

A Division: *American Son* Film Analysis

Gabriella Campos

Angelo State University

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The movie *American Son* is a 2019 drama film directed by Kenny Leon and written by Christopher Demos-Brown. The film is based on Demos-Brown's Broadway play, also titled *American Son*. *American Son* is centered around a worried mother, Kendra Ellis-Connor, and her husband, Scott Connor, who have just been stationed in the lobby of a police station for their missing son, Jamal Connor. The broken couple face challenges as they try to figure out where their son is and what has happened to him. The film portrays the challenges Black Americans must go through when faced with those who are supposed to be there to protect them, the police. *American Son* discusses the stereotypes, racism, and prejudices that Black Americans face in their everyday life despite the world and people changing. This film manages to showcase the difficulties young Black males, Black people in general, face by being truthful and honest about the harsh society that has been built for Black Americans.

American Son may not be an easy watch for those who might be coming to terms of how harsh and cruel society has been, and still is, toward Black people. The film portrays the theme of how divided our nation is when it comes to the lives of Black people. When watching a film or video of a Black life being taken by authorities, it raises debate and questions about whether that life being taken deserved it or not. The harsh reality strikes the audience as they are able to gather a different perspective on how society works for those who are marginalized and discriminated. This is done in the film by having the mother, Kendra Ellis-Connor, as the center for the heart of the film. The film puts the perspective of a Black mother who knows what it is like to grow up in a society that stereotypes and discriminates a person based on their skin color, and who is willing to do everything to protect her son from a cruel death that seems to be prevalent in the lives of Black people.

A DIVISION: *AMERICAN SON* FILM ANALYSIS

In the film, Officer Larkin is shown to be speaking to Jamal's mother about her son and the information he knows about him. As Officer Larkin begins asking Mrