

Dr Louise Owusu-Kwarteng- 'When your intersectionality goes against you' Podcast Transcript

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Hello, good morning. My name is Dr. Louise Owusu-Kwarteng. I'm

the program leader in sociology at the University of Greenwich. This

podcast is called 'when your intersectionality goes against you'. And

it is focusing on the case of Lisa Anne Coleman, who was executed

for matricide in 2014, at the age of 38. So what I'm considering here

is the impact of gender role expectations, and how if a person goes

against these and how this may impact on the way that it is reported

on within the media, and then also the consideration of when race,

sexuality, and class inequalities are included in the mix. And again,

how does this shape the way that they represented and perhaps

sentencing takes place? And this is considered in the case of Lisa

Coleman. And I also ask the question, whether, in Lisa's case, there

was enough understanding of her background and if there had been,

might this have shaped the way that she was, the sentencing took

place. And then after this, I will offer some final thoughts. So what

was Lisa Coleman's crime? So Lisa was a 38 year old woman from

Texas and she was considered convicted of the starvation, torture

and death of her girlfriend's son in 2006, and she was executed for

this in September 2014. Now, her son was found malnourished in

2006, and he was only weighing in a two and a half stone, so that's

35 pounds. Now, her girlfriend's daughter also testified against Lisa

because she was saying that Lisa tied her brother up and beat him

and also abused her as well. And her girlfriend also testified against

her and made a plea bargain. So this meant that she got a life sentence rather than a death sentence like Lisa did. So in terms of

gender, and behaviour, expectations, media representations and

sentencing. So obviously, we know that crime, the way that crimes

are reported in the media can depend on who you are. Okay, so we

consider the relationship between crime reporting and gender here,

I asked the question whether there is a view that female offenders

are often depicted as others and further marginalized in the media.

Especially if they don't conform to what society perceives as normal

behaviour for a woman. And this is an idea that's been picked up by

Yvonne Jukes, who is a criminologist in this area. But then we have to

ask this question, what is normal behaviour for a woman? So, this is

ideas of hegemonic femininity. So this includes being a good mother,

being a nurturing personality and also being a good wife, among

other things. So these are the traits of what are seen as a good,

normal woman in society. So, what happens to women like Lisa

Coleman who transgressed these ideas, so does going against these

stereotypes lead to a worse representation and perhaps worse

treatment within the media. And then, are they also seen within the

media as transgressors as law in nature, and regarded as doubly

deviant as highlighted used by Ann Lloyd.

So let's consider this a little bit further. So when we include things

like single motherhood, somebody's ethnicity, their sexuality and

their race within this mix, does this create further issues? So, if a

woman is seen as deviating from the norm, such as, as I say, being a

single mother, because you're not married, and you're not in a 2.4

family, if you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, or asexual, can

these aspects of a woman's identity further reinforced the othering

and the marginalization and the way that women are represented in

the media? So then when we include the racial aspect of it, now we

know that there are long standing negative representations of black

people as savage and criminals, and as Cookie Warner, who has

explored this area. And this is a sociologist. As she explained. She

says that when black women are involved in crime, especially heinous crimes, they'll be represented in a particular way because of

the race, sexuality and gender transgression angle. So this in a sense

reinforces what Yvonne Jukes is saying, but then adding different

layers to it. So that's race and sexuality, and being a single mother,

and then there's also the issue of class as well. So if you're from a

poor background, does it further reinforce these negative

stereotypes because poor people are often represented in a negative

way in society? Interestingly, Lisa Coleman, her defence lawyer, John

Stickles, kind of reinforces this idea that Cookie Warner suggested so

she went in summing up the case, he said that the state singled Lisa

Coleman out and figured some way to get her the death penalty

because she was black, lesbian and an easy target, it was a slam

dunk. Now this is a very, very strong reflection on this, but it does, as

I say, kind of reinforce the point that Cookie Warner was saying, and,

and this idea of quadruple deviance. So, we can link this back to a

sociological term around intersectionality. Now, Kimberly Crenshaw

was a black female academic who coined this idea in 1989, because

it highlights multiple oppressions faced by African American women,

and I would say that they sort of explained to other women of colour

across the world. So this this she explained it as the interconnected

nature of social categorization, such as race, class and gender, as

they apply to a given individual or group is regarded as creating

overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage. So this is in society already, and this is before criminality has been brought into the mix. But then if we take all

