical situation ("*experiential closeness*"). However, it remains unclear how *moral evaluations* about mediated criminality arise when a morally certain frame of reference is missing, and the stories are narrated from the point of view of morally ambiguous, even criminal, characters. What role do viewers' moral make-up, knowledge, and personal experiences play in their moral evaluations? To address these questions, the current study aims to map the grounds that play a role in coming to moral evaluations by different viewer groups of *The Sopranos.* To explore the broad possible variety of the grounds for moral evaluations, we focus on three viewer groups who will most likely come to *different* moral evaluations regarding crime and punishment: (1) viewers who have broken the law (prisoners), (2) viewers who work towards upholding the law (law enforcement agents), and (3) viewers who are participants in a lawful society (civilians). In association with text characteristics of *The Sopranos*, we expect that prisoners and law enforcement agents share specific real-life knowledge and real-life experiences with regard to the unlawful setting of the show, while civilians most probably share lack of these knowledge and experiences. Additionally, these groups possibly share viewer characteristics, such as patterns of morality salience and the acceptance and appeal of (mediated) violence, which guide media preferences (Mastro et al., 2013). Therefore, these groups may be conceptualized as different *morality subcultures* (e.g., Tamborini, Eden, Bowman, Grizzard, & Lachlan, 2012).

2. Theoretical frame

Earlier research that focused on evaluations of MACs and morally ambiguous narratives has generally, built on the idea by Zillmann (2000) that viewers of drama series function as "untiring moral monitors". Viewers continually judge what they see on screen, and their ongoing verdicts influence the valence and intensity of the affective dispositions toward the protagonists (e.g., Eden et al., 2011; Janicke & Raney, 2015; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). Affective Disposition Theory (ADT: Raney, 2004, 2005; Zillmann, 2000) states that the enjoyment of a narrative depends on the congruency between a viewer's affective disposition toward a character and this character's outcome within the narrative. According to Zillmann (2000), this affective disposition toward a character depends on moral judgments of the character's actions and motivations within the narrative.

However, Zillmann (2000) also asserts that moral judgment may vary across morality subcultures, which share for example different patterns of moral justice and sanctioning. In this seminal paper Zillmann calls for exploration of these morality subcultures. This corresponds with the (meta)analysis of reception data of Michelle (2007), which suggests that viewers engage in different modes towards actions and motivations in the narrative, and that these modes are, for example, shaped by viewers' social group membership. Furthermore, ADT literature, such as extended ADT (EADT) by Raney (2004) has outlined that viewers engage differently with morality in the text.

Therefore, in this paper, we illustrate three separate ways of viewers to come to moral evaluations – via moral reasoning in the narrative, via viewers' own experience, knowledge and/or moral make-up, or via the relationship between both narrative and viewer characteristics – and discuss these three routes firstly in terms of reception mode theory (Michelle, 2007), and secondly in terms of ADT and EADT (Raney, 2004, 2005; Zillmann, 2000). The three separate ways are conceived in terms of a continuum ranging from narratively bound and largely "subjective" to more distant and supposedly "objective"