

The Sociology of Breaking Bad and Societal Relevance:
Methamphetamine Abuse, Marital Dissolution & White-Collar Crime

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Abstract

This research project seeks to assess the contemporary societal trends depicted in the hit television series *Breaking Bad* while comparing them within the context of modern culture. This thesis will analyze three sociological factors portrayed in the series as well as their societal counterparts: methamphetamine abuse, marital dissolution, and white-collar crime. In the first section, methamphetamine abuse is conceptualized within the confines of the series and then expounded upon in reality. The second chapter of this project will delve into the White family's marital dissolution within *Breaking Bad* and highlight the most common causes of divorce in society. The final section of this research will conclude with a brief overview of white-collar crime depicted in *Breaking Bad* and its influence on the real-world economy. This research concentrates on combating these societal issues for a better, more unified future.

~ CHAPTER I ~

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, & RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The AMC television series *Breaking Bad* premiered on January 20, 2008. It was filmed in the desert city of Albuquerque, New Mexico (where the events of the show are set) by a collaboration of studios, including Sony Pictures, High Bridge Productions, and Gran Via Productions for AMC (IMDB, 2013). Although it was received with a more modest viewership during its first few seasons, *Breaking Bad* transformed into a pop culture phenomenon with a “cult following.” Seasons 1-4 averaged close to two million viewers per episode, whereas the Season 5 finale was viewed by five times that amount, an audience of ten million. The decision to broadcast the show through Netflix and release its fifth season in two different segments over a year’s time allowed the series to reach a different demographic (IMDB, 2013). These brilliant marketing decisions gave viewers another opportunity to catch up to the fifth season before the finale was aired, resulting in the steep increase in viewership.

During its 62-episode run, it became one of the best television series ever made in terms of storytelling, plot lines, and character casting. According to IMDB, *Breaking Bad* ranks #4 on the competitive “must watch” list and has a viewer rating of 9.5/10, one of the highest scores on this critical review site (2013). In “The American Western Mythology of Breaking Bad,” author Paula Brown also describes the show as “a game-changing television series that created a unique kind of audience, viewing experience, and product” (2017, p. 78). She asserts,

“*Breaking Bad* was willing to destroy itself in order to perfect itself as a kind of tragic performance art. Although the series was revolutionary in this aspect, it was also deeply traditional in others, indebted to the generic television shows and film audiences had become familiar with from the big screen and from other networks, most obviously, the mobster drama and the Western. The series recreates and rejuvenates the genre of the Western by reversing the expectation that it depicts a quest or founding of civilization, instead revealing the loss of civilization” (Brown, 2017, p. 78).

This unique reversal of expectations is one of the many aspects of this series that make it stand apart in a long list of exceptional modern television. Some may say this show parallels a Shakespearean tragedy, such as *Macbeth*, in certain ways making it even more of a genuine classic. In an article for the *Independent*, editor India Ross states, “one d[idn’t] simply start watching *Breaking Bad* in a casual capacity. It was a case of submitting yourself happily, voluntarily, to a cult of sleuthing and over-analysis. An episode [was] no longer a forty-six-minute slice out of the working day—it [was] a meal of many courses” (2016, para 4).

The main characters in *Breaking Bad* include the protagonist Walter White (Bryan Cranston), White’s partner-in-crime Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), White’s spouse Skylar White (Anna Gunn), White’s DEA brother-in-law Hank Schrader (Dean Norris), Hank’s wife Marie Schrader (Betsy Brandt), and White’s son Walter White, Jr. (RJ Mitte). Other supporting, yet equally important characters are Walt’s crooked attorney Saul Goodman (Bob Odenkirk), Hank’s DEA partner and friend Steven Gomez (Steven Quezada), Mike Ehrmantraut (Jonathan Banks) and Jesse’s two best friends “Skinny Pete” and “Badger” (Charles Baker & Matt Jones) (IMDB, 2013). The complexity and depth of the characters

as well as the constant moral dilemmas are two of the key factors that make this story great. The way these characters interact with each other depict everything from the effects of prolonged drug abuse on relationships and the human body to family dynamics in modern, middle-class America. *Breaking Bad* is also fraught with its fair share of ruthless villainy. The actors who portray brutal, drug-dealer Tuco Salamanca (Raymond Cruz), cartel-member Hector Salamanca (Mark Margolis), lethal assassin Uncle Jack (Michael Bowen), and the infamous Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) give *Breaking Bad* its gritty sense of danger and constant mortality for the main characters (IMDB, 2013). Ironically, Walter White can also be added to this list as the underlying antagonist of the entire series.

Literature Review

For this research project, Jens Christiansen provides a psychological backstory for Walter White that will lay the groundwork for his character (2017). White's lung cancer diagnosis in the pilot episode sets the stage for a complex and realistic drama adding many different layers to the story. IMDB (2013) provides data about the viewership of *Breaking Bad* and the success of the series. Ross (2016) gives an in-depth analysis of *Breaking Bad* and the quality of its writing. Television critic Paula Brown further compares the series to a classic western movie or a familiar Greek tragedy (2017). Piquero (2010) and Masters (2017) are important to this research because they analyze certain white-collar criminal acts. Piquero gives a detailed definition of "white-collar" crimes, while Masters introduces current statistics about money laundering and other forms of this criminal activity. Many sections incorporate specific lines from the characters using quotes from *Breaking Bad* (2011).

Drug addiction is, of course, a focal point of the series and several sources about methamphetamine use are significant to this project. Information from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) (2017) strengthens the argument about drug abuse. McGuinness conveys the health problems that stem from drug abuse using a biological approach (2006). Hohman details the common ingredients that “cooks” use for methamphetamine and points out the effect of meth on children who have been raised in drug-ridden homes (2004). Gunter (2007) follows Hohman with ways to limit methamphetamine use and production amongst the current drug crisis in certain areas of the United States. Bloom (2017) adds key information about one of methamphetamine’s key ingredients, a decongestant called Sudafed. Formerly available to buy at will, Sudafed is now limited to over-the-counter purchases in small quantities. This was originally instituted as part of the US government’s “war on drugs” to limit the production and distribution of methamphetamine. As a result, meth “cooks” found alternative methods to make their product. Dunn (2012) addresses the amphetamine crisis in the Appalachian region specifically.

Scott (2013) provides the substantive basis for relating *Breaking Bad*’s marital strain to reality through his study about the cited reasons for divorce from participants who attended the Premarital Relationship Education Program (PREP). The results from Scott (2013) indicated a number of frequently occurring issues that directly aligned with the White’s marriage in the series. Additionally, the PREP website is useful because it highlights information not mentioned in the previous study and further clarifies the purpose of the PREP curriculum (PREP 2021). In this research, an iconic *Breaking Bad* scene between Skyler and Walt adds dialogue from the series to the domestic abuse

section. YouTube (2011) shows Walter's transformation into Heisenberg most accurately when he states "I am the Danger..." leading Skyler to believe even more that he presents a threat to their family. Click (2018) surmises the moral degradation of Walter White through the lens of the viewer. She explains the moral conflict and uncomfortable position for viewers of the series to align themselves with an immoral person that was once decent and reasonably upright.

