

Erratic Mothers and Wild Animals:

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Online Newspapers'
Representations of Female and Male Opioid Users

by Sofia Hedberg



MALMÖ UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF CULTURE
AND SOCIETY

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Supervisor: Emil Stjernholm

Abstract

This thesis critically investigates how female and male opioid users are represented in local newspapers in Ohio, one of the states which has been most severely affected by the ongoing ‘opioid crisis’ in the United States. Through an analysis of 20 articles from the *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch*, the study aims to highlight how women and men who use opioids are portrayed, and what ideologies are hidden in the texts. Guided by Fairclough’s framework for critical discourse analysis and van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach, the analysis was performed on three levels: text-level, whereby journalists’ word choices, contextualisation and linguistic emphasis were studied; discursive level, which focused on processes involved in the production and consumption of the news pieces, and; sociocultural level, which entailed analysing historical and current developments of drug policy locally and nationally. The study finds that journalists downplay the seriousness of (white) male opioid use by calling men by their nicknames, by portraying them as ‘mischievous’ and by using jokey undertones when referring to their drug use. Female opioid use is constructed as abnormal by use of words such as ‘erratic’ and ‘unruly’ and women are discursively penalised for failing in their roles as caregivers to children. This thesis exemplifies how language use by local journalists’ in Ohio reinforces societal perceptions of male and female opioid users, which may influence counteractive measures by authorities.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, sociocognitive approach, gender representation, local news, drug users, opioids

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1. Introduction

On February 9th, 2001, the *New York Times* published its first story about a ‘cancer painkiller’ that was causing trouble in several of the country’s Eastern states. Journalists Francis X. Clines and Barry Meier (2001) reported how police in West Virginia, Maine, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Ohio frequently witnessed dealers selling the substance on the street, after having procured it illegally via (real or fake) patients. Users of the drug, OxyContin, had learned how to evade the slowness of its effect, and could attain a strong and instant high, similar to that of morphine. Local attorneys interviewed in the article described how the number of overdoses from use of OxyContin had increased dramatically over a short time, and one asserted that “[w]hat is most unusual and disturbing is the number of high school kids and those in the early 20’s who got addicted” (United States attorney for Maine, Jay P. McCloskey, in Clines & Meier, 2001). This news story may well have been many citizens’ first encounter with a phenomenon which would become increasingly prominent in media over the following years, as the use of OxyContin and other opioids grew into a national ‘epidemic’.

The term ‘opioids’ refers to chemically produced versions of ‘opiates’, which are pain-relieving medications based on the opium poppy flower (Macy, 2018). Opiates and opioids, in different forms, have existed in the United States for several hundred years and have played significant roles in the country’s medicinal history (Gahlinger, 2004). Periodically, the substances have received praise for their ability to ease such varied symptoms as pain, coughing and different kinds of stomach issues, but the addictive nature of the substances has also been cautioned regularly by physicians (op. cit.). Drugs such as morphine, codeine and heroin, which were all produced for medical purposes, have gone through similar processes of initial frequent and liberal use to strict limitation and regulation, when the substances have proved highly addictive (Gahlinger, 2004). OxyContin, referred to in the *New York Times* article, was introduced to the U.S. drug market in the mid-1990s, promoted to physicians by its manufacturer as a secure, dependable, non-addictive medication for all kinds of chronic pain (Macy, 2018).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that, between the years 1999-2017, the number of overdose deaths caused by prescribed or illegal opioids increased by six times in the United States - ending approximately 47 700 lives in 2017, on average 130 per day (CDC, 2018b). A poll from 2017 further showed that 44 percent of citizens knew someone who had been addicted to prescription opioids, and one in five someone who had died from an overdose caused by them

(Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017). Drug overdose now outweighs deaths by car accidents and gun violence in the U.S. and constitutes the primary reason for citizens dying before the age of fifty (Macy, 2018). One of the states where the opioid epidemic has reaped the most victims is Ohio, where the rate of opioid overdose resulting in death was more than double the national average in 2016, resulting in 3 613 casualties that year (NIDA, 2018). This significant and concerning development, in combination with the fact that Ohio ranks among the top ten states where paid circulation of daily newspapers is most common (Statista, 2019), motivates a study which investigates the state's local newspapers' coverage of the opioid crisis.

Existing scholarly work that examines the U.S. opioid epidemic has thus far primarily been produced within the realm of medical and criminology research. Only one study has been conducted within the field of media and communication studies (see Russell et. al., 2019). Investigating news media's representation of the ongoing crisis is important because those portrayals may influence the population's attitudes towards opioid use (Hodkinson, 2011) and ultimately have bearing upon regulation and societal efforts aimed at curbing the problem. As opposed to the approach taken by Russell and his colleagues (examining media framing of the phenomenon generally) my thesis specifically deals with the ways in which victims of opioid addiction and overdose have been depicted. This angle is particularly interesting in the current context because research has shown that U.S. media reporting on drug users has partially shifted from a demonising discourse to one of drugs as a 'public health problem'. It is argued that this may be because users often, 'unexpectedly' are white, suburban and middle-class (McLean, 2017; Hansen, 2017; Netherland & Hansen, 2016). In my thesis, I refer to the issue as 'opioid crisis', 'opioid epidemic', 'public health problem' etcetera, whilst recognising that previous drug surges affecting primarily other demographics of the U.S. population should have been denoted in the same way.

Scholars from the criminology and medical research fields who have studied representation of drug users tend to focus on disparities in media depictions of drug addicts and dealers along racial lines (see for instance McLean, 2017; Netherland & Hansen, 2016; Cobbina, 2008). By contrast, I found only three studies that examine gender representation and drug use (see Linnemann, 2010; Daniels et. al., 2018; Hansen, 2017). The purpose of the present study is thus to investigate the ways in which female and male opioid users are depicted in contemporary local Ohio news media and why. Applying a gender perspective to research on news media representation of drug users is especially relevant in connection with the current epidemic, as the number of women who are dying as a

result of overdose from prescribed opioids is increasing at a faster rate than men (CDC, 2018a). By doing so, I contribute to knowledge of an overlooked perspective on media representation of drug users in the United States. My research questions are:

1. How are female and male opioid users portrayed in contemporary local Ohioan news press?
2. What ideologies, if any, are expressed in the texts?
3. How might these representations relate to societal perceptions of female and male drug use in the United States?

To answer these questions, I perform a critical discourse analysis of online articles published in two daily Ohioan newspapers, that in different ways deal with individual opioid users. I do so by operationalising Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, complemented by van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, to examine journalists' language use when portraying female and male opioid users.

After this opening chapter comes the literature review, where I present and position my study in relation to existing research which relates to my topic. In chapter three, I discuss the theoretical concepts that are central to my research. The following chapter, four, introduces my analytical framework and chosen method. Chapter five delves deeper into my research approach and describes the data collection and analysis processes. Thereafter, in chapter six, I discuss the ethical issues I have faced in conjunction with this thesis. Chapter seven presents my research findings, organised into three sections based on Fairclough's framework. Finally, chapter eight summarises the results, relates them to the research questions and offers some ideas for future studies.

2. Literature review

What has motivated much of the research on representations of drug use in the United States is the longstanding tendency within the public discourse to protect or express concern for certain groups' contact with narcotic substances, and to scapegoat and identify threat in others' (Musto, 1999; Lassiter, 2015). This dates to (at least) the nineteenth century, when Chinese railroad workers brought opium to the country and - following economic depression and labour surplus - were blamed for causing increased levels of opium addiction among natives (Musto, 1999). Around the same time, use of cocaine among black people was a cause for concern in the South, as members of the white population feared that the drug's stimulating effect might make black users forget 'their place' and perform attacks on white society. Meanwhile, the white middle- and upper classes had put the substance to good use by offering it to builders and mine workers, which kept them working at a satisfactory pace with smaller requirements for food (op. cit.). Such beliefs regarding the varying appropriateness of citizens' use of drugs and who should be blamed for addiction and who should not, has left traces in U.S. drug policy, criminal policy and public discourse ever since (Lassiter, 2015). This, in turn, has led a multitude of scholars to investigate media's role in sustaining/challenging such perceptions.

2.1 Race, class, age

McLean (2017), for instance, has shown how media coverage of drug overdose changed over a time period (1988-2014) when victims' demographic profiles went from being predominantly urban and black or brown, to increasingly suburban and white. Her study revealed that whereas there was very little information included about those who had succumbed to overdose in the beginning of the period, journalists gradually began contextualising the victim's situation in later articles, and referring to drug addiction as a public health issue, rather than as criminal behaviour which should be penalised (McLean, 2017). Other than offering more in-depth information about white, suburban drug users' life circumstances, media depictions often provide 'explanations' of their behaviour. In a comparative study of media representations of white opioid users and black and brown heroin users, Netherland and Hansen (2016) found that white drug use was systematically explained as (1) youngsters consuming medications prescribed to parents or grandparents, (2) the user "[falling] in with a bad crowd" (p. 673), or (3) the user becoming addicted to prescribed medication after suffering an injury or disease. By contrast, substance use among black and brown urban individuals was portrayed as expected and - when considered newsworthy - drug-related events were summarised briefly in the form of arrest reports (Netherland & Hansen, 2016).

Some scholars that have investigated how drug users' ethnicity/'race' shapes representations in news media extend their analysis to include age and class as influencing factors. In a study which examined portrayals of opioid overdose victims in Canada, Johnston (2019) found an over-representation of (white) youth in photos of victims. All but one image featured a person under the age of 35, even though 75 percent of overdose deaths caused by opioids in British Columbia happened to people between the ages 30 and 54 (Belzak & Halverson, 2018, in Johnston, 2019). In terms of social class, Johnston concluded that whereas journalists rarely used explicitly classist language, they frequently referred to overdose victims as "regular' kids from 'good families'" (2019, p. 8), subtly indicating middle- or upper-class inherency. Because research shows that drug addiction and overdose is more common among less privileged socioeconomic groups, news media in this way produce distorted images of which groups in society are vulnerable to substance abuse (Johnston, 2019). On occasions when white drug users from the lower socioeconomic classes have been the subjects of media attention, Murakawa (2011) found that the coverage has partially been marked by a fear *of* the user, but – compared to news pieces about black and brown users – also by a fear *for* the user. She argues that what drove journalists to describe methamphetamine use in the early 2000s as an 'epidemic', despite research showing that meth use has been relatively stable for many years, was an underlying racially-based scare: "the scare of declining White status in the context of post-civil rights economic stratification" (2011, p. 220). Whereas black and brown drug use is associated with danger to others, drug use among white, poor citizens is associated with danger to the self, or white racial status (Murakawa, 2011).