these things together with sexuality, I asked the question whether

these factors play a role in harsher sentencing and harmful, harsher

media representation for black women. And again, arguably, this

reiterates the case, the point that Cookie Warner made before, so

let's apply this to Lisa Coleman. So, Lisa Coleman, she's poor. She

comes from a very poor background. She's black, she's a woman.

She's a lesbian. She comes from the deep south, in Texas, where race

relations, there's a deep, long, long standing history of negative race

relations. Plus, she's a single mother. So all of these things represent

it. Who she is and represent her intersectionality. But as her lawyer

pointed out these things all did go against her. And obviously it had

implications for the judgment that came against her. But I thought

I'd also like to ask the question whether this is also reinforced by the

crime that she committed. So, you know, the fact that she committed matricide, the fact that she killed her stepchild, and in a

sense, we can also link this to Myra Hindley. And again, how she

killed children. They weren't her children, but she killed him anyway.

So did as a result of these things. Were they represented more harshly? And were they given more harsh sentences?

So, we have considered the social aspects we've considered her

intersectionality and how these things may have gone against her in

terms of her sentence. And representation in the media. But I think

that it's also very important to look at other aspects which may have

been downplayed in the consideration of a case. Now, first of all,

let's consider Lisa's background. So she had bipolar disorder throughout her life. And she had a very deeply troubled upbringing.

So her mom became pregnant with her when she was at the age of

13. So, her mother was a child herself when she had her. She was

raped by a family member. So effectively Lisa was a product of rape.

To make things worse, from an early age, she experienced physical and sexual abuse by her family members. So as a result of this, she was taken to foster care. So she may have been sexually abused there because this is not unheard of. Now when she was in foster care, her mom never came to see her. She didn't see any of her family. And when her mum did come, she called her a pig. So, you know, imagine what this must have done to the way that she saw herself on top of everything else. Furthermore, she was stabbed in the back by her cousin. And then she was taunted by the fact that she was a product of rape and the fact that she was raped. This rape took place from a family member. So to arguably, to block all of this out, she started to abuse drugs and alcohol. And then by the age of 16, she was a mother herself but her child was also taken into care. So we again, we have to ask this question. Her lawyer suggested that perhaps her background and her early life experiences perhaps made an unsuitable guardian and parent, but not a deliberately violent killer. as she's being portrayed within the media, but then did the negative emphasis on her personhood and the crime that she committed mean that these early upright life experiences were not acknowledged enough and that there was

somewhat downplayed when they were analysing her case. So were

they taken into enough consideration? Okay. And then again, you

know, if it wasn't, did downplaying it impact on the severity of the

sentence that she got. And then again, we ask this question, Is this a

clear case of how her intersectionality went against her? And, well,

this is a problem in many contexts, is it perhaps made worse by the

fact that she lived in an area where there's deep seated segregation

there was segregation of people according to the race, and also the

deep seated history of race. In the marginalization of black groups,

so did these things also go against her as well? So I'm going to leave

you with those questions. And I'm going to sort of review the lecture

now. So we have considered the case of Lisa Coleman, who was

executed for matricide. And we've considered her the implications of

her race, gender, sexuality, class, and how the way that she was seen

in the media, in society and the sentence that she got, and then I

asked the question, whether there was enough consideration of her

early experiences, when, which shaped who she was, and perhaps

shaped what it was that she did. Thank you very much.

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