Actor Bryan Cranston's reaction to this scene in Snierson's (2016) Entertainment Weekly interview reveals that Heisenberg was inside of Walter White all along. White's transformation was not gradual from good to bad he argues, it was from bad to worse. Slepian (2019) studied the effects of secret-keeping on relationships and the keeper of the secret. This provides quality information from the Society of Personality and Social Psychology to strengthen the argument that secret-keeping is a reason for marital dysfunction both in *Breaking Bad* and reality. Brenner (2019) further explores secret keeping to unveil the negative side effects that may occur when someone keeps heavy secrets from their spouse, family and friends. Lastly, statistics from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2018) as well as the American Psychological Association (APA) (2020) shed light on the current marriage and divorce rates. These two sources enhance this research by giving a numerical picture of contemporary divorce trends.

For the final section of this project, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (2020) defines white-collar crime, specifically money laundering in the context of organized criminal activity. This source highlights the involvement of federal organizations in the war against money laundering, which finances many other criminal

endeavors. Schneider (2010) supplements this argument with more material about the status of money laundering in terms of the global market. Interestingly, the dark shadow cast by laundering money comprises a worrisome amount of the world's total GDP. Information from the Financial Action Task Force (2020) reveals that the amount of money laundered worldwide amounts to the GDP of an economically medium-tier country, like Spain. Unknown criminal enterprises possessing this much power is extremely concerning. Levi (2006) details the process that criminals use to launder money that supports appalling behaviors like human trafficking, drug trafficking and terrorism.

Methodology

For this Honors Thesis Project, I will examine the social issues and crimes portrayed in the television series *Breaking Bad* and analyze these trends in the context of modern society. I have found sources regarding the psychology of the characters in *Breaking Bad*, which I will incorporate into the thesis to give context to the crimes committed and even try to explain why these events happen outside of fiction. This research will also play a vital role in developing an explanatory background for each main character at the beginning of this project for those who have not seen the show. There have been plenty of pop culture critiques and reviews of the series, but I have not found any other research inquiries exactly like the one I am proposing.

The main issues that will be the focus of this project include the series' portrayal of substance abuse, the reasons for Walter White's marital fallout in the series related to the current divorce rate, and the effect of "white-collar" crimes on the U.S. economy. I will use each of these points to argue that in many ways *Breaking Bad* is a gritty,

dramatized representation of modern culture. The writers of the series spared no detail in their quest for realism. Towards the end of my thesis, I will briefly delve into the effects of the show on society and whether I believe it incites violence and amoral behaviors amongst its viewers. Depending on how much information is available, I may add a section about children who have grown up in a drug-ridden environment and its effects on adolescent development. At certain points, it seemed like Walter and Jesse would end their reign in the drug world with millions at their disposal, but the series ended brilliantly depicting that crime does not pay.

My main research question for this project will be “What current issues does *Breaking Bad* portray in its 62-episode run and how accurately does it capture the essence of these problems compared to modern culture?”. This is a bit of a broad question because the series is rich in material, but I will use several subsections to answer it in detail. These sections will be about each of the issues mentioned above. My first subtopic question will be “How is the use of drugs portrayed in *Breaking Bad* and what is the current status of the drug epidemic in the U.S.?” I will use several sources including statistics from the CDC and DEA to evaluate the amounts drug abuse in the U.S., the effects of these drugs on the body, treatment programs for drug abuse, and methods of prevention. This problem is worth researching because there are millions of cases of drug abuse each year and as a people, we should be aware of the signs and symptoms of drug abuse. I believe that addiction is a “disease” of the brain and treatable in most cases with the necessary resources; therefore, we should be more aware of these resources to help others.

My second subtopic question will be “How does *Breaking Bad* portray the degradation of marriage and what is the current status of marital fallout in the U.S.?” The relevance and accuracy of this source will highly depend on the amount of quality resources available because I struggled to find anything specifically about this idea. Nonetheless, it is worth exploring because the separation and divorce rates are significantly higher now than they were a few decades ago and we need to be aware of the common problems in marital relationships to try to overcome them. My final topic question will be “How does *Breaking Bad* portray “white-collar” crimes and how damaging is “white-collar” to the individual and the global economy each year?”. This is worth researching because the U.S. and its citizens lose more money each year to “white-collar” crimes, such as tax fraud and money laundering, than to all other forms of organized and common street crimes combined.

~ CHAPTER II ~

METHAMPHETAMINE ABUSE: EFFECTS & REHABILITATION

Methamphetamine, the signature drug seen in *Breaking Bad*, is a Schedule II controlled substance categorized by the Food and Drug Administration (DEA, 2017). The most common street names for meth are “ice”, “glass”, and “crystal”, but there are over a dozen other slang terms. It is a highly addictive stimulant with almost no medical purpose that causes an intense euphoria and rush because of its potent influence on the user’s central nervous system (DEA, 2017). The only legally prescribed use of a methamphetamine derivative is Desoxyn, which treats obesity and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Meth can be abused in a variety of ways including swallowing, snorting, smoking, and injecting (DEA, 2017). The method of use often dictates the level of

disorientation and the duration of the high. For example, smoking or injecting methamphetamine introduces it to the bloodstream faster resulting in a very intense sensation as the blood pumps through the brain. Swallowing and snorting the substance causes the user to experience a prolonged, more gradual release of the drug into the bloodstream (DEA, 2017). This rush is caused by an immense wave of dopamine, the pleasure-emitting neurotransmitter, across the synaptic gap in the brain.

Every time someone takes the drug, their body begins acclimating to the current dose. For this reason, a progressively higher amount is required each time to replicate the same euphoric trip (DEA, 2017). The brief, intense feeling of pleasure causes the substance to be even more addictive, often to the point that an individual will do anything to get another fix. The dependency created in the user by the misuse of meth has been manipulated throughout history for a plethora of reasons. Meth has also disturbingly been used in warfare to heighten a soldier's alertness, endurance, and overall performance. In World War II, Nazi Germany gave their infantrymen methamphetamine to increase their resilience and deadliness on the battlefield. This effectively created an even more formidable opponent for the Allied forces because individuals using amphetamines require little sleep to function and have almost no appetite (McGuinness, 2006).

Effects of Methamphetamine

Prolonged use of methamphetamine can have a disastrous influence on the mind and body. According to the DEA, "chronic users of methamphetamine can exhibit violent behavior, anxiety, confusion, insomnia, and psychotic features including paranoia, aggression, visual and auditory hallucinations, mood disturbances, and delusions --- such as the sensation of insects crawling on the skin. Such paranoia can result in homicidal or

suicidal thoughts” (2017, p. 54). *Breaking Bad* introduces a shockingly accurate portrayal of these effects demonstrated by a man’s brutal beating at the hand of Tuco Salamanca in the Season 1 finale titled “A-No-Rough-Stuff-Type-Deal” (Gilligan, 2008). Salamanca clearly exhibited a supreme level of paranoia, aggression, and homicidal behavior shortly after snorting meth which resulted in a bystander’s grotesque demise. Because of meth’s 12-hour half-life and sudden release of dopamine, the human body has a difficult time coping with the abuse (McGuinness, 2006).

Even miniscule amounts of this drug result in “increased wakefulness, increased physical activity, decreased appetite, rapid breathing and heart rate, irregular heartbeat, and hyperthermia (the inverse of hypothermia which causes overheating and fever)” (DEA, 2017, p. 55). Death often results if dosage levels exceed a critical amount. When excessive amounts are ingested, the body begins to fight back against the invading toxin which can result in a lethal spike in temperature. A seizure can also occur in response causing a heart attack due to hypertension. Non-lethal, long-term side effects of meth abuse include “extreme anorexia, memory loss, and severe dental problems” (DEA, 2017, p. 55). Research also indicates that brain damage also occurs when low levels of meth are ingested. Up to 50% of dopamine-producing cells can be destroyed with even a minute amount of this drug. The disastrous effects of methamphetamine on the human body are shown quite often during tragic overdoses that are all too common.