2.2 Gender

What emerges from the research presented above are indications that the ways in which drug users are described by news media in North America varies with the individual's 'racial' composition/ethnicity, age and social class. This leaves us with the question of how the person's sex influences the discourse. Linnemann (2010) has investigated how Midwestern news press portrayed women and men who committed methamphetamine-related crimes during the aforementioned 'epidemic', using the analytical categories "reasons for involvement, role in the meth market, criminal virility and outcome of involvement" (p. 100). He found that journalists described men as active agents in the production and distribution of methamphetamine, and – when discussed – their motivation as associated with the prospect of a thrilling business opportunity. By contrast, women were represented as passive assistants in the process, and their reason for using meth was, according to journalists, to cope with traditionally female 'duties' (Linnemann, 2010). In terms of outcome, women were frequently portrayed as seeking redemption

through participation in rehabilitation programs, whereas men simply received their stately punishment (op. cit.). Emphasis on white women's obligation to overcome morally questionable behaviour and return to being productive citizens has been observed also in television portrayals of female drug users by Daniels et. al. (2018). In their study of tv-series *Law & Order* and *Intervention*, women were represented as "having failed the standards of White femininity, and thus, the social order" (Daniels et. al., 2018, p. 342). As symbolic reproducers of the nation, white women's drug use is portrayed as especially problematic, because their deviant behaviour ultimately threatens to diminish white supremacy. Hansen (2017) has observed how this is mirrored in local public discourse in Staten Island in conjunction with the current opioid crisis, where physicians refer sympathetically to their (white, middle-class, female) patients and speak of "valued professionals' need for support and of vulnerable children needing protection" (p. 330). The women are portrayed as blameless and in need of maintenance therapy, which allows them to lead functional, healthy lives (Hansen, 2017).

Compared to the large amount of research which investigates how white and non-white drug users are represented in U.S. public discourse, the gender perspective has largely been neglected. The articles referred to in this section begin to paint a picture of the way male and female drug users are portrayed in various types of media and discourse, but they simultaneously reveal big gaps which remain to be filled. Linnemann's choice of analytical categories provides his study with a clear criminological focus, and methamphetamine is furthermore a highly different substance to opioids, which will carry different connotations in the general public. Hansen's research deals with opioids, but she studies the 'epidemic' in a different setting to the one chosen for this thesis, and her more 'community-based' discourse analysis does not focus specifically on local papers (2017, p. 329). News journalists pride themselves in remaining true to certain values (Deuze, 2005) and therefore people carry different expectations of their portrayals of drug users than they do of those in tv-series such as *Law & Order* and *Intervention*, thus distinguishing the current study from Daniels et. al.'s.

2.3 Public response and 'moral panic'

While some research which documents media's biased portrayals of drug users remain at the descriptive level, others go one step further and consider how such media content might influence public attitudes and societal response. Netherland and Hansen (2016) found that, depending on the demographic profile of the user, news articles mentioned different kinds of authority interventions. In articles about black and brown individuals, journalists often referred to law

enforcement initiatives, whereas pieces about white individuals often discussed preventative measures, treatment and education (Hansen & Netherland, 2016). The authors state that such choices by journalists

logically lead to different public responses and policy interventions. In this sense, the popular press is helping to create a form of narcotic apartheid that is inscribed not only on divergent narratives of the human qualities, family, and community lives of white compared to black or brown addicted people, but that is also inscribed on racially divergent legal codes and local, State and Federal policies (Netherland & Hansen, 2016, p. 666).

Russell et. al. (2019) have mapped out what kind of response news pieces about drug users receive, when journalists frame the story in different ways and mention different kinds of societal interventions as potential solutions to the problem. They saw that reactions on Facebook tended to be more emotional and supportive when articles depicted personal experiences of addiction, and – conversely – users expressed a need for action and offered ideas on how to promote public safety when journalists utilised criminality- and law enforcement frames (Russell et. al., 2019). Thus, whereas news pieces on white drug use appear to make the general public favour supportive and educative measures, news pieces on black or brown drug use appear to install a sense of insecurity and make the public support law enforcement initiatives.

Such outcomes of media representations have been theorised by a number of scholars as examples of ‘moral panic’ (Cobbina, 2008; Linnemann, 2010). Cobbina (2008) states that moral panic occurs when “the majority perceives one social group or type of activity as threatening the stability of society” (p. 145). She concludes that four out of five ‘moral panic elements’ were realised in conjunction with the (‘white’) methamphetamine ‘crisis’ of the early 2000s, and five out of five during the (‘black’) crack cocaine ‘epidemic’ of the late 1980s. However, moral panic in connection with the meth crisis concretised in newspapers expressing concern for health and environmental effects, and in connection with the crack epidemic journalists were more likely to refer to the need for more strict crime controls (Cobbina, 2008). Linnemann adds, quoting Greer, that moral panics “or ‘crises of the present’ have much to tell us about salient, yet sometimes unspoken social values” (2010, p. 97). The group which is perceived as threatening to the rest of society becomes a kind of ‘folk devil’ who the public aims its anxiety at. In the context of representations of female and male methamphetamine users, Linnemann identifies the meth-using mother as the media-constructed ‘folk devil’ (2010, p. 105).

Agar and Reisinger (2000) have investigated what it takes for a so-called 'topic framework' to take off in news media, which in turn may lead to a state of moral panic. They define the concept as "a high-level schema-theoretic structure than can be used as a resource for any number of speech acts – conversation, narrative, argument, and so on" (p. 1553). For their study, they use "suburban youth heroin use" (Agar & Reisinger, 2000, p. 1553) as an example, which became established as a topic framework in news outlets in Baltimore in the late 1990s. The authors found that the phenomenon began being taken for granted by the local community after the media had reported on it repeatedly over a period of time, and they assert that readers will show continued interest when dramatic elements are included, when they can relate to the topic personally, and when the issue is somehow morally charged (Agar & Reisinger, 2000).

Though the articles above provide interesting insight to how media representations of drug users can influence public perceptions and societal interventions, the scholars largely rely on similar types of content analysis, which risks limiting the understanding of how individual journalistic texts connect with surrounding societal practices. Russell et. al., for instance, organise their material into four news frames, which they then draw conclusions from. Such an approach disguises individual word choices and does not allow for detailed linguistic analysis. Agar and Reisinger's piece, on the other hand, focuses on journalistic-technical aspects, but does not consider what factors influence the reader's consumption process. By applying critical discourse analysis, this thesis therefore fills a methodological gap within the field.

3. Theoretical framework

This section introduces the three concepts that make up foundational ‘pillars’ in my research: ‘discourse’, ‘ideology’, and ‘representation’. All three are central to the process of answering my research questions, and together they simultaneously situate the current study within a larger theoretical context.

3.1 Discourse

The multitude of definitions that exist for the concept of discourse largely overlap, but there are different ideas concerning the ‘scope’ of the term and what it represents. Some theorists have argued that discourse, and language use, is what makes up social life completely, whereas others distinguish between discourse and other elements of the social (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Several scholars use the concept as a ‘mass noun’ and refer to language use in connection with different social domains, such as ‘media discourse’ or ‘medical discourse’. Others apply the term as a ‘count noun’ and use ‘discourse’/’discourses’ when they talk about specific instances of language use, such as a news article or a public speech (van Dijk, 1997). Discourse has also been more closely associated with language use that expresses certain opinions or perspectives on societal issues, such as ‘feminist discourse’ (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In the Foucauldian tradition, discourse is theorised as a way of structuring various types of knowledge. Hall (1997), for instance, defines it as:

ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society (p. 6).

Whereas research focused on discourse within the linguistic field primarily has dealt with language use in the form of text and talk, several theorists emphasise the need to perform ‘multi-modal’ analyses of communication, and include visual aspects such as images, gestures and facial expressions (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1997). Van Dijk further argues for a more specific, but simultaneously wider perspective on discourse, which considers “*who* uses language, *how*, *why*, and *when*” (1997, p. 2). This, in turn, leads him to identify three primary dimensions of discourse: 1) the language use; 2) the expression of ideas/ideology; and 3) social interaction (van Dijk, 1997). Fairclough similarly combines the traditional linguistic view of discourse with a more wide-

spanning social-theoretical perspective, which considers each discursive event as “simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice” (1992, p. 4). This ‘contextualised’ notion of discourse is most relevant to the current study, as my purpose is not merely to describe the language journalists use in a particular set of articles, but to understand why, and connect those instances of language use to more deeply rooted discursive and societal patterns. My assumption is that news pieces are never produced in a state of vacuum but always influenced by their sociocultural setting.

3.2 Ideology

Teun van Dijk’s definition of ideologies is particularly useful for this study, as it supports the above mentioned multidimensional or ‘contextual’ analysis of discourse. This is because van Dijk argues that ideologies are always “*socially shared* by the members of a *collectivity* of social actors” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 116) and never specific to one person. Hence, studies of discourse and ideology both require consideration of contextual circumstances. According to van Dijk, ideologies are ‘systems of ideas’ that form the identity of social groups. They constitute shared perceptions of basic conditions and ways of life which influence social groups’ ideals, goals and actions, and simultaneously help distinguish one group from another (van Dijk, 2006). However, not all formations in society share an ideological foundation, and van Dijk stresses that it is important to differentiate between *social groups* (which hold ideologies) and *cultural communities*, that share common *knowledge*, but not necessarily ideology (2006). Journalists can be considered a social group, as they share a professional ideology, which contains values such as objectivity and autonomy (Deuze, 2005).

Van Dijk’s (2006) notion of ideology is intimately linked with discourse, as ideology is acquired, re-established and commonly expressed through discourse. Ideology, in turn, forms part of language users’ mental models that control discourse (see ‘Sociocognitive approach’ below). Van Dijk notes that members of ideologically based social groups apply discourse strategically, which leaves traces in the construction of sentences and semantic meaning (2006). Discourse analysis can therefore be used to unveil ideology in text and talk. In this study, discourse analysis will help establish whether news depictions of male and female opioid users might be considered ideological in some way. This could for instance concretise in journalists ascribing users with different qualities or expectations. It is, however, important to be aware that not all utterances of language contain ideology (van Dijk, 2006). Van Dijk notes that “*as such*, words, phrases, topics or intonations, are not ideologically biased. It is their specific *use* in specific communicative situations that make them

so” (2006, p. 128). That is why, he states, analysing the contextual circumstances of a discursive event is necessary.

3.3 Representation

Representation is what allows us to refer to things in our environment – material objects, people and experiences. Hall (1997) theorised two systems involved in the process of representation; the first consists of the mental conceptualisation of all things we see and experience in our lives. The second comprises language, through which we may share those concepts with other people, and thereby provide things with meaning (op. cit.). A basic assumption underlying the theory is that no object inherently holds meaning; it is only when we use it in a certain way, apply particular words to refer to it, and associate it with emotions that the object ‘begins to mean’ (Hall, 1997). Effective communication of meaning between people requires that they share the same language, as language constitutes a system of signs and symbols which can be used to refer to things, people, feelings or ideas (op. cit.). However, signs and symbols are not universal but culturally contingent; the colour red, for example, holds different associations in different parts of the world (Hodkinson, 2011).

According to the social constructionist view, the process of establishing meaning through language is constitutive of culture and is our way of understanding and gaining knowledge about the world. Thus, when considering representation from a media perspective, the way newspapers represent people, groups, events and social establishments, has the potential to influence readers’ perceptions of those phenomena (Fürsich, 2010). Fairclough (1995) notes that, in representation, there are always different options at hand, for instance of which words to use when describing a topic. Those choices will impact the result and depend on the “social positions and interests and objectives of those who produce them” (p. 104). Rather than objectively and equally reflecting reality, media organisations’ representations are selective and have the power to aim our attention at certain societal issues and steering it away from others (Fürsich, 2010; Hodkinson, 2011).

Fürsich (2010) argues that because media representations produce ‘reality’ and establish norms, they can help sustain unequal power structures in society. Of specific interest to the current research is how portrayals of male and female opioid users relate to gender inequalities in general. Hodkinson notes that traditionally, men and women have been represented according to stereotypical gender roles in media, which reinforces the patriarchal system and side-lines identities and sexual preferences that do not fit the bill (2011). Research further shows that women are featured to a much smaller extent in news stories than men, and when they are, they are twice as

likely to be described as victims (Gill, 2007). Gill states that journalists tend to include commentary about women's appearance more often than with men, and women are more frequently associated with the domestic environment and their parental role than men are (2007). Establishing how my case relates to these tendencies entails identifying what is included in journalists' portrayals and what is not, what is emphasised and what is backgrounded, as well as what is made explicit and what is presupposed (Fairclough, 1995).

4. Analytical framework

Having untangled the notions of ‘discourse’, ‘ideology’ and ‘representation’, this section presents the method I use to operationalise the theoretical framework. I begin by introducing discourse analysis as a general approach, then define and argue for my choice of (feminist) critical discourse analysis.

4.1 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a study of language, which focuses on the ways in which people make use of different language in different social situations (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Thus, the field separates itself from other forms of language study that are concerned with language as an abstract system, by looking at what happens when people use their previous knowledge and experience of language in various contexts (Johnstone, 2017). Discourse analysis thereby offers explanatory, macro-level insights to language use, rather than descriptive, micro-level renderings (Paltridge, 2012). People’s acquired perceptions of *when* and *where* to use *what* language are based on existing discourse, and, when applied, continues to establish discourse (Johnstone, 2017).

Even though scholars who practice discourse analysis tend to focus on different types of text and speech, there are those that study other kinds of communicational forms, such as photography, music and dance, which are likewise concerned with meaning-making (Johnstone, 2017). Discourse analysis can thereby be considered a broad and adaptable concept, which is neither defined by certain kinds of research questions (op. cit.), nor by a singular methodological approach (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The concept has its roots within the structuralist and poststructuralist linguistic traditions, which share the basic notion that language provides access to reality. By representing reality in language, we not only reflect it, but actively contribute to the ongoing production of it (op. cit.). By this logic, discourse analysis can be used to study how language use produces and influences various world views, social identities and relations (Paltridge, 2012).

Throughout its history, a multitude of approaches to discourse analysis have been established, based on varying ideas with regards to, for instance, the ‘scope’ of discourse and analytical focus. Critical discourse analysis, which I use in this thesis, specifically aims to highlight the connection between discourse and unequal power relations in society (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

4.2 (Feminist) Critical discourse analysis

As with discourse analysis, *critical* discourse analysis (CDA) cannot be defined by a common set of methodological approaches or prescribed theoretical concepts. What critical discourse analysts share is rather a focus on the connection between discourse and power relations in society (Fairclough, Mulderrig & Wodak, 2011). Fairclough et. al. (2011) note that it is seldom obvious to people how discursive practices are charged with ideological assumptions, or that those practices, in turn, are facilitated by intrinsic power structures. Thus, the aim of CDA is to shed light on how language use contributes to sustaining the social (unequal) order, and consequently, to facilitate change and contribute to increased levels of equality (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

According to Fairclough, the object of study in CDA should not be discursive practices in isolation, but their external and internal relations (2013). This is because he considers discursive practice as an intermediate level between individual ‘communicative events’ (speeches, texts, etc.) and sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 1995). All discursive events are in what Fairclough calls ‘dialectical relationships’ with the larger societal system and its condition; that is, each text is influenced by the sociocultural state and practice, but the text can also influence them (Fairclough, Mulderrig & Wodak, 2011). Change on the societal level happens through ‘creative discursive practice’ whereby language is assembled and used in innovative, novel ways (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). One advantage of using CDA lies in its unique possibility to connect individual language choices and micro-level nuances to contextual circumstances, which other forms of content analysis cannot. However, because CDA seldom uses large sets of data, applying it simultaneously represents a limitation in terms of generalisability.

To study communicative events, Fairclough has developed a three-dimensional model, which encourages analysis on 1) text level, 2) discourse practice level, and 3) sociocultural practice level. On text-level, the scholar takes a traditional linguistic approach by looking at aspects such as word choices, use of grammar and meaning. Important elements to consider might be the way(s) in which individual people are portrayed, how the author constructs their own as well as the reader’s identity, and in what way(s) the writer addresses the reader. Analysis on the discourse practice level involves consideration of the way in which the text has been produced and how it is consumed (Fairclough, 1995). Here, the analyst might look at what kinds of discourse the communicative event draws upon and how the text is understood by its audience (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Lastly, the researcher studies the sociocultural context of the topic that the text deals with. This can for instance entail analysis of economic, political and cultural aspects (Fairclough, 1995).

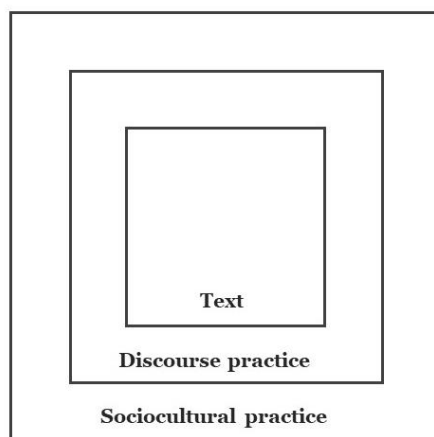


Figure 1: Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to CDA.

Because the current study focuses on representations of opioid users based on gender categories, I take inspiration from research which explicitly applies a feminist angle to critical discourse analysis. The two research fields share a lot of common features and can therefore successfully be combined to form a strong analytical framework. As CDA, feminist research does not take an 'objective' stance, but openly critiques the patriarchal order, that is, the societal structure which privileges men over women (Lazar, 2005). The goal of feminist research is to achieve social change and build a society where gender does not define who we are, what we can become, or our relationships to other people. It follows that *feminist CDA* aims to reveal how discursive practices maintain, negotiate and challenge gender ideology (op. cit.). The feminist angle is significant because, as Cameron notes, historically, most critical discourse analysis, has been performed by heterosexual, white men (Cameron, 1998) and in present times, "issues of gender, power and ideology have become increasingly complex and subtle" (Lazar, 2005, p. 1).

Throughout the past decades, feminist scholars studying language have turned away from trying to establish what gender is and how it appears in discourse, to recognising that gender is not something that we are, or possess, but a fluid notion which is constantly re-established and negotiated through behaviour and discourse (Lazar & Kramarae, 2011 [2011]). Thus, feminist researchers share the view that individual and collective language choices influence sociocultural practice, and vice versa (Lazar, 2005). To better understand the cognitive processes involved in text production and consumption, which connects Fairclough's discursive level with the sociocultural level, I use van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, presented below.

4.3 Sociocognitive approach

The basic premise of van Dijk's sociocognitive approach to CDA, is that what enables discursive practices to become sociocultural practice, and sociocultural practice to be reproduced in text and talk, are the cognitive processes of language users. As discursive agents, we store and process all the things we experience in life by creating representations of them in our minds (2018 [2016]). Importantly, these 'mental models' are not kept as *neutral* pieces of information in our memory but become influenced by our individual beliefs and previous knowledge and experiences. Thus, each time a person expresses themselves about a topic, they draw upon the associated mental model and reproduce *their* version of the issue, along with opinions and emotions (van Dijk, 2008). The resulting discourse will further be adapted to what van Dijk calls 'context models' – the particular social situation that the person finds themselves in. For instance, they will consider *where* they are, *who* they are addressing, as *what* (a journalist/a neighbour/a friend), in what *way* and with what *purpose*. Consequently, all communicative events are controlled by the discursive agents' perception of what is appropriate in the specific context (van Dijk, 2018 [2016]). This mediating process between the discursive agent's mental model and text/talk is necessary to produce meaningful discourse for the receiver, to reach common ground, and will influence many aspects in terms of (for instance) choice of words, presuppositions, implications and grammar (op. cit.).

For the purposes of this thesis, van Dijk's sociocognitive model is applied to consider the process that local journalists in Ohio go through when producing news stories about opioid users, how the texts may be understood by receivers, and what kind of discourses and societal practices they might contribute to. The articles are both influenced by the journalist's mental model of the topic, and by his or her context model, including the ideological standpoint of the media corporation they work for. Important to note is that even though the journalists, as discursive agents, must modify their outputs to the perceived mental models of their readers, the process of understanding discourse also involves the readers updating their mental model associated with the topic (van Dijk, 2018 [2016]). News discourse therefore has the potential to significantly influence people's understanding of a phenomenon such as the opioid crisis and its victims, and much of the information the general public base its knowledge on may be biased and not explicitly stated in the articles, but rather implied as "socioculturally shared knowledge" by the journalists (van Dijk, 2008).

5. Methodology

In this chapter I clarify my stance as a researcher, by discussing some ontological and epistemological assumptions I make by performing this study. I also place my thesis within a research paradigm and describe the way I performed the data collection and analysis.

5.1 Research approach

This study is of a qualitative character, as it revolves around societal meaning-making of a particular group and uses written words as its empirical data, rather than numbers. (Blaikie, 2010). When I investigate portrayals of male and female opioid users, I do not set out to test any pre-existing theory; rather, I collect the data, analyse it, and then identify emerging patterns related to my research questions, thereby applying an inductive research strategy (op. cit.). As opposed to building a generalised theory of the results, I align with Fairclough and van Dijk's approach and present my findings as specific to their situational context. My assumption that the way female and male opioid users are portrayed in Ohioan news media is contingent of the local environment simultaneously places my study within the interpretivist tradition of research, which considers social reality to be "the product of its inhabitants" (Blaikie, 2010, p. 99). By performing this study, I do not expect to find any objective truths (Collins, 2010, p. 39); rather, the value of the research lies in trying to understand how journalists and newspaper readers make sense of a phenomenon which affects the area they live in.

I draw upon the idealist assumption that there is no one reality to be found, but that individual realities are created in the minds of human beings, through interpretations controlled by their previous experiences and situational context (Blaikie, 2010). Because we constantly see the world through a filter of our own subjectivity, it is only possible to understand the world by collecting and interpreting inhabitants' own knowledge and experience. Adopting a constructionist view of research (Blaikie, 2010) simultaneously means recognising that the results presented in this thesis will inevitably be influenced by the previous experience and knowledge that I bring to the project. My attention to certain parts of the newspaper content is due to my experience as a woman and a feminist, and there might be aspects that another scholar would pick up on which I do not, for instance because I am white or because I do not live in the part of the world that my research focuses on. This provides my study with certain limitations, but it simultaneously creates possibilities. Throughout the process, I strive to not simplify or streamline findings based on my

personal opinions and beliefs, but to include and be transparent also about contradictory findings in the data.

5.2 Data collection

Issues related to opioid (ab)use is not unique to the United States; the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction have noted that opioids used for medical purposes are more frequently causing addiction-related problems also in Europe (EMCDDA, 2019). My own native country, Sweden, now ranks second among nations with the highest numbers of drug-related deaths in Europe (Ögren, 2019) and prescriptions for pain-relieving medications which contain oxycodone – the same active ingredient as in OxyContin – have become much more common, climbing from 27 prescriptions per 1000 citizens in 2006, to 145 prescriptions per 1000 citizens in 2017 (Thurfjell, 2018). While this is a significant development, the number of Swedish citizens who are prescribed with opioid-based medications has remained relatively stable in the last ten years (op. cit.). Thus, my focus on newspaper representations of opioid users in the United States is motivated by the unique scale of the problem there, as well as on my assumption that the kind of articles I use as empirical data for this thesis are more scarce in Swedish and other European news media.