Methamphetamine Abuse in the U.S.

The extent of methamphetamine abuse in many parts of the U.S. is an entrenched societal problem with devastating consequences on health, safety, and the overall welfare of the community. In fact, in 2004, research indicated that as many as 12 million people

had used meth in some form and with varying levels of purity in their lifetime (McGuinness, 2006). These numbers have increased since then alongside the total U.S. population and new derived methods of meth manufacturing. In the same study, approximately 583,000 individuals were “regular users” of this drug (McGuinness, 2006). It is becoming increasingly more difficult to determine the validity of studies like these because only a certain percentage of actual users would confess to this level of abuse. Therefore, exact figures are difficult to evaluate.

From the current number of inmates that are incarcerated in federal prison for drug crimes in the U.S., one can surmise that these estimates may be somewhat understated. There is a substantial disparity between the number of inmates in federal prison who are serving lengthy sentences due to drug crimes. According to *CJ: Realities and Challenges* by Ruth Masters, “individuals sentenced for drug offenses constituted the largest number of federal inmates” at a staggering 49%. In comparison, only “about 16% of federal offenders committed weapons, explosives, and arson offenses, and 10% committed immigration offenses” (2017, p. 59). Granted, not all of the incarcerated individuals are convicted of a crime relating to methamphetamine, specifically. Their sentencing could stem from the possessing or selling of any illegal stimulant on the Schedule II list.

Methamphetamine Abuse in Tennessee

The Appalachia region including Tennessee has one of the highest amounts of methamphetamine abuse in the entire country. Not only is this incredibly dangerous for law enforcement, but it also effects the local economy and ruins lives on a regular basis through overdose and terminal impairment. In the book *Appalachian Health and Well-Being*, chapter author Michael S. Dunn states,

“Clients in treatment for methamphetamine abuse increased from 3.5 to 6.27 percent over a five-year period in Appalachian Tennessee. Although another study conducted in Central Appalachia found that admission rates for treatment of methamphetamine abuse were lower than the rest of the nation’s. Tennessee had more seizures of meth labs (539) than any other state in the southeastern United States in 2007... However, as law enforcement reduced the number of meth labs in the state, trafficking in the drug increased from new sources, such as a rogue foreign and domestic precursor chemical companies and mobile labs run by independent small manufacturers (Dunn, 2012, p. 254).

“Methamphetamine is widely accessible because the precursor ingredients are readily available, home manufacture is easy, and the costs of ingredients and production are low. Meth is typically produced in clandestine labs in private homes, garages, and hotel rooms. Although reports from Tennessee indicated a decrease in meth lab seizures between 2003 and 2008, there has been an increase in the use of alternative means of production, such as the ‘shake and bake’ method, which does not require heating of the materials and can be done in a soda bottle in any location (Dunn, 2012, p. 254).”

Unfortunately, there is simply not enough awareness about the meth crisis in Tennessee. Progressive steps should be taken to increase, enhance, and destigmatize the drug abuse resources in these communities, as well as those available in U.S. federal penitentiaries.

Status of Children in Meth-Ridden Homes

While methamphetamine devastates the abuser, it also vicariously endangers everyone who may live within a drug-ridden home, including children. In *Breaking Bad*’s sixth episode of season 2 titled “Peekaboo”, Jesse Pinkman acquires the address of a couple

who had recently ripped off one of his dealers and stole their meth at gunpoint (Gilligan, 2009). In his attempt to make an example out of them and get the meth back, Jesse breaks into their home. After he enters, Pinkman finds a young boy (4-5 years old) who is clearly malnourished and covered in dirt from lack of parental care. Finding anything he can to feed the child, Jesse then makes the boy a sandwich out of hamburger buns and marshmallow cream (Gilligan, 2009). Shortly after, the parents start fighting while under the influence of meth and heroine, resulting in the death of the boy's father. Thinking that the police will arrest him, Jesse runs out of the house until his conscience grips him. He runs back inside to save the child and cover his eyes from the horror of his father's demise. When the two escape the premises, Jesse calls the police, stays with the boy until just before the arrival of law enforcement, and then tells him to go "live a good life" before disappearing into the night (Gilligan, 2009). This is an example of Jesse's moral character despite his consistent criminal behavior with Walt. Some would argue that Jesse Pinkman is an inherently good person trapped in a bad situation, unable to leave because of societal limitations.

There are innumerable cases of adolescents cohabitating with individuals who misuse meth. In fact, children who grow up in this type of environment are likely to suffer from malnutrition, developmental disorders, exposure to hazardous chemicals, and even explosions. In *Methamphetamine Abuse and Manufacture: The Child Welfare Response*, author Melinda Hohman states, "From 1997 to 1999, 472 children in California were found in 176 homes during methamphetamine laboratory seizures and were removed by child welfare officials. More than one-third of these children tested positive for illicit drugs because of environmental exposure" (2004, p. 373-374). In response to the increasing meth

crisis across the U.S., a pilot program called the Drug-Endangered Children's Resource Center, or DEC, was created to assist children who either were found during a meth lab raid or who were reported by an outside source and removed from the home. Workers in this program also provide resources for adolescents who suffer from the maladies of environmental drug addiction (Hohman, 2004).

Methamphetamine can be produced and manufactured in several ways, but all of them include the use of extremely dangerous chemicals such as red phosphorus and acetone. During meth laboratory takeovers, law enforcement personnel have even found evidence of Raid bug killer, chlorine, and cleaning chemicals (Lysol, Clorox, etc.) being used. Depending on the amount and length of exposure, side effects experienced by children in a meth-laden environment can manifest in two forms: acute and long-term (Hohman, 2004). Acute meth exposure can result in "burning of the eyes and skin, headaches, dizziness, nausea, and respiratory distress" from breathing the chemicals (Hohman, 2004, p. 376). Exact long-term effects of this exposure on children is not completely known, but some research indicates that contact with precursor chemicals can cause "liver and kidney disease, cancers such as lymphomas and leukemias, bone marrow suppression resulting in anemia, and risk of infection" (Hohman, 2004, p. 376). According to Hohman, "a small study of 18 pediatric patients who had been inadvertently poisoned with methamphetamine tachycardia (100 percent), agitation (50 percent), vomiting (33 percent), and inconsolable crying and irritability (33 percent). The patients required an average of three days hospitalization" (2004, p. 376).

Methamphetamine Abuse Treatment Programs

With the current increase in methamphetamine abuse cases and the large number of inmates incarcerated for drug charges in the U.S., available treatment programs are absolutely essential, in and out of prison. A huge glimmer of hope for individuals suffering from the effects of meth abuse is that these programs actually work. McGuinness states, “[S]tudies in 15 states have demonstrated significant effects of treatment in the areas of abstinence, reduced arrests, employment, and other measures. Methamphetamine abuse has generally been shown to be as receptive to treatment as other addictive drugs” (2006, p. 56). Therefore, since this system works, some of the U.S. tax dollars should be diverted to increase the availability of these programs. Unfortunately, the growth rate of admitted individuals who need rehabilitation is very slowly increasing due to a number of factors. From 1993 to 2003, “admissions increased from only 13 per 100,000 to 56 per 100,000” (McGuinness, 2006, p. 56). Reasons for this dramatically small increase include the expansion of drug courts and new alternative sentencing programs. While drug courts and sentencing reformations are by no means bad, they do influence a person’s ability to get the help they need.