I began the data collection process by establishing which daily newspapers are most popular and thereby influential in Ohio. Searching for ‘Ohio newspapers’ on Google provided a list of ten outlets with the highest number of copies distributed on an average day (Agility PR, 2019). Aiming to analyse 20 articles - which seemed like an appropriate number for the scope of this thesis - I originally planned to work with five articles from four outlets, but because I was going to divide my sample into pieces about female and male users, I ultimately decided to work with two newspapers and include ten articles from each source. Retrieving news pieces from only two newspapers might be considered a limitation to the study; however, this approach was deemed more appropriate as my original data set would have generated two and a half articles per sex per outlet, resulting in a somewhat scattered sample. Thus, I collected articles from the websites of *The Plain Dealer*¹ (based in Cleveland) and *The Columbus Dispatch* (based in Columbus) - the two outlets with highest circulation levels. I recognise that content published on newspapers’ websites may not fully reflect that included in print versions; however, as this research was performed in Europe, I had no way of accessing physical editions. The fact that both newspapers are based in larger cities

¹ *The Plain Dealer* does not have its own website; its online content is published on the ‘umbrella site’ Cleveland.com, which is where I searched for and collected my articles.

and likely favour urban news before rural might be considered problematic, but my choice was also motivated by how much easier the websites of *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch* were to use compared to some smaller outlets'. Because the *Columbus Dispatch* website was available only for national IP-addresses, I made use of a virtual private network (VPN) to access it.

In order to find stories about individual drug users, I used the search terms 'opioid overdose', 'opioid user', 'heroin overdose' and 'fentanyl overdose' when searching the newspapers' digital archives. It was my impression that this combination 'caught' the articles I was looking for, as the same pieces kept appearing when I changed search term. I filtered the search by setting publication date to 1st January 2016 until the time of data collection (May 2019). The start date was motivated by the general increase in media attention toward opioid use which followed the publication of a report by two Harvard researchers in late 2015, a trend which was mirrored also by the newspapers used for this study. When going through the search results, I saved articles where the headline and/or first lines of text indicated that the piece dealt with an individual user. I additionally used the following criteria when choosing my sample:

1. Articles should focus predominantly on *one person*, not several, and not on the phenomenon in general².
2. Articles should focus on *adult* users³.
3. Articles should focus on drug use '*by choice*', not on accidental use.
4. Articles should focus on *users*, not dealers⁴.
5. Articles should be *news stories*, not, for instance, opinion pieces.
6. Articles should be produced by an employee of one of the chosen newspapers⁵.

This selection process generated 17 articles from *The Plain Dealer* and 19 articles from *The Columbus Dispatch*. To structure the data and get an overview, I created an Excel file where I noted down the title of each piece, its publication date and demographic profile of the featured drug user (sex, age and 'race'). Even though the primary purpose was to investigate gender representation, I believe that 'race' and gender are not "mutually exclusive categories of experience" (Crenshaw, 1989, p.

² I chose this approach because it was easier to detect patterns in the way journalists portrayed opioid users when they wrote about them at length, rather than when several users were described briefly in the same piece.

³ Thus, articles covering instances when small children have become intoxicated with opioids were discarded, as I believe the media representation in such pieces would be very different to that of adult opioid use. Additionally, in most cases, if not all, children had not become intoxicated by choice (see criteria no. 3).

⁴ These categories may of course, in some instances, overlap, but I chose from articles that clearly portrayed the individuals as users, and discarded those that primarily portrayed dealers.

⁵ Or, in the case of *The Plain Dealer*, employees of Cleveland.com.

139) and therefore it is neither possible, nor appropriate, to completely exclude ‘race’ as an analytical category in this study. The content of the articles did, however, not allow for consideration of the influence of opioid users’ sexual preferences or social class. At this stage I also categorised the pieces into four themes based on the narrative focus of the articles: ‘Overdose death’ (13 articles), ‘From addiction to recovery’ (12 articles) ‘Overdose incident’ (6 articles) and ‘Other’ (5 articles)⁶.

Thereafter, I reduced the number of articles to 20. In doing so, I maintained the proportions between the four themes and thus chose eight ‘Overdose death’ stories, seven ‘From addiction to recovery’, three ‘Overdose incident’ and two ‘Other’ stories. My aim was to analyse ten articles per sex, ten pieces from each newspaper, and to include both black/brown and white opioid users. Within this framework, I applied randomised sampling. It may have been possible for me to include a larger number of articles from the original sample of 36 pieces; however, it was my impression that the articles that were excluded from the analysis did not contain any themes that were not already represented in the sample.

5.3 Data analysis

The analysis was conducted in three stages. I began by performing the text-level analysis, which entailed investigating the way opioid users were described by journalists in the articles. Prior to this, I had created a set of questions to ‘ask’ the articles, which would help me answer my research questions. These were:

1. Which words are utilised to refer to and describe the user?
2. Which words are utilised to describe the person’s drug use?
3. Is the drug use contextualised? If so, how?
4. What discourses are drawn upon?
5. Are there patterns in how female and male users are represented across texts?

I read through each article multiple times and noted down all words used to refer to and describe the opioid user and their drug use, as well as the number of times each word was used. These nouns and adjectives were stored in a separate document to allow for easy comparison between

⁶ Three of these pieces described instances where opioid users lost their lives, but where it was not clear whether they were intoxicated at the time. One article covered a suspected overdose death, and the last one focused on one person’s physical consequences of extensive opioid use.

individuals. I chose not to consider use of more neutral words such as she/he, him/her, woman/man, etcetera. To answer questions 3 to 5 above, I took notes for each piece 'freely' in another document and searched for emerging patterns.

During the second stage, I analysed the articles' production and consumption processes, to highlight aspects which might influence the representations of opioid users and how these are received by readers. For the text production, I aimed to get as close to the newspapers and their specific context as possible, by retrieving some facts about each outlet and their owners, statements about publication policies, political affiliation and so forth. In addition, I turned to statistics and research pieces about news value, hard/soft news, crime reporting, working conditions at local newspapers in the U.S., reader expectations and digital news. To analyse the text consumption process, I looked at some demographic statistics for the cities where the newspapers are based, Cleveland and Columbus, as well as some surveys concerning residents' attitudes towards local news media. Paired with van Dijk's notion of mental models, I then considered how different citizens in Ohio might interpret the articles. The final stage of the analysis entailed embedding findings from the previous phases in facts about wider sociocultural practices in Ohio and the United States. For this, I studied the historical development of drug policy, to produce an image of how the public's attitude and media portrayals connect with societal interventions and development of laws. In doing so, I simultaneously highlighted how male and female drug users have been viewed at different points in history.

6. Ethical considerations

Many basic principles for performing ethical research concern the protection of human subjects. All researchers must consider the “dignity, autonomy, protection [and] safety” (Markham & Buchanan, 2012) of the people that may be affected by the process. In addition, any risk of harm to participants should be minimised and weighed up against the perceived outcome value of the project (Collins, 2010). As this thesis is not based on primary data, such as interviews, surveys or direct observations of people, but on already existing, public material, the ethical considerations are limited. Simultaneously, Markham and Buchanan (2012) note that in the context of Internet research, it is easy to disconnect the text under study from its human connections, and thus it is important to consider the different people involved in its production. The people that are connected to the articles I work with are the interviewees and the journalists that have written the texts. By participating in interviews, the opioid users and the people around them have consented to having their statements published on the newspapers’ various platforms, and the journalists have written the articles for the purpose of public use.

Another important aspect to consider when performing textual analysis of online content concerns authorised access to the material and the issue of how to store and reproduce it in the final report (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). For this study, I rely solely on articles published on *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch*’s public domains and I saved copies of the articles on my personal computer in case they would be taken down from the websites during the research process. When quoting the news pieces, I made sure to do so correctly and separated them clearly from the rest of the text, so as not to confuse the journalists’ words with my own. Throughout the analysis, I aim to make my own analytical assumptions clear, and keep them separate from the descriptions of the newspaper content. Finally, all articles used for the analysis are listed in the Appendix with links, titles and publication dates.

7. Results and analysis

This chapter presents the findings of my research, divided into three sections based on Fairclough's three analytical levels: text-level, discourse practice (consisting of text production and text consumption) and sociocultural practice.

7.1 Text level

It became evident during the data collection process that most articles in *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch* which cover the opioid crisis do not describe individual opioid users. Rather, they report on the issue from a societal/political perspective, or favour stories of drug dealers who have been criminally charged after selling drugs which caused an overdose. However, the content of these newspapers' digital archives was vast enough for me to include the same number of articles for each theme per outlet⁷ and the same number of male and female users. The articles varied in length, ranging from 149 to 1820 words. *The Plain Dealer* tended to have longer articles (five out of six pieces with more than 1000 words were published there) and it often dedicated whole pieces to the opioid user and their families' stories, whereas *The Columbus Dispatch* to a larger extent combined personal stories with contextualising facts, and included quotes from various sources. Most articles were published in 2017 (eight out of 20), six were from 2016, four from 2018, and two were published this year, 2019. Articles tended to take different form depending on which of the four themes they belonged to, and the representations of opioid users likewise tended to follow different patterns depending on the news pieces' focus; however, there were variations and discrepancies within the themes as well. Below, I present the findings from the text level analysis, organised by the four themes; however, because the last category ('Other') only contained two pieces, I analyse those as part of other categories, one in 'From addiction to recovery', and the other in 'Overdose death'.

7.1.1 Overdose death

Among articles which described individual opioid users, the 'Overdose death' category was the most common in both newspapers, though 'From addiction to recovery' was equally common in *The Columbus Dispatch*. Out of the pieces analysed, the majority (six out of nine) were in-depth stories of individuals who had been addicted to drugs for an extended period and eventually died

⁷ Except, of course, when the total number of articles per theme was uneven.

from an overdose. Within this sub-group, all opioid users were white or assumed to be white⁸. These pieces were based on interviews with family members of the deceased drug user and contained information about the person’s background/life circumstances and descriptions of how they became addicted to drugs. All but one article contextualised the person’s death by referring to them as ‘one of many’, or by including statistics of how many people had died from overdose in the same county, or in the state, that year. The remaining three articles were shorter than the rest (244/343/369 words) and took a different form; one reported on a man who had overdosed and died in prison (presumably the only black male in the sample), another reported on a male police officer who had stolen confiscated drugs from his workplace and subsequently died from an overdose, and the last story was of a female opioid user who had died in a car crash. These three pieces were not as directly focused on the opioid user, but on different circumstances around their deaths. As a result, these stories included much less personal information and background, and were marked by a ‘legal’ and/or ‘criminality’ discourse. In addition, statements in these pieces more often came from official sources, and quotes from family members were only included in the ‘car crash case’. Due to the different nature of these three articles, content from them are marked grey in Table 1-4.

designations	(Full name); (Surname); (First name); Woman; Daughter; Sister; Mom; Kid; Child; Mother; Parent (Full name); (Surname); Woman; Female driver; Victim; Girl
positive characteristics	"Creative and kind"; "Good friend"; "Wasn't afraid of anything"; "Just wanted to have fun" "Sweetest girl"
negative characteristics	"Defiant teenage years"; "Unruly juvenile"; "Erratic"; "Emaciated"
career, interests, other	"Talented artist"; "Nurse"; "Medical professional"

Table 1: Representations of females.