To date, the most effective treatment program for methamphetamine abuse is cognitive-behavioral intervention. This treatment consists of relapse-prevention work, participation in 12-step programs, urine testing, individual therapy and a social support group (McGuinness, 2006). Social support and accountability are integral to successful rehabilitation. A fantastic example of this program, especially the “12-step” process and the social support group is depicted in several episodes of *Breaking Bad*’s third season. After the death of Jane Margolis (Jesse Pinkman’s love interest) in the Season 2 finale, Jesse struggles to cope with his tragic loss and resorts to using White’s strain of meth

(nicknamed “Blue Sky” because of its 99.1% purity) (Gilligan, 2009). Fearing for Jesse’s safety and needing his manufacturing partner back, White checks Jesse into a rehabilitation facility to “get him clean”.

Between the Season 2 finale and the Season 3 premier, there is a slight time jump during which Jesse is involved in this intensive treatment program. In the first episode of Season 3 titled “No M`as”, the series portrays Jesse’s support group and mentor before he is released with significant improvement (Gilligan, 2010). At this point, he had been clean for 45 days and was looking much healthier according to his parents. It also gave him a fresh perspective about life and another avenue to handle the death of Jane Margolis through self-acceptance. Jane’s death had a profound influence on Jesse. It made him more compassionate and strengthened his moral compass during the partnership with Walter White. Having a new way to cope with his grief may have ultimately saved Jesse’s life (Gilligan, 2010).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the information depicted in *Breaking Bad* and subsequently in this research is important for several reasons. Firstly, it draws attention to an otherwise lesser known subject matter in most circles: methamphetamine abuse. This is especially crucial for the residents of Tennessee because it recently overtook California for having the most meth misuse of any state in the U.S. Secondly, this research promotes the need for more treatment programs. It is ludicrous to believe that someone who is struggling with drug dependency can be placed in a prison cell for an allotted period of time and come out of it a changed individual. The success in imprisonment is only a temporary fix for a much larger, deeper issue. Addiction is rooted in an individual on a biological level. It is a

disease that can be cured with the right amount of time, compassion, and resources. Therefore, knowing that it is indeed curable, why would society be naïve enough to assume that typical incapacitation will result in drug independency without proper treatment? An increase of funding to substance abuse programs is absolutely essential.

~ CHAPTER III ~

THE MARITAL FALLOUT OF WALTER WHITE AND SOCIETAL RELEVANCE

Introduction

Walter White's relationship with his wife Skyler in *Breaking Bad* perfectly exemplifies the rapid degradation of marriage that is all too common in modern society. From the beginning of the series, tensions were high between them and viewers could clearly sense their marital friction. The marriage had grown increasingly stagnant with time. With this said, ardent fans of the series were not surprised to see Walter and his wife grow farther apart but the portrayal of this distancing was nothing short of cinematic genius. They started off as a familiar middle-class couple living in an Albuquerque subdivision. Walter is the quiet, somewhat begrudging high school chemistry teacher that has grown slightly bitter with the regret of what he could have been. Skyler, on the other hand, is a content accountant for a local business in Albuquerque. Together, they have a disabled son named Walt Jr. (ironically named after his father, the series' antihero) who is still in high school. Looking at this uneventful couple in Season 1, they accurately portray the average marital relationship in modern culture for several reasons.

A key factor directly correlates with Walter's cancer diagnosis. While this ultimately corresponds with most of the series' events, Walter's behavior changed significantly afterwards. He began to be more resentful toward Skyler and even at a certain point became somewhat sexually aggressive. On the other hand, Skyler's behavior made matters worse when she started to consistently criticize Walter even before he dabbled in his illegal endeavors. Despite this, the two still had a connection and a mutual concern for their son. Walter's diagnosis catalyzed his slow, casual descent into madness and further exacerbated the existing problems in their relationship. While Walter's deeds were heinous, Skyler also played a role in their misfortune. There are several interactions in *Breaking Bad* that are turning points which signaled the end of Walter and Skyler's marriage. The depiction of their relationship is unique in the fact that it is obviously dramatized, but key contributors to marital dissolution are present that portray the realistic downfall of marriage outside of the series.

Current Factors Leading to a Higher Divorce Rate

Divorce and separation rates have surged at an alarming rate in the modern age. As a result, research has been conducted by dismayed psychologists to search for the root cause of this phenomenon. This steady increase can be attributed to a number of reasons, some obvious and others more obscure. One factor to consider is the growing population. As more people are born, more relationships develop and as a result, there is higher potential for failure. The growing populace and the advent of dating apps through technology also allows for a more diverse mate selection. Just a century ago, some people that are together today would never have met because of their location in the world.

Information is transported through the Internet so quickly that people on opposite sides of the planet can share photos, contact information and communicate instantly.

While this is beneficial to a certain degree, it also correlates with the idea of broader mate selection. Today's world uses apps to find dates and most users even go on several dates a week with different people. So while a larger selection of mates is a good thing in the right context, it can also harm the potential for a solid, lasting relationship by always having exposure to other options. Obviously, this is where loyalty and real love for another comes into play. With the U.S. divorce rate hovering between 40% - 50%, one could assert that the advent of technology has simultaneously aided and harmed our ability to stay in committed relationships depending on the specific case. This also applies to in-person encounters at work or another venue as well. *Breaking Bad* perfectly depicts the effects of infidelity in its third season when Skyler sleeps with her boss, Ted Beneke as a way of spiting Walter for his malevolent actions throughout the series (Gilligan, 2010). Viewers witnessed the influence of this betrayal on Walter White because he still desperately loved Skyler, regardless of the friction in their relationship.

Another factor that effects the U.S. divorce rate in our time is generational difference. In the past even prior to the founding of the United States, divorce was basically unheard of for religious reasons. In fact, King Henry VIII appealed to the Pope for a divorce which was not granted because it was taboo at the time. Instead, he went to tremendous lengths for a divorce by founding the Church of England to have it arranged. He even went further than this on different occasions by having two of his wives executed for trivial reasons. Even several hundred years later in the U.S., divorce was hard to obtain, especially for the woman who still had very limited rights in the eyes of

the law. The latter half of the 20th century saw changes in the availability of divorce and the social consequences it had on its practitioner. By the end of this period, the occurrence of divorce became commonplace as rates grew into what they are today.

Common Causes of Marital Strain or Separation including “Final Straw” Reasoning

Factors leading to a higher divorce rate and actual causes of divorce are different depending on the circumstances surrounding the failed relationship. In *Breaking Bad*, a combination of factors contributed to the demise of Walter and Skyler’s marriage as is often the case in reality. Courses are often available that try to help couples solve their differences positively and enhance communication skills within relationships. One of these is called the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) which attempts to “develop resources for couples, educators, therapists, and programs to support healthy and happy relationships” (PREP, 2020, para 1). The PREP curriculum is lauded as a helpful tool for many couples, but some have still separated from their significant other. To try to better understand the reasoning behind this, a group of researchers conducted a study to find the most common reasons for divorce, including what they referred to as “final straw” reasoning (Scott, 2013). Ironically, many of the same “causes” retrieved from the survey aligned well with *Breaking Bad’s* adaptation of Walter and Skyler White’s failed relationship.

According to the article “Reasons for Divorce and Recollections of Premarital Intervention: Implications for Improving Relationship Education”, the study’s methodology included a questionnaire answered by divorcees who had formerly taken the PREP education program (Scott, 2013). The participants were 52 divorced individuals (21 males and 31 females) who answered questions regarding the reasoning for their

decision to separate, including the aforementioned “final straw” motivation (Scott, 2013). Of these 31 females and 21 males, 18 men and 18 corresponding women had been married to each other, while the remaining 16 participants were alone in the study without their former spouse (Scott, 2013). This particular study leaned heavily Caucasian at a rate of 88.2% so the diversity of the sample must be taken into account when analyzing the results. Nonetheless, for this assignment, this majority demographic is fitting since both of *Breaking Bad*'s protagonists (Walter and Skyler) were Caucasian.

Lack of Commitment, Infidelity and Excessive Conflict

Participants were asked to accurately identify their reasons for divorce by answering “yes” or “no” to a list of common problems that are present in relationships (Scott, 2013). Interestingly, a majority of these issues were also present in Walter and Skyler's relationship. This accuracy can be attributed to literary purpose and character development as well as authentic storytelling. The topics included but were not limited to the following: “lack of commitment, infidelity or extramarital affairs, too much conflict or arguing, getting married too young, financial problems, substance abuse, domestic violence, health problems, lack of support from family, religious differences, and little or no premarital education” (Scott, 2013, Table 1). The results of the survey indicated that lack of commitment, infidelity, and excessive arguing/conflict were present the most being cited as a reason individually and as a couple over 55% of the time. This is especially interesting when we consider the aspects of White's marriage which had all three of the most common issues present in some form.

The results of the study were specified in terms of individual and couple response as well as couple agreement (Scott, 2013). The fifth most common reason for separation

was financially related. Over 35% of individual participants indicated that this was a major determining factor in their decision to divorce while couples attributed this reason ~56% of the time with 50% agreement (Scott, 2013). Financial destitution was highly influential in *Breaking Bad* and placed an enormous level of strain on the White's marriage. After being diagnosed with cancer, Walter felt as if he had very limited time left before his death and committed to not leaving his family (especially Skyler) with an unsurmountable stack of medical bills. While he had good intentions in the beginning, Walter never expected to live as long as he did and therefore, allowed his newly found power to consume him. Amazingly, the events depicted in *Breaking Bad* from the Season One pilot to the series finale titled "Felina" occurred over the course of just a year in the series timeline (Gilligan, 2013). That means Walter and Skyler's relationship completely disintegrated in just a few short months due to a number of issues including financial strain. Monetary issues are notorious for causing marital degradation, unless they are handled prudently.

Substance Abuse

Another issue that aligns both with the PREP study and the *Breaking Bad* series is substance abuse. The study's participants stated that substance abuse was present in the relationship and was a motivation for divorce (or separation) ~35% individually, with couples identifying this cause 50% of the time (Scott, 2013). Interestingly, they agreed on this topic only a third of the time which could be attributed to shame from one or both partners. There is a tremendous social stigma placed on those who struggle with substance abuse. Instead of being offered assistance, drug users are often cast out of society or directly into a prison. Neither instance grants that person the help they require

and as a result, many die or end up destroying their relationships. Obviously, an individual who interacts with narcotics must see the problem with their actions and want to change which is a huge determining factor. Substance abuse is the core societal issue depicted in *Breaking Bad*. The series is absolutely riddled with methamphetamine abuse, along with several other illegal drugs. Fans of the show can attest that at times, it seems like the show romanticizes Walter and Jesse's drug-laden rise to power. However, in the end, the series beautifully depicts the consequences of substance abuse and criminal behavior with its sheer loss of life. Just Walter's association with narcotics ultimately cost him his marriage and his life, even though he never tried his product personally.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a huge motivating factor in an individual or couple's decision to separate. According to the PREP study, participants cited domestic violence as a reason for divorce ~24% of the time. Couples reported this as a reason ~28% of the time with 40% agreement (Scott, 2013). Spousal abuse is quite possibly the most well-deserved and equally hazardous reason to leave a significant other. Victims of domestic violence often find it extraordinarily problematic to escape from their situation because of fear. Measuring the frequency of domestic abuse is difficult because of cultural differences and lack of reporting to proper authorities. For example, in *Breaking Bad*, Walter's behavior escalated throughout the series to the point that he became borderline aggressive with Skyler in a few instances. While their bickering was mostly harmless, Walt did pin Skyler against the fridge on one occasion and verbally demeaned her with expletives over the phone in Season Five. In fact, one of *Breaking Bad's* most ominous

and iconic lines emanates from a conversation between Walt and Skyler in the Season 4 episode titled “Cornered” which is depicted as follows (Gilligan, 2011):

Skyler: “We go to the police...”

Walter: “I do not want to hear about the police!”

Skyler: “I do not say that lightly. I know what it could do to this family... but if its either that or you getting shot when (someone knocks and) you open your front door...”

Walter: “I do NOT want to hear about the police!!!”

Skyler: “You are not some hardened criminal, Walt. You are in way over your head. That’s what we tell them. That’s the truth.”

Walter: “That’s NOT the truth!”

Skyler: “Let’s both stop trying to justify the whole thing and admit that you’re in danger.”

Walter: “Who are you talking to right now?... Who is it you think you see?... Do you know how much I make a year? Even if I told you, you wouldn’t believe it... You clearly don’t know who you’re talking to so let me clue you in. I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens this door and gets shot and you think that of me. I am the one who knocks!” (YouTube, 2011).

This is clearly a turning point for Walt who has gone too far with his actions in the series.

Indirectly, at this point, he has become a threat to his entire family. The good man who just wanted to make money for medical bills to clear his family of debt has become the leading antagonist of his own story. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, actor Bryan Cranston (Walter White) states “It was a transitional period for him, where we saw remnants... There was never a switch going from Walter White to Heisenberg (White’s moniker in the criminal world). It was gradual. It was losing Walt and gaining some of Heisenberg (each time)” (Snierson, 2016, para 3). This slow descent into madness resulted in Walter justifying every action, even if it hurt his family.

Spousal Health Concerns

The seventh related issue covered in the PREP study is that of spousal health problems. This is an extremely unfortunate reason for a failed relationship because most of the time health issues are completely out of someone's control. Nonetheless, individuals attributed this to their reasoning ~17% of the time with couples identifying health issues ~28% for their motivation with 25% couple agreement (Scott, 2013). This is another highly sensitive topic relating to marital strain because unwarranted health issues place so much pressure on a couple financially and emotionally. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter's cancer diagnoses undoubtedly increased tension on the whole family, including his son Walt Jr. who was handicapped in the series. For this reason, Walter kept his cancer a secret for a brief period in the series' run knowing Skyler and the rest of his family would not handle the announcement well. In fact, the only reason Walter revealed his secret in the first place was to cover another secret he acquired from dabbling in the meth trade. Once again, he had good intentions but proved the old adage about honesty correct. He unintentionally made matters worse by keeping his diagnoses a secret from even his wife who most certainly had a right to know. The White family already struggled to pay the medical expenses for their son Walt Jr. who had cerebral palsy (brilliantly portrayed by actor RJ Mitte). One of the most tragic aspects of the show is that Skyler would have loved and stayed with Walt until his death had he not made the decision to build wealth through illegal activity. Walter's cancer would have had minimal impact on their marriage, despite the associated hardships.

Secret Keeping and Dishonesty

One huge determining factor for the White's relationship was retrieved from personal observation and not included in the aforementioned study (and probably should

have been). This is the effect of secrecy on interpersonal and romantic relationships. Throughout the series, Walter kept a large number of secrets from Skyler for different justifications. At first, he made the choice for secrecy in an effort to preserve the separation of his two “worlds” – the kind and loving, yet dying chemistry teacher and the merciless, greedy kingpin with nothing to lose. For the first few seasons, Walt managed to keep these two worlds relatively separate. Jesse Pinkman remained in the criminal realm and was scolded for appearing at the White’s residence one day.