⁸ In two cases, the visual media included did not show the victim, but a (white) family member.

designations	(Full name); (Surname); (First name); (Nickname); Man; Son; Father; Boy (Full name); (Surname); Inmate; Man; Police chief
positive characteristics	"Typical, energetic boy"
negative characteristics	"Ornery young boy with eyes full of mischief"
career, interests, other	"Standout football and basketball player"; "Campaign aide"; "Top advance man"; "Newly engaged"; "Former star athlete"; "Football and track star" "Police chief"

Table 2: Representations of males.

drug use designations	"Drug troubles"; "Roller-coaster path of alcohol and drug use"; "Bad behavior"; "That wrong road"; "Would experiment with drugs"; "Partying"; "Struggles"; "Began smoking marijuana at 13 [...] moved on to using crack cocaine" "Drug problem"
agency	"Started hanging out with the wrong crowd"; "Her choice"

Table 3: Representations of female drug use.

drug use designations	"Started to rebel"; "Experimenting with drugs"; "Went down the familiar path: from marijuana, then ecstasy..."; "Struggle"; "A mistake they made on their worst day"; "Suffering from addiction" "Apparently was taking drugs"; "Indications that Hughes had purchased illegal drugs"
agency	"Caused Dupain harm" "Ingested heroin"; "Hid a bag of heroin and ingested it"; "Swallowed or ingested a bag of heroin"; "Had fentanyl in his system"

Table 4: Representations of male drug use.

When going through the longer, in-depth articles, the ways journalists referred to female and male opioid users and their drug use did not appear that different. Portrayals were largely marked by the same kind of discourse identified in previous research; descriptions of young, white citizens who were good people with bright prospects, who then, surprisingly and tragically, became addicted to

heavy drugs. However, when comparing the designations in Table 1 and 2, discrete differences begin to appear. Female opioid users were referred to by terms which define their position in the family significantly more often than men were (24 times compared to six) and with more variety. These designations also more frequently described the person as young ('kid', 'child'). One woman was referred to as 'daughter' seven times, whereas the maximum amount of times a man was referred to as 'son' was three. Even though 'daughter' might be considered an ageless term, its use places the person in relation to their parents and symbolically takes away from their agency and independence. Both men and women were most often referred to by some version of their name, but in one article, a man was referred to by his nickname 'Stosh' 15 times, whereas no nicknames were used to refer to the female opioid users. By repeatedly referring to a person by their nickname, the journalist sets a less formal tone and places themselves, and the reader, closer to the described individual, which may lead readers to view the person in a more sympathetic manner. By contrast, in the three shorter articles, journalists took a more distanced position towards the deceased opioid users, and only referred to them by their full name or surname. This is likely due to journalists predominantly using other sources for these articles, and of a formal tone being considered more appropriate in instances when the focus is on some controversy around the person's death which involves stately services or authorities⁹. Interestingly, the woman in this sub-group was referred to as 'girl' on one occasion, continuing the pattern of women opioid users being represented in 'juvenile' terms. She is also the only opioid user in the 'Overdose death' category referred to as a 'victim'.

In reference to the opioid users' drug habits, a lot of the same discourse is used for males and females in the longer articles. Several pieces describe how the person 'rebelled' as a teenager and began 'experimenting' with drugs. Both female and male drug use in this sub-group is represented by the terms 'struggles' and 'troubles', allowing the newspaper reader to sympathise with the user. If, for instance, their addiction had been referred to as 'habit' or even 'obsession', this would have shifted the responsibility toward the user, whereas 'struggles' and 'troubles' indicates that addiction was something that 'happened to' the person, which they subsequently had to fight against. Drug use in the shorter articles about the police officer and the prison inmate is described in less general terms and deals more directly with the particular drug use and substances which lead to their deaths. Interesting to note here is that sentences which relate to the white police officer's drug use contain

⁹ The first article focuses on the issue of whether prison staff did enough to try and prevent the prisoner's death; the second focuses on the sensationalism of a member of law enforcement stealing and using confiscated drugs, and; the final piece focuses on the initial misinformation about when the car accident happened in relation to when the vehicle and woman were found.

words such as ‘apparently’ and ‘indications’, while the black prison inmate actively ‘hid’, ‘ingested’ and ‘swallowed’ heroin. Thus, while the police officer’s drug use is not afforded the same sympathetic discourse as that found in the in-depth articles, his behaviour is represented with an element of surprise (‘apparently’) and cautiousness (‘indications’).

Even though both female and male opioid users in the longer pieces are granted a sympathetic discourse, there are slight linguistic differences when articles touch on issues of choice, blame, and what is expected of men and women. Two fathers pushed the responsibility away from their sons by referring to the drug use as singular mistakes, and one indicated that someone else ought to be blamed:

“It only takes one time. Don’t do it even once. **Their** evil greed and **your one bad choice** ... ruins lives.”

“People who have paid their debt to society should be able to re-enter society as productive citizens – not continually pay for **a mistake made on their worst day** [...]”

By contrast, another father whose daughter succumbed to a deadly heroin overdose after years of drug addiction said: “I miss her. I wish I had seen her more, but it was **her choice**.” In addition, if we compare the content in the ‘negative characteristics’ field in Table 1 and 2, it becomes clear, first, that women are assigned more negative traits and behaviour in connection with their drug use, and second, that focus is placed on them being ‘out of control’, by use of words such as ‘erratic’ and ‘unruly’. Within this article sample, I only found one example of a man being assigned a negative trait:

“Stosh, whose nickname is Polish for ‘Stanley’ and was bestowed upon him by his grandfather, was an **ornery boy with eyes full of mischief**, Simcak said.”

What is significant about this sentence is how the ‘negative’ description of the son is combined with a clause which explains how he received his nickname. This somewhat downplays the negative trait (‘ornery’) and by adding the “with eyes full of mischief” we are left with an image of a young boy who might misbehave, but who is at the same time harmless and perhaps even a bit charming in his mischievous behaviour. Within the context of the story, this character trait serves as something like an ‘explanation’ to why the man began using drugs, and perhaps even suggests that

he was bound to get himself into trouble. In this way, male drug use is made to sound more to-be-expected and less serious than female drug use, which is described as ‘erratic’ and ‘unruly’.

Another interesting finding concerns how female and male opioid users are represented in relation to their families. In five out of nine articles, it is made explicit that the deceased person had children. Out of those, one is a man and four are women. In the article about the man, the fact that he is a father is mentioned on one occasion, whereas in the pieces about the women, the number of times they are referred to as mothers or their children are mentioned ranges from one to eight. Significantly, three out of four articles about women with children contain a sentence proclaiming how many children the woman ‘left behind’ when she died: “She **left behind** two daughters and a son.”; “She **left behind** two children, ages 21 and 19.”; “Dowler **leaves behind** two sons, ages 6 and 4.”. In the case of the male opioid user, there is neither any mention of how many children he ‘left behind’, nor does the journalist include how old his child/ren were. This shows that women are considered primary caregivers to children, also because the children’s fathers are not (or only vaguely) mentioned in the articles. By using the phrase ‘left behind’, the journalist assigns the woman an active role and portrays it as if she *chose* to leave her children. There are also indications that in instances when women opioid users loose contact with family members in general, this is highlighted more frequently by journalists, and more clearly as a *negative* outcome of their drug addiction. Two articles exemplify this:

“Clause’s behavior again became **erratic** – hanging out with new friends, partying and eventually **cutting off phone contact.**”

“They’re dealing with it well, but I think they have a lot of questions, questions about addiction. **Why would mom do this? Why would she put this thing before us?**”

7.1.2 From addiction to recovery

Articles about individuals who had been addicted to opioids and - at the time of publication – had not been using them for some time, was the second most common type of story in *The Plain Dealer* and one out of the two most common in *The Columbus Dispatch*. Four out of seven articles were long pieces (ranging from 1253 to 1820 words) which went into detail about the person’s journey from becoming addicted to recovery. Three out of these were based on conversations with the former drug user and a family member, the fourth was based on conversations with the former user and a municipal judge. In addition to these longer pieces, three were somewhat shorter (581

to 699 words) and tended to be based partly on interviews with the former drug user, but they also described a public event and/or included more contextualising facts and quotes from a variety of sources. These were all published in *The Columbus Dispatch*. All opioid users described in the ‘From addiction to recovery’ category were white.

designations	(Full name); (Surname); (First name); Woman; Addict; Mother; Troubled kid; Human trafficking victim
positive characteristics	"Hard-headed attitude"; "Resilient"; "Believes in herself and loves those boys"; "One of the strongest women"; "Going to turn out wonderful"
negative characteristics	"Erratic"; "A mess"; "Non-functional and manic"; "A shell"; "Numb"
career, interests, other	"Stylist"; "...danced, played softball and was a member of the marching band" "...learned to play the clarinet, saxophone and French horn"; "Nurse"; "Was athletic"; "Was figure skater"; "Wants to be an emergency medical technician"

Table 5: Representations of females.

designations	(Full name); (Surname); (First name); (Nickname); Man; Brother; Opioid user; Son; "Handsome, troubled son"; Resident; "Like a wild animal"
positive characteristics	
negative characteristics	"Violent and angry"
career, interests, other	"Army staff sergeant"; "National spokesman for the Patriot Project"; "Speaker"; "6-foot-one athlete"

Table 6: Representations of males.

drug use designations	<p>"Addiction"; "Started drinking at..."; "Addictive behavior"; "Heroin became the focal point"; "Get high"; "Began as an attempt to ease the pain of a toothache"; "Tumultuous road of opioid dependency"; "Partying"; "Disease"; "Indulged"; "Staying sober became a challenge" "Graduated from marijuana and alcohol to opioids"; "Habit"; "Repeatedly plunging syringes into the back of her right knee"</p>
agency	<p>"Addicted to the powerful drug"; "...engulfed in throes of the opioid scourge"; "Heroin wreaked havoc on her life"; "Under this addiction"; "Well-treaded path of opioid addiction"; "Battling heroin"; "I went from pills to Suboxone to heroin"</p>

Table 7: Representations of female drug use.

drug use designations	<p>"Addiction"; "Struggle to stay sober"; "Struggles"; "Abused"; "Cravings"; "Went full-bore back into smack"; "High" "Messing up"; "Couldn't stay sober"; "Appetite for heroin"; "Addicted"; "Sick"; "Started abusing alcohol at 15 and quickly added drugs"</p>
agency	<p>"...led him down a path to harder drugs"; "Heroin consumed his life"; "Prescribed opioids"; "Traffic accident required him to return to some of the opioids"</p>

Table 8: Representations of male drug use.

Comparing representations of male and female opioid users from the previous category with the present, we see some continuation of patterns, some contradicting content, and some new discursive phenomena. The women and men in these articles are not as often referred to by their position in the family, which is likely due to the opioid users being interviewed themselves for these articles. One exception exists, in which a man and his parents are interviewed, and here, the former opioid user is referred to as ‘son’ 11 times, thus a juvenile image is constructed of a male user in this case. As with the previous pieces, we can see that journalists utilise a less formal tone when referring to men opioid users, since first names are applied more often than for women (four times compared to one). In one case a man’s nickname is even used more than his surname (34 times compared to three). The informal tone can further be observed in descriptions of one man’s drug use, when the journalist refers to an instance of relapse as the man going ‘full-bore back into smack’, and to a positive milestone by writing ‘Apparently, that was the **kick in the pants** he needed’. However, in another article about a female opioid user, the journalist writes that she ‘**graduated** from marijuana and alcohol to opioids’ when she was 16. This occasional ‘jokey’ tone may be a

sign of drug use becoming taken for granted in Ohio, and it is perhaps applied mostly in situations when the person has stopped using opioids since.

Another emerging tendency is that of journalists including references to women opioid users' appearance more often than to men's. In the previous category, there was one example of a woman described as having lost a 'ton of weight' and looking 'emaciated', and within the current category, there are several references to the ways women look as a result of their addiction. One woman refers to herself as being 'a mess' when she checked into a rehab clinic, and the journalist adds: "There were abscesses on her forehead and arm and cellulitis on her leg." In two articles, the journalists include a short description of the way the women appeared physically on occasions when they overdosed: "The first time she overdosed, she was using heroin in a car when **her lips turned purple.**" and "DeSena's **lips turned blue.**" The same interest is not shown towards men's appearances, though in one piece, the journalist includes information about the amount of weight a man lost while he was in a coma: "The 6-foot-one athlete weighed 135 pounds, down from 180." However, I would argue that this statement signals concern regarding the person's health (pointed to by the use of 'athlete') rather than being a remark upon the man's appearance, whereas pointing to a woman's abscesses and cellulitis indicates that the issue lies in the way this makes her look.

Both in the previous category of articles and in the current, female opioid users are described with more character traits than men (approximately 19 times compared to four) both positive and negative. Men were more frequently referred to by their profession and/or their abilities within sports in the 'Opioid death' category than the women. In the 'From addiction to recovery' pieces, male opioid users were still not referred to by many characteristic features, but female users were presented with their profession and/or athletic and creative abilities to a larger extent. The type of words used to describe females' negative characteristics/behaviour while under the influence of drugs remain the same; they highlight how women have acted out-of-control ('erratic', 'a mess', 'non-functional') as opposed to 'functional', 'predictable' or 'collected'. In addition, when one woman reflected on her own state, she called herself 'a shell' and described feeling 'numb'. This is a somewhat different (self-)critique, focusing on emotional unavailability. By contrast, the one negative behaviour used to describe a man in these articles was 'violent and angry', and the same man was also referred to as being 'like a wild animal'. Thus, it appears as if female and male opioid users are 'shamed' for different kinds of negative behaviours, which likely is a result of society's different expectations of women and men.

The negative view of women acting unstable and emotionally distant as a result of their opioid use likely stems from the expectation of women to be the central family figure and primary caregiver to children. As part of the ‘happy ending’ discourse in these articles, three out of the four women were paraphrased or quoted by journalists saying that their children are the primary reason why they wanted to stop using opioids:

“She’s also eager to rebuild her relationships with her family – **particularly her son.**”

“Her short-term goals are to **get custody of Zandiah** and earn her high-school diploma.”

“But this time I have to. I’m going to die. And I **need to be here for my 2-year-old daughter.**”

The same kind of discourse was expressed in one out of the two articles which described a formerly opioid-using father:

“The [33-year-old] said his **focus is solely on his child** and his [fiancé] and ensuring that he’s there for them.”

In the second piece, however, the man’s child was only referred to on two occasions, and when the son is introduced to the reader, his existence seems to be of secondary (or tertiary) importance:

“He stole items he could sell from the mother of **his son, Angelo, who is now 9.**”

7.1.3 Overdose incident

The final category of articles report on three incidents where opioid users overdosed and subsequently faced criminal charges. These pieces were among the shortest in the sample, ranging from 149 to 329 words, and based on police reports and/or statements from official sources. The first article was about a man who overdosed in the bathroom of a police station, the second described how a woman (presumably the only black woman in the whole sample) overdosed in her home with two children in another room, and the last article reported on a woman who overdosed in a car - together with her partner - while her grandchild was in the backseat.

designations	(Full name); (Surname); Mother; Woman
positive characteristics	
negative characteristics	
career, interests, other	

Table 9: Representations of females.

designations	Man
positive characteristics	
negative characteristics	
career, interests, other	

Table 10: Representation of male.

drug use designations	"Overdosed on \$20 worth of heroin"; "Sitting on the couch alert and conscious"; "OD'd in car"; "Overdosing on heroin"
agency	"Snorted the heroin"; "I snorted the heroin and passed out"

Table 11: Representations of female drug use.

drug use designations	"Overdosed on heroin"
agency	"Suffers heroin overdose"; "Injected the drug"; "Sticking his left hand with a needle"

Table 12: Representations of male drug use.

What is immediately striking in these pieces is how the reader is kept at a distance from the opioid users, by journalists referring to them solely as ‘man’, ‘woman’, or (in case of the females) their full names and surnames. As opposed to most previous articles, there is neither any information included about the person’s background, nor is the opioid user (or their family members) interviewed by the journalist to present their view of what happened. It becomes clear that in instances when the opioid user might be considered a criminal by the state and the general public, this impacts the way news media portray them.

One interesting difference between the article about the male opioid user and the pieces about the female opioid users in this category, is that the former is longer (329 words compared to 232 and 149). It contains a more detailed account of the event, whereas the stories involving women are summarised more briefly. It is also the only piece in the ‘Overdose incident’ category which is afforded contextualising facts about the extensive opioid crisis in Ohio:

“The report is a vignette into the continued struggle authorities here face in combatting an epidemic of heroin and fentanyl addiction. Cuyahoga County has seen at least 280 overdose deaths this year.”

This results in a portrayal of the male opioid user as more of a victim than a criminal. Another element which adds to this image is the use of the word ‘suffered’ in the headline: “Man **suffers** heroin overdose in bathroom of Cleveland police station”. By contrast, the pieces reporting on the two female opioid users simply state ‘overdosed’.

Like findings in previous categories, the women in this group are largely represented in their roles as caregivers to children. The woman who overdosed in her home with her son and his cousin in the next room is referred to as ‘mother’ two times (out of which one is in the headline) and the fact that her son and his cousin were close by when it happened is mentioned on three occasions (one in the headline). It is also highlighted that it was the children who eventually found the woman unconscious on the floor. Interestingly, the way in which the woman in this article consumed her drugs is included by the journalist (‘snorted’) and they also refer to the amount of heroin the woman consumed (‘\$20 worth’). This resembles the way the black, male prison inmate’s drug use was portrayed in the ‘Overdose death’ category, as both journalists use active verbs to describe the drug use. One sentence even combines the ‘active choice’ element with stating the children’s presence:

“Smith told police she **snorted the heroin** in her living room **while her 8-year-old son and his cousin were in a bedroom**, the report says.”

The journalist further refers to the woman as being “alert and conscious” when police arrived, after emergency staff had revived her. Directly after this, a quote from the report is included where the woman, when asked what had happened, said “I snorted heroin and passed out”. This adds to the portrayal of the woman as an irresponsible mother who was fully aware of her actions. At this point it seems appropriate to question whether the white mothers in the previous categories, throughout their opioid use, never used drugs in the vicinity of their children, and whether those occasions were turned into news stories by local newspapers.

Considering the ‘racial’ aspect, it is interesting to note how - even though the stories of the women in this category focus on a similar type of event - the headlines highlight different aspects:

“Elyria mother **overdoses** on heroin with **child nearby**, police say”

“Judge **sentences** woman who **OD’d** in car”

In the case of the white woman, it is not mentioned in the headline that her grandson was sitting in the backseat, this only surfaces in the preamble. Additionally, when it is mentioned, it is not the primary focus of the sentence:

“A woman photographed with her boyfriend slumped in a vehicle after overdosing on heroin as her 4-year-old grandson sat in the backseat has pleaded no contest to a child endangering charge in Southeast Ohio.”

This woman comes across as more regretful (and therefore more sympathetic) to the reader, because it is mentioned early on that she ‘pleads no contest’ to the child endangering charge. It is however clear that the grandson being present at the time when his caregiver overdosed is what makes this incident newsworthy, as the story could otherwise have focused on the woman’s male partner.

7.2 Discourse practice

7.2.1 Text production

When the journalists at *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch* report on the opioid crisis and Ohioan opioid users, they not only co-create the discourse on the topic: they are themselves constantly influenced by how the discourse develops around them. As has been noted previously, multiple scholars have identified a shift in the way drug addiction is described in U.S. media, from casting drug users as hopeless criminals who deserve punishment, to constructing the issue as a public health problem, which cannot be solved by long prison sentences (McLean, 2017; Netherland & Hansen, 2016). This was observed as a general pattern also among the articles analysed for this study, though such representation varies along ‘racial’ and gendered lines. An influential event which may have pushed the discourse on opioid use in the ‘sympathising’ direction was the publication of a report by Princeton researchers Anne Case and Angus Deaton in 2015, which concluded that mortality rates in the white, middle-aged population from drug overdose and suicide (‘deaths of despair’) were driving up the “all-cause mid-life mortality” (p. 15078) in the years 1999-2013. The report was followed by significant media coverage (see for instance Levey, 2016 and McKay, 2015) where experts referred to the phenomenon as, for instance, a “serious national problem” (University of Pennsylvania demographer Samuel Preston, in Levey, 2016). This may have increased knowledge of the consequences of widespread opioid use in the general public and influenced views of how addicted people should be treated. Picking up on such developments in discourse is important for the journalists at *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch*, as many citizens turn to their local newspapers to attain a shared sense of identity and consensus (Nielsen, 2015).

A lot of the decisions journalists and editors make regarding which stories to publish, and how they should be written, are influenced by the way they perceive their audience. This involves a sensitivity toward what the cultural norms of the community are, and which type of content the readers want to see in their local paper. While it might not be possible to achieve complete knowledge in this area, journalists and editors of publications established across multiple digital platforms, such as *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch*, now have access to sophisticated tools which can tell them more about how their audience behave, and what their preferences are. Despite some journalists’ resistance to adapting to market demand in this way, research has shown that the more news staff know about their readers, the more they adapt news placement (Lee et. al, 2014). Performing this kind of analytical work might be especially important for the staff working at local

outlets because, as Poindexter (2006) and her colleagues have shown, there appears to be a gap between what local reporters identify as their primary task, and what members of the community expect from local media. Whereas journalists consider the traditional role *watchdog* to be of highest importance, a large portion of news readers in the United States want local newspapers to act as a *good neighbour*. This entails “caring about the community, reporting on interesting people and groups, understanding the local community, and offering solutions” (Poindexter et. al., 2006, p. 78).