To retain secrecy, Walter lied to Skyler telling her that Pinkman was his marijuana dealer for medicinal purposes. Skyler bought this story temporarily and even made her way to Jesse Pinkman’s home to ridicule him for selling marijuana to Walt, leaving Jesse completely astounded. Eventually, Walter White’s two parallel universes came crashing together toward the end of the series, driving an even bigger wedge between him and Skyler. She even was dragged into the meth business out of loyalty to Walt despite her constant frustration. While Skyler never participated in the sales aspect, she begrudgingly served as the financial hub for the operation – purifying their ludicrously high cash flow through a local business.

Breaking Bad eloquently depicts the consequences of keeping important information from a spouse in a romantic relationship. Somehow, the truth usually comes out and damages the marriage even more than it would have otherwise had the keeper of the secret been honest. Secret keeping is not necessarily such a “black and white” moral argument though. In very limited circumstances, it can be beneficial to retain certain aspects of one’s past life from a significant other. With that said, honesty is always the best way to approach a circumstance, despite the inherent difficulty of truthfulness. There

is a difference between being honest and withholding potentially harmful information. Nonetheless, it is within human nature to embellish or withhold information that could potentially tarnish our relationships. Despite this, true love for another is generally honest, regardless of the consequences.

According to a study conducted by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, “97% of people are keeping a secret at any given time, with the average person having about 13 secrets” (Slepian, 2019, para 1). The author Michael Slepian continues with “[B]y the age of five, children develop the ability to keep secrets. Keeping a secret from a parent can perhaps prevent a scolding, but more importantly, the ability to keep secrets is a major developmental milestone. To have a secret from others is to create an alternate world, one to which others don’t have complete access” (2019, para 2). No wonder people become so adept at harboring information from others in adulthood. The development of secret keeping capabilities at such a young age gives someone years of practice, but clearly, this action has consequences as seen in *Breaking Bad*. Not only can secrets have a disastrous influence on romantic relationships, studies indicate that secret keeping may also decrease someone’s overall well-being. In reference to a previous study, *Psychology Today* author Grant Brenner states “Slepian and colleagues (2017) demonstrated in a study of 13,000 secrets that people may become distracted by secrets, leading to a preoccupation with them, decreased feelings of authenticity (detachment from their true reality), and a reduced sense of well-being and satisfaction with one’s life” (2019, para 4).

In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White lost a clear picture of his reality by getting further entangled in a seemingly endless web of lies and secrets. In just a year’s time, he went

from an ordinary person to a stone-cold manipulator who stopped at nothing to preserve his expanding empire. Does this signify a rapid digression from who he was as a person? Or was it within him all along, waiting to emerge? The authenticity of the storytelling in the series makes it difficult to tell. Author Melissa Click perfectly explains the rationale by stating, “[T]he pleasures of *Breaking Bad* are in the character’s journey; we find ourselves uncomfortably in a situation that we would rather not be in, aligned to an immoral criminal whom we remember as having once been decent and sympathetic” (2018, p. 67). Despite Walter White’s transformation, he still loved Skylar immensely. The secrets that Walter carried permanently scarred his family and cost the lives of his brother-in-law and several others.

Conclusion

For the past few decades, divorce rates have surged to a concerning level. As previously mentioned, this can be attributed to a number of different factors depending on the relationship. According to statistical data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, there was a total of 2,132,853 marriages in 2018 with a divorce occurring an average of 6.5 times per 1,000 individuals (2020). In comparison with this national average, Tennessee has seen a slight reduction in divorce rates per capita from its 1995 peak. In 2018, a divorce occurred in Tennessee an average of 8.0 times per thousand individuals (which is surprisingly higher than the national average) (CDC, 2020).

At first glance, this statistic sounds rather insignificant when compared to the overall population which hit the 327 million mark that same year. However, when you factor in only those that are of age to marry, this number grows exponentially. That combined with the fact that divorce no longer has such a potent social stigma surrounding

it fosters more of the same. In certain circumstances, divorce is entirely the best option but as a society, we should strive to make better marital decisions and cultivate relationships that garner peace and success. Obviously, marriages sometimes fall apart and cannot be fixed. Walter and Skyler's marriage in *Breaking Bad* involved extraordinary circumstances that most will never experience, but Walt did fight to preserve his relationship in spite of his poor decisions.

In the Western world, marriage is highly valued and has traditionally been viewed in some instances as an indicator of life success. Interestingly, this ceremonious rite of passage has changed with time. For example, in 19th century America, men and women often married very early in life as opposed to modern trends where people often marry in their 30's or later. One reason is that premarital cohabitation was simply unheard of until quite recently for social and religious motives. In more conservative sections of the nation, cohabitating is still bathed in social stigma. Another reason that people marry later can be credited to a longer average lifespan than that of our predecessors. Nonetheless, marriage is still fundamentally engrained in the foundations of modern culture. According to the American Psychological Association,

“[M]arriage and divorce are both common experiences. In Western cultures, more than 90 percent of people marry by age 50. Healthy marriages are good for couple's mental and physical health. They are also good for children; growing up in a happy home protects children from mental, physical, educational and social problems. However, about 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce. The divorce rate for subsequent marriages is even higher” (2020, para 1).

To put this further into perspective, those 2.1 million marriages in the United States have at least a 40-50 percent rate of failure. This number is simply astounding when we consider the vast social consequences that divorce has in the lives of children and future generations. Young people who grow up in split homes have an increased propensity for divorce later in their own lives. This leads to a vicious cycle of traumatic experiences that break generational barriers.

In conclusion, *Breaking Bad's* depiction of the Walter and Skyler White's marital fallout was nothing short of cinematic greatness. Obviously, it was highly dramatized, but many of the problems seen in their relationship align with the issues that often cause divorce in reality. There was a consistent lack of communication between these two characters that drove them apart in the end, aside from the craziness of their fictional world. Walter White's actions were ultimately the biggest reason for the premature end of their marriage, but Skyler's infidelity also placed a massive barrier between them. Infidelity, lack of commitment, and excessive arguing without conflict resolution are the three "final straw" factors in modern marriages. Cinematically, all three of these issues and several others were present in Walter and Skyler's relationship in the series. This also placed a tremendous amount of pressure on Walt Jr. who was struggling with his own health problems and the potential loss of his father. The influence of parental divorce outstretches the bounds of childhood lasting far into adult life. As a society, we must strive to enrich intimate relationships with avid communication while encouraging loyalty and respect for the sake of everyone involved. The mental health and well-being of future generations depend on the successes of the present.

~ CHAPTER IV ~

WHITE COLLAR CRIME IN BREAKING BAD

& ITS INFLUENCE ON THE ECONOMY

Breaking Bad's depiction of white-collar crime spotlights a massive, ambiguous form of illegal activity in today's society. In the article "10 Theories of White-Collar Crime and Public Policy", scholar Herbert Edelhertz offense-based approach defines white-collar crime as "an illegal act or series of illegal acts committed by nonphysical means and by concealment or guile to obtain money or property, to avoid the payment of money or property, or to obtain business or personal advantage" (Piquero, 2010, p. 190). Interestingly, this type of misconduct is not studied very much in the criminological realm, despite its costly impact on the U.S. economy. One reason for this is the hazy, secretive nature of the crime itself. Most of the time, white-collar is associated with high-ranking officials or politicians that use money to hide secrets resulting in public corruption. These investigations often lead detectives down a seemingly infinite tunnel of dead ends and false narratives. Agencies may spend years developing a case from one investigation. Other times, white-collar is the result of deeply embedded tax evasion from money laundering or embezzlement. The latter is the primary focus of this section.

Introduction

Breaking Bad's portrayal of white-collar crime is unique because of the White's status. In the beginning, Walter and Skyler White lead a thoroughly middle-class household that in retrospect would be considered 'blue-collar'. They were honest, hard-working people living in a decent home in the Albuquerque suburbs. Ironically, the

writers of *Breaking Bad* include a subplot and flashbacks about what Walter White's life could have been. In the fifth episode of Season 1, Gretchen Schwartz (Jessica Hecht) is introduced as Walter's ex-girlfriend and former lab assistant (Gilligan, 2008). Years before in the 1980's, the two had fallen in love and were celebrating the 4th of July together with Gretchen's wealthy family when Walter began to feel inferior. Shockingly, Walter broke up with Gretchen on the spot and left, clumsily destroying a good relationship.

In the present (2007), Walter attends a birthday party for his old college roommate, Elliott Schwartz (Adam Godley) who is now married to Gretchen. Elliott and Walt had plenty of history which included founding a company together called Gray Matter. In the 1980's, the pair had won the Nobel Peace Prize for technology which started the company's enormous rise to power. Around this time, Walter left Gretchen with her family that 4th of July weekend and impulsively sold his half of the company for a measly \$5,000 (Gilligan, 2008). During a slew of terrible decisions, Walter unknowingly cost himself a fortune when Gray Matter made billions over the next few years. In the Season 1 episode titled "Gray Matter", Walter caught a glimpse of the affluence he squandered while attending Elliott's birthday party at his lavish home. Seeing this, Walt became envious of Elliott who now possessed a multibillion-dollar net worth and had Gretchen as his wife. To make matters worse, Skyler prematurely and insensitively mentioned Walt's degenerating condition to the Schwartz's who eagerly sought to pay for Walt's treatment.

Despite their painful history, Gretchen still cared for Walter and attempted to persuade him to take the money stating "[A]fter all, half of the company is named after

you” (Gilligan, 2008). This comment referenced the company’s name which combined White and Schwartz (meaning “black” in German) to form Gray Matter. Elliott even offered Walt a job at his old company emphasizing that “they have great health insurance” (Gilligan, 2008). Stubbornly, Walter refused to accept their assistance with his treatment stating that insurance had paid for it after all (which was a lie). At the end of the episode, Walt asks Jesse Pinkman about resuming their meth scheme instead which set the events of the series in motion. Sadly, Walter’s pride shrouded his judgment (Gilligan, 2008). He could have accepted his old friend’s offer of unlimited resources but refused leading to countless deaths, the dissolution of his family, and the tarnishing of his name forever. Walt’s choices directly influenced Jesse’s life as well and almost got him killed several times throughout the series.

After declining the Schwartz’s offer, Walter and Jesse began cooking meth again. Eventually, their operation outgrew its confines and they started to make enormous amounts of money that needed to be liquidated and “purified” through a legitimate business. To do this, Walter and Skyler (once she got involved) bought an old car wash to filter drug money through and evade suspicion. In the Season 2 episode titled “Better Call Saul”, the writers of *Breaking Bad* introduced one of the best characters in the show as the crooked, eccentric lawyer Saul Goodman (Bob Odenkirk) (Gilligan, 2009). Throughout the series, Saul, Walter and Jesse commit egregious levels of white-collar crime by filtering drug money through legitimate business interests in the Albuquerque area. Even Saul uses a local nail salon to launder money and avoid the pursuit of law enforcement. *Breaking Bad’s* adaptation of white-collar crime highlights its role in society through the series’ superb storytelling.

Money Laundering

White-collar crimes can be committed in a variety of ways but the most pertinent for this research and the most common is money laundering. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, money laundering is defined as “the process by which criminals conceal or disguise their proceeds and make them appear to have come from legitimate sources” (2020, para 12). In *Breaking Bad*, all of the main characters (Walter, Skyler, Saul and Jesse) committed money laundering and tax evasion crimes in the series. For instance, Saul “purifies” his money through a local nail salon while Walter uses a car wash that he buys in Season 3 to “cleanse” his ill-gotten proceeds (Gilligan, 2010). While this is obviously fictional, it uncovers the fact that financial crimes are deeply embedded in modern society and happen all the time in plain sight using legitimate businesses. *Breaking Bad*’s depiction of white-collar crime also aligns with reality in the sense that drug money is one of the biggest ways that criminals who engage in white-collar make their money.

While this misconduct receives very little attention, it can have devastating impacts on the global economy because it happens so often. In the article “Money Laundering: Some Facts”, author Friedrich Schneider estimates that the world-wide volume of money laundering may exceed 2.85 trillion dollars (2010). One of the largest contributors to this figure is drug-trafficking which accounts for approximately a trillion dollars worldwide or nine percent of the global trade value (Schneider 2010). In a study conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), researchers indicated that “in 2009, criminal proceeds amounted to 3.6% of global GDP, with 2.7% (or USD 1.6 trillion) being laundered... Using 1998 statistics, these percentages would

indicate that money laundering ranged between USD 590 billion and USD 1.5 trillion. At the time, the lower figure was roughly equivalent to the value of the total output of an economy the size of Spain” (FATF, 2020, para 4-5). Clearly, money laundering can have a tremendous influence on the economy of entire nations. With that said, pursuing those accused of money laundering can serve a dual purpose. Criminals must have resources to continue their operation so if investigators track financial misdoings, they can uncover human trafficking rings, drug kingpins, and even terrorist organizations. This is a fundamental investigative technique used to bring embedded criminal syndicates to justice around the world.

By the end of *Breaking Bad's* fourth season, Walter White and Jesse Pinkman were bringing in millions of dollars from their illegal operation. In fact, Walt was given so much cash that he had to rent a storage unit to house all the money. He was no longer able to hide it at home and was unable to deposit at a bank without arousing suspicion. At that point, Walter's only option was to launder it. To simplify a relatively complex system, money laundering usually incorporates a general three-step process to achieve one specific goal – “purifying” funds received from illegal activity by making the money look like it came from an authentic source. In the first step referred to as “placement”, launderers place their money in various accounts (Levi, 2006). This allows someone to deposit less money into each account instead of depositing one huge sum into a single account that would raise questions about the money's origin. The second step called “layering” occurs when the criminal moves their separated funds to different financial institutions (Levi, 2006). This is often done to obscure the data trail left behind by their deposit. Different banks have various ways of conducting business which makes it harder

to investigate the money's movement. The final portion of the money laundering process is that of "integration" which incorporates the money into legitimate business ventures as a cover for the criminal activity underneath (Levi, 2006). This last step was completed in *Breaking Bad* when Walter bought the car wash and Saul bought the nail salon to filter their money.

Conclusion

In conclusion, financial crimes like money laundering place a significant strain on nations across the globe by destabilizing their economies which can potentially lead to widespread unrest. This is especially disastrous on developing countries that may try to establish a lasting democratic system. *Breaking Bad's* portrayal of financial crime in its fictional realm aligns well with how money laundering works in reality. Drug trafficking substantially contributes to the world's criminal economy just as it did in the series. Not only does this misconduct hurt the economy, money laundering is also used to finance terrorism and other atrocities. Many federal agencies have teams dedicated to targeting organized financial crime, but strictures designed to hinder money laundering should be enforced through preventative laws. At the heart of every despicable action is the money used to fund it.