Though the representations of female and male opioid users analysed in the previous section shared some similarities, there were also (more and less) discrete variances, which signalled different societal expectations of men and women. Occasions when female opioid users distanced themselves from their families or ‘failed’ in their role as spouse or mother, were highlighted more frequently as negative by the journalists. The notion of the woman as primary caregiver and centre of the domestic sphere likely appeals to the newspapers’ conservative readers, though Ohio is, based on election results, neither considered a fundamentally conservative, nor fundamentally liberal state, but one where the political pendulum often swings from year to year (Almukhtar et. al., 2019). In addition, neither *The Plain Dealer* nor *The Columbus Dispatch* (or their owners) state any political alignment on their websites, though elsewhere *The Plain Dealer* is referred to as having a slight liberal bias, and *The Columbus Dispatch* a slight conservative bias (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2019a & 2019b). Regardless of political tendencies, the journalists are probably aware that women who deviate from society’s norms in this way carry a high *news value*, especially if they are white and middle-class (Jewkes, 2011). This will likely interest the reader because it is more *surprising* (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017) than if the drug user would be male and/or non-white. If the news piece additionally includes a child who, as a result of the woman’s behaviour, is put at risk, this further increases the story’s news value (Jewkes, 2011). Because women should, by nature, be good, nurturing and caring – an expectation which is not placed on men to the same extent – their crime is considered more severe in the eyes of society, and therefore highly newsworthy to journalists.

How these newspapers portray opioid users is also influenced by factors related to internal working conditions and each publication’s own objectives. The articles analysed for this study may be divided into ‘hard news’ and ‘soft news’, where the distinction lies in the pieces’ level of dependency on timeliness; ‘hard news’ report on events immediately or soon after they have occurred, whereas ‘soft news’ are less urgent and retain their news value regardless of when they are published (Boczkowski, 2009). In this study, the longer pieces which were based on interviews with family

members and portrayed the lives of opioid users, might be considered ‘soft news’ and the articles which were related to a specific event, ‘hard news’. The different types of story represent different modes of working for journalists; because the production of ‘soft news’ is afforded more time, the journalist can plan the piece more carefully and collect information from multiple sources, whereas the production of ‘hard news’ happens within a much shorter time and will thus be limited in terms of planning and sourcing (op. cit.). Choosing to publish a story about an opioid user as ‘hard news’ or ‘soft news’ significantly influences their representation, as ‘soft news’ contains more contextualising information about background, work, and family, which can lead to a more sympathetic image of the person. In terms of male and female opioid users, my material showed no strong tendencies of journalists favouring either the ‘soft news’ or ‘hard news’ framework; the difference was more prominent between the white and the non-white opioid users. As mentioned previously, most of the longer news pieces were published by *The Plain Dealer*, which may be a reflection of the owner’s aim: “Our mission is to tell stories that inspire, engage, and drive change. High-quality journalism and storytelling is at the heart of what we do.” (Advance Ohio, 2019). By contrast, *The Columbus Dispatch* and its owners focus on speed and efficiency: “Our goal [...] is to inform you about what’s happening in Central Ohio in the most efficient ways technology will allow.” (GateHouse Media, 2019).

7.2.2 Text consumption

The way readers of *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch* will interpret journalists’ representations of opioid users depends on their previous experiences and subjective knowledge, stored in cognitive ‘mental models’ in their Episodic Memory (van Dijk, 2008). Even assuming that most people who read one of these two newspapers live in and around the cities where they are based, the demographic variation in and between the cities alone, allows for very diverse readings of the articles analysed above.

	Cleveland	Columbus
Age		
Persons under 5 years	6.7%	7.4%
Persons under 18 years	22.9%	22.7%
Persons 65 years and over	13.3%	9.8%
'Race'/Ethnicity		
White	33.8%	56.8%
Black or African American	50.4%	28.3%
American Indian and Alaska native	0.5%	0.2%
Asian	2.1%	5.2%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.0%
Hispanic or Latino	11.2%	6.0%
Two or more of the above	4.0%	4.1%
Education		
High school graduate or higher (age 25+)	79.2%	89.1%
Bachelor's degree or higher (age 25+)	16.4%	35.1%
Sex		
Females	52.1%	51.3%

Table 13: Demographic statistics for Cleveland and Columbus (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

As Table 13 informs, Cleveland has a somewhat older population, the city is more 'racially'/ethnically diverse, and education levels are lower than in Columbus. Whereas the younger population in Columbus is primarily white, the city has a bigger Asian community than Cleveland and education levels are higher. Finally, in terms of sex, 52.1 and 51.3 percent of the cities' populations are females¹⁰. Unfortunately, I have not found any un-biased data to reveal how these statistics compare with reader demographics of *The Plain Dealer* or *The Columbus Dispatch*. The owners of both publications 'promote' their readers as young, affluent, well-off and highly educated to sell advertisements, but such statements do not provide much indication of actual reader demographics.

The statistics above indicate the multitude of ways portrayals of female and male opioid users might be understood within and between the Columbus and Cleveland populations. For instance, the occasional inclusion of comments on female opioid users' appearances, and the repeated focus on their poor behaviour towards parents, partners and children, will be received differently by different

¹⁰ It is neither clear whether, then, 47.9 and 48.7 percent, respectively, are estimated to be males, nor how these statistics compare with citizens' self-identification.

citizens depending on the environment they have grown up in. Readers' disparate life experiences will have shaped their ideas about gender roles differently, and when they read portrayals of male and female opioid users, they draw upon their individual mental models to interpret the message (van Dijk, 2018 [2016]). Some might ask why the journalist includes that a woman had cellulitis on her legs when she went to rehab, whereas others might interpret it as a legitimate sign of the low point the woman was at, as she was not able to tend to her looks in a satisfactory way. What will also largely play into how people interpret such articles is their relationship to opioid use and addiction. If they themselves are/have been addicted or know someone who is/has been, they will undoubtedly approach such articles in another manner than someone who has not had any such experience and/or know very little about what addiction entails.

Another aspect which will influence how the audience of *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch* react to representations of opioid users is their previous experiences of the newspaper they are reading, and judgements they have made about its credibility, relevance and so on. The news outlet that the article is published in can be considered one aspect of the communicative situation's 'context model', which may influence how the message is received (van Dijk, 2018 [2016]). If a reader thinks that the newspaper they are reading is trustworthy and that its journalists portray citizens fairly, they may not react as easily when discrepancies in how female and male opioid users appear, whereas if the reader considers the newspaper to be of low quality and has already noticed unequal representations, they may be more sensitive to such discrepancies. . Research has shown that 40 percent of adults in Cleveland do not think that their local media deals fairly with all sides in news stories and the equivalent number in Columbus was 34 (Pew Research Center, 2019a & 2019b).

7.3 Sociocultural practice

The debate over how the U.S. state should deal with people who are addicted to drugs began in the late 1800s and has swayed with public opinion and political rule between healthcare treatment and penalising approaches ever since. Need for legislation first emerged when addiction started creating problems for various public institutions in the final decades of the 19th century, and people's concern over morphine and cocaine addiction became increasingly prominent (Musto, 1999). In the public discourse, addicted individuals were, then as now, classified differently based on their 'race', class and gender composition. Drug dependency among white citizens was understood as individual cases of deviant behaviour, while addiction among non-whites was considered a 'natural' occurrence (Campbell, 2000). At the turn of the century, an addicted, upper-

class white woman would likely be constructed as the unfortunate victim of overprescribing doctors, whereas a female prostitute and/or careless mother might be referred to as an ‘opium vampire’ who threatened to drag innocent white men and children into her abusive behaviour (op. cit.). Women were considered more susceptible to drug addiction in general, and along with this assumption came a fear that respectable white women might engage in sexual relations with non-white men (Campbell, 2000).

Federal laws regulating opium importation and misbranding of medical products were put in place stepwise at the close of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. The Harrison Act of 1914, which is sometimes referred to as the beginning of the U.S. ‘war on drugs’ aimed to confine distribution of narcotics to legitimate medical sources, requiring “every person involved in the supply chain of opium or coca leaves [...] to register with [their] state’s internal revenue office” (Redford & Powell, 2016, p. 525). Thus, any unregistered person in possession of these substances was, as of 1914, considered a criminal, and frequent users could no longer get hold of their drug legally, pushing many into less safe, criminal environments. In conjunction with the instalment of laws which were meant to limit access to opium and other drugs, the public’s opinion of drug use simultaneously became less accepting, which crystallised into strong opposition toward so-called maintenance treatment, whereby a doctor would provide the patient with opioids in a controlled environment (Musto, 1999). In the context of World War One, individuals who depended on drugs were considered immoral and as an obstruction to the U.S. war effort (op. cit.).

During the 1920s, a few prominent figures helped popularise the notion that drug addiction, particularly opium and heroin use, led to antisocial and criminal behaviour. One was former war-hero Richmond P. Hobson, who started multiple pro-prohibition organisations and got his message into schoolbooks, radio broadcasts and even into the U.S. Congress (Musto, 1999). Another was Sarah Graham-Mulhall, President of the Narcotic Drug Control League, who helped spread the view that pregnant female drug users were responsible for cross-generational addiction, and thus, the children of addicted women should be taken away from their mothers “‘just as anyone must be removed from contagion of an incurable disease’” (Graham-Mulhall, 1926, quoted in Campbell, 2000). White men’s drug use and involvement in distribution continued to be overlooked, and the focus was - next to women - on young, urban, black men, who were considered particularly prone to addiction due to their ‘weak masculine identity’ (Campbell, 2000). Animosity toward drug use reached a symbolic peak in the 1950s, when mandatory minimum sentences were

introduced for first-time offenders, and the death penalty could be applied to people over 18 years who sold heroin to minors (Musto, 1999).

One important aspect which helped turn the pendulum back toward more sympathetic attitudes toward drugs and their consumers was the increasing popularity of marijuana in the U.S. population. Especially among young people, the strict legislation established in the 1950s symbolised an outdated view of drugs, which was not based on medical or sociological knowledge (Musto, 1999). In addition, prominent individuals within the mental health establishment argued that drug addiction stemmed from psychological or physical illness and that it should be treated by medical professionals. Richard Nixon, who strongly opposed drug use, partly responded to this call for reform by introducing methadone maintenance treatment, but significant investments were also made in law enforcement during his presidency (op. cit.). In the 1960s, when use of marijuana, LSD and heroin increased significantly, concern for women's use of drugs remained strong, and a common perception was that "girls 'naturally' conformed to social expectations" and therefore they were considered "more stubbornly addicted and more deviant than teenage males" (Campbell, 2000, p. 135-136). Motherhood was viewed as the ultimate sign of a healthy woman, and it simultaneously provided authorities with leverage over female drug users, as the threat of having their children taken away was always impending (Campbell, 2000).

After the wave which brought high tolerance levels, praise for methadone treatment and official recognition from Nixon's successor, that "[t]otal elimination of drug abuse is unlikely" (President Ford, 1975, quoted in Musto, 1999), the 1980s directed public attention to the harm of drugs once more, when crack cocaine appeared. Drug addiction was associated with violence and criminal behaviour in the public discourse, and laws aimed at penalising distributors and users were put in place (Musto, 1999). Ronald Reagan further invested the majority of four billion dollars in law enforcement activities, and between the years 1985 and 1996, the total number of inmates in custody rose from 744.208 to 1.630.940, out of which approximately 50 percent were drug offenders (op. cit.). The number of imprisoned women increased by 500 percent between 1980 and 1994, but compared to white women, African American women were seven times more likely to receive a prison sentence (Campbell, 2000). In hearings on illicit female drug use during this period, addiction was frequently associated with a disintegrated maternal instinct. Whereas men's illicit drug use might be considered 'victimless crimes', pregnant women's use put the 'most vulnerable citizens' at risk and constituted "child abuse through the umbilical cord" (Senate Subcommittee on Children, quoted in Campbell, 2000, p. 170). On these grounds, pregnant,

addicted women were coerced into ‘preventative’ which included learning household management, parenting, shopping and cooking (Campbell, 2000). Such sanctions were, however, largely played out by the mid-1990’s, and prenatal addiction was increasingly treated as a medical/social concern (op. cit.).