~ CHAPTER V ~

THESIS CONCLUSION

The critically acclaimed crime drama *Breaking Bad* is revolutionary to say the least. During its run, the writers and actors involved won two Golden Globes and multiple Emmy awards successfully backing the argument that it might be the greatest drama series of this

generation. One would be hard pressed to find a television series that depicts gritty, realistic issues in a more beautiful way. *Breaking Bad* accurately portrays the fallible nature of human beings in extreme circumstances, and yet, it fails to stray from the reality of consequences. On a deeper note, it depicts the emptiness of the thing people strive for above almost anything else in life: wealth. At the end of the series, Walter White had the thing he wanted most. He had more money than he could ever use but had lost everything else in the process, including his family and eventually his life. Walter's greed and selfishness turned him into someone that not even his family recognized. The concept one should take from this is to enjoy the present and focus on things that matter more than money or success.

This research thesis concentrated primarily on the literary and symbolic realism depicted in *Breaking Bad*. The events in the series and the quality of the storytelling allowed plenty of ideas to develop, especially during the second viewing. For this specific project, my research focused on three main sociological aspects that relate to modern culture: methamphetamine abuse, marital fallout and white-collar crime. Methamphetamine abuse has run rampant in certain parts of the U.S. with rates particularly high in California and Tennessee. To combat this epidemic, many federal law enforcement agencies have anti-drug task forces that specialize primarily in drug-related crimes. During the "war on drugs", several of the known ingredients used to make methamphetamine were restricted to "over-the-counter" purchases only. For example, Sudafed or pseudoephedrine was taken off the shelves in 2006 because of its propensity to be chemically altered into crystal meth (Bloom, 2017). As a result, it was replaced by the less effective, but not so easily manipulated Sudafed PE.

While this temporarily slowed the production of the stimulant, methamphetamine “cooks” began to once again circumvent the system by creating the P2P method which diminishes the need for Sudafed in favor of aqueous methylamine (Bloom, 2017). The simplicity of this process makes it very hard to limit and easy to replicate. Once again, *Breaking Bad’s* accuracy aligns with reality. In the seventh episode of Season 1, Jesse and Walt face a shortage of Sudafed due to the stringent regulations of its purchase (Gilligan, 2008). Like many cooks, Walter used his vast chemistry knowledge to figure out how to make meth without Sudafed turning to the P2P method instead. To do this, the duo had to find a source of aqueous methylamine to continue making their product. In the episode, Walt and Jesse put ski masks on and use a thermite reaction to break into a storage facility that housed this key ingredient (Gilligan, 2008). Clumsily rolling the barrel of methylamine away, the two made their escape, but not without being caught on camera in their masks. While the writer’s attention to detail concocts brilliant television, could it be possible that *Breaking Bad’s* viewership learned how to commit this crime just from watching the show? Some sources argue in favor of this theory. In fact, a chemistry teacher in real life was arrested for cooking meth. Ironically, he looked very much like Walter White with his shaved head. Nonetheless, this thought could potentially spark compelling research in the future.

Breaking Bad is riddled with poorly handled relationships, romantic and otherwise. Jesse and Walt’s friendship exudes toxicity because of Walter’s manipulative behavior. Several times, Jesse thinks about leaving the meth business altogether, but eventually gets sucked back in by Walter’s greed each time. One instance of this occurs during Season 2 when Jesse dates Jane Margolis (Kristin Ritter). The two start off as a

happy couple and had serious potential for a long-term relationship but she dies prematurely (Gilligan, 2009). As a recovering addict, Jane gets tempted back into taking heroine when Jesse enters her life. Eventually, Jesse tries to stop her from going too far when she shoots heroine one final time. While unconscious, Jane begins to choke while Jesse is asleep. Walter comes into the room just in time to save her life by rolling her over, but he chooses not to which leads to her death (Gilligan, 2009). In the romantic realm, Walt and Skyler's marriage teeters over the brink of collapse throughout the series. Once again, *Breaking Bad's* authenticity in its writing aligns with common relationship killers outside of the fictional realm.

In this research, there were several elements that played a role in the White's marital demise that are quite common in many failed marriages. In the series, the fact that Walter resorted to cooking meth and broke the law is the most obvious reason for their separation. To a degree, this loosely aligns with a relationship stressor that was uncovered in the PREP study – substance abuse. Although Walt never partook of his meth, just breaking the law and being the source of other's addiction was enough to change their relationship forever. The second biggest factor that played a role in their marriage's demise was the brief domestic abuse displayed in tidbits throughout the series. In one scene early in the show, Walt pins Skyler against the refrigerator and attempts to have sex without her consent. To Skyler, this was a huge indicator that Walter White was a different man now than the one she knew. Closer to the series finale in Season 5, Walter angrily degrades her with expletives over a payphone. The context of the situation reveals that he did this ultimately to protect her, but it still played a lasting role in the destruction of their marriage.

Out of the eleven disastrous elements stated in the PREP study, the White's marriage loosely contained at least seven of them. That being said, I believe that there was an eighth factor not mentioned in the study that significantly contributed to their marital demise as well as many marriages in reality – secret keeping and dishonesty. Even in the first season, Walter began keeping secrets. As these secrets piled up, he eventually had to resort to bold-faced lying to keep his web of dishonesty intact. Especially after the first season, Skyler just was not buying what Walter was telling her and yet he continued to lie to her anyway. Of course, he did not want her to know about or get involved in his double life, but she eventually became so cold that he had to tell her the truth. This tension in the household no doubt had its effects on Walt Jr. as well who was not naïve to the fact that their marriage was suffering. Even before Walter White resorted to cooking meth, viewers could easily tell that their relationship was stagnant to say the least. The factors present in the White's marriage, whether more present or less, are picturesque of many households today that contribute to a higher divorce rate.

The third and final element of this research is that of white-collar crime, specifically money laundering. After Walter White began making his millions from the meth trade, it is not surprising to see him try to evade taxes and conceal his resources using illegal means. Even the side character Ted Beneke committed fraud during the show's run. While this is a central factor in the series, it also points to money laundering's illusive, yet disastrous impact in reality. Currently, sources indicate that money laundering accounts for between 2%-5% of the global GDP (FATF, 2020). This means that criminal organizations involved in human trafficking, drug trafficking, terrorism, rape and murder are being funded by an underground economy the size of an

economically mid-ranged country. This simply cannot be allowed to happen. There are current anti-laundering laws in place, but governments need to continue to be proactive against laundering because it is not a victimless crime.

To conclude, the purpose of this thesis is to draw attention to certain sociological factors present in *Breaking Bad* and relate them to current trends in society. As this research has proven, many of the same factors that are present in the series are also realistic contributors to addiction, the fallout of marriages, and white-collar crimes that fund despicable enterprises. While I highlighted three of the most pertinent nuances, there are still many aspects of the series to be uncovered in future research. *Breaking Bad* is predictable in that it draws upon elements from the famous Greek tragedies – evil deeds do not pay; however, it is unpredictable in how Walter White’s actions reverberate through the entire community in a rippling “butterfly effect” of distress. Viewers of the series know that eventually the whole thing ends poorly, but the unknowns of how and when draw someone in until the final episode. While *Breaking Bad* is loaded with excellent storytelling and superior acting, it has a several takeaways that should influence viewers positively. The first is to treat others with respect and be honest. The second is to prioritize marital relationships and the well-being of one’s family because this effects other people more than we realize, especially children. Lastly, none of us know when our time in this life ends, so use it wisely to create a lasting legacy of kindness and peace.

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