This historical summary illustrates how U.S. citizens’ attitudes towards drugs and drug users has swayed back and forth between sympathy and hostility ever since opium started creating problems in the end of the 19th century. How people talk about drugs and drug users – which in turn is mirrored in newspapers and other media – influences policy makers’ decisions about how the issue should be dealt with. In times when addicted persons have been constructed as ‘unwell’, medical treatment (or even drug maintenance) has been advocated, and in times when drug users have been associated with deviant behaviour and/or criminal acts, penalising sanctions have been favoured (Musto, 1999). Important to note, however, is that drug users have been, and still are, seen and treated differently depending on their demographic profile. According to a study from the 1990s, women who commit drug-related offenses are, for instance, less likely to receive prison sentences than men are (Spohn, 1999). However, contrary to some researchers’ assumptions, having young children did not appear to be what influenced this outcome. Rather:

Our results indicate that women convicted of drug offenses, like women convicted of child abuse or prostitution, may be perceived as inadequate mothers whose children would be better off living with relatives or in foster homes (1999, p. 389).

This corresponds well with findings in the current study, where women frequently were portrayed negatively as ‘failing’ mothers. To some segments of the population, these women may be considered worthy of a prison sentence, though white women are likely afforded more sympathy in such a context than black or brown women.

During the current opioid crisis, some voices have been raised to urge policy makers to soften punishments for certain drug-related crimes. Last year, citizens of Ohio voted on ‘Issue 1’ which proposed that minor drug possession and drug use felonies should be considered ‘misdemeanours’, and that “first and second offenses committed within a 24-month period” (Wedell, 2018) should not lead to prison sentences. Additionally, Issue 1 offered that jail time could be cut short if the offender goes through a rehabilitation program, and that monetary savings made from fewer prison inmates could be spent on “drug treatment and crime victim programs” (op. cit.). The proposal was, however, voted down; 63 percent ‘no’ versus 37 percent ‘yes’ (Wedell, 2018). This is not

necessarily because the majority of Ohioans favour punishment before treatment, but likely because there exist different perceptions as to whether prisons or other facilities provide the best rehabilitation (see Ohio Organizing Collaborative, 2019; “No on Issue 1”, 2018). Interesting to note is that the editorial staff at both *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch* encouraged readers to vote ‘no’ on the issue (“No on Issue 1”, 2018; “A View Worth Repeating”, 2018).

8. Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to investigate how female and male opioid users are portrayed in local news media in one of the states which has been most severely affected by the ongoing crisis in the United States, Ohio. Journalistic depictions are important to study, because they constitute many people's source of information about the opioid crisis at large and may influence the public's view of how individual users should be dealt with by authorities. Previous research which has studied media representations of drug users has focused on depictions of white and non-white users, whereas the gender perspective largely has been overlooked. To perform my research, I applied the multi-dimensional method of critical discourse analysis, combined with van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, and studied word choices, contextualisation and linguistic emphasis on text-level, the processes involved in the news outlets' text production and readers' news consumption on the discourse level, and historical and current developments of drug policy in the United States on the sociocultural level. My research questions were:

1. How are female and male opioid users portrayed in contemporary local Ohioan news press?
2. What ideologies, if any, are expressed in the texts?
3. How might these representations relate to societal perceptions of female and male drug use in the United States?

The analysis revealed that women were more often referred to by their position in the family than men were. Words such as 'daughter', 'mom', 'sister' and 'parent' appeared more frequently in articles about female opioid users than in pieces about males. It was especially common for journalists to portray women in their role as mothers, not just through denotations, but through mentioning their children on more occasions than in pieces about opioid-using fathers. Men were, on the other hand, more often referred to by nicknames than women, for who journalists tended to use either the whole name, last name or first name. In connection with their drug use, women were described with more negative characteristics in general, and by words which portrayed them as being out of control ('erratic', 'unruly') and/or emotionally unavailable, whereas men's negative behaviour was related to expressions of aggression or anger ('violent and angry', 'like a wild animal'). Journalists further mentioned the effect drug use had on females' appearances more times than they did in connection with male users.

Taken together, these representations signal underlying ideological viewpoints which relate to differing expectations of men and women in general. Specifically, opioid use was constructed as more ‘normal’ for men than for women in these articles. Through referring to male users by their nicknames, by using descriptions such as ‘eyes full of mischief’ and by applying jokey undertones when referring to their drug dependency, male opioid use is constructed as less serious and as something expected. Portrayals of women in this sample were not as often afforded jokey undertones, and the women’s actions were described as more negative and unnatural through words such as ‘unruly’ and ‘erratic’. Adjacent to such terms were also references implying that these women had failed in their role as mothers; journalists repeatedly described the children of female overdose victims’ as being ‘left behind’. In two cases, news pieces focused particularly on events where women had overdosed in the vicinity of a child, which shows that journalists identify a high level of news value in such stories. The continued use of such discourse reinforces ideological views that are deeply rooted in U.S. society, which see female drug use as more deviant than men’s, and which historically has led to specific sanctions aimed at restoring women as productive citizens, i.e. as centre of the domestic sphere and symbolic reproducers of the (white) nation.

Of course, gender is not the only parameter which shapes journalists’ representations of drug users. As has been the case in previous studies, my sample showed a highly uneven inclusion of white and non-white opioid users (out of 20 articles, two were about black users). This may be considered indicative of another ideologically based view which has been prominent in white U.S. discourse about drug users for over a century: the assumption that non-white persons are specifically prone to drug use. Applying the news value logic, the staff at *The Plain Dealer* and *The Columbus Dispatch* may choose to not publish stories about non-white opioid users, because they do not fulfil the criteria of ‘surprise’ to the same level as stories of young, ‘innocent’, white citizens who use drugs do. Furthermore, both the male and the female black opioid users were portrayed in a criminal context and through the ‘hard news’ format, whereby the pieces did not offer background information about their life circumstances. Such choices by newsroom staff not only marginalises non-white drug use but it also places it on the ‘criminality’ end of the drug use spectrum. The pattern of representing female drug users as irresponsible mothers was particularly prominent in the case of the black female opioid user, as her neglectful actions were portrayed as the result of active choice.

8.1 Implications and future research

This study exemplifies how language choices and journalistic practices of local journalists and editors in Ohio reinforce societal perceptions of female and male drug use, which may have bearing on public attitudes and authority interventions. In addition, this thesis highlights how stereotypical views of gender roles materialises in contemporary Ohioan news coverage about opioid use. Because my approach has been to perform a qualitative analysis of a relatively small sample of articles, future research with similar aims may apply quantitative methods to a larger set of data to be able to draw more generalisable conclusions of the results. Furthermore, as this study primarily focused on gender representation and only secondarily on ‘racial’ aspects, future pieces could take a more intersectional approach and compare discrepancies in portrayals of white men and women with those in portrayals of non-white men and women. Finally, as this study did not differentiate between legally prescribed and illicit opioid use, future research could explore differences in media representations of ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ drug users.

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Appendix

1. Articles analysed for the 'Overdose death' category.

Newspaper	Publication date	Title/Link
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2016-06-20	Heroin's human toll: Euclid man apologized to father two days before overdose https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2016/06/heroins_human_toll.html
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2016-10-17	Heroin's Human Toll: Years of drug troubles led up to Parma woman's opiate use https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2016/10/heroins_human_toll_years_of_dr.html
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2017-07-03	Cuyahoga County jail staff not liable for inmate who died of heroin overdose, judge says https://www.cleveland.com/court-justice/2017/07/cuyahoga_county_jail_staff_not.html
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2016-10-11	Heroin's human toll: Coventry Township mom dies of overdose after three decades of addiction https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2016/10/heroins_human_toll_coventry_to.html
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2018-03-02	Schiavoni running mate Stephanie Dodd talks of sister's overdose death https://www.dispatch.com/news/20180302/schiavoni-running-mate-stephanie-dodd-talks-of-sisters-overdose-death
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2017-08-27	Kasich campaign aide Ryan Dupain died from cocaine, fentanyl https://www.dispatch.com/news/20170827/kasich-campaign-aide-ryan-dupain-died-from-cocaine-fentanyl
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2019-05-15	Urging bill passage, father says son died after drug felony left him without a job https://www.dispatch.com/news/20190515/urging-bill-passage-father-says-son-died-after-drug-felony-left-him-without-job
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2018-08-01	Kirkersville police chief took drugs from department before fatal overdose https://www.dispatch.com/news/20180801/kirkersville-police-chief-took-drugs-from-department-before-fatal-overdose

<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2017-09-15	Woman found in crashed car may have died weeks earlier https://www.dispatch.com/news/20170915/woman-found-in-crashed-car-may-have-died-weeks-earlier
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2. Articles analysed for the ‘From addiction to recovery’ category.

Newspaper	Publication date	Title/Link
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2017-07-27	Recovering Hope: Sandusky woman survived five heroin overdoses, now in recovery https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2017/07/recovering_hope_sandusky_woman.html
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2017-11-16	Recovering Hope: Toothache sends former Westlake nurse down road of opioid addiction and recovery https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2017/11/recovering_hope_toothache_send_1.html
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2018-04-30	After years of heroin addiction, Mayfield Heights man is now 11 months clean https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2018/04/after_years_of_heroin_addictio_1.html
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2017-10-29	Living with heroin's consequences: Nick Kristek survived overdose and coma, hopes and prays for better life https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2017/10/living_with_heroin_consequenc.html
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2017-11-05	Losses make woman more determined to break heroin addiction https://www.dispatch.com/news/20171105/losses-make-woman-more-determined-to-break-heroin-addiction
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2018-03-20	Chiropractic care touted as one path out of drug addiction https://www.dispatch.com/news/20180320/chiropractic-care-touted-as-one-path-out-of-drug-addiction
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2019-05-20	Former addicts thank emergency responders for second chances https://www.dispatch.com/news/20190520/former-addicts-thank-emergency-responders-for-second-chances
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2016-08-20	Hope Over Heroin gathering brings hundreds for addiction help to Dodge Park https://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/08/19/Hope-Over-Heroin-gathering-brings-hundreds-for-addiction-help-to-Dodge-Park.html

3. Articles analysed for the 'Overdose incident' category.

Newspaper	Publication date	Title/Link
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2017-05-31	Elyria mother overdoses on heroin with child nearby, police say https://www.cleveland.com/elyria/2017/05/elyria_mother_overdoses_on_her.html
<i>The Plain Dealer</i>	2016-08-15	Man suffers heroin overdose in bathroom of Cleveland police station https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2016/08/man_suffers_heroin_overdose_in.html
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>	2016-09-16	Judge sentences woman who OD'd in car https://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/09/16/judge-sentences-woman-who-odd-in-car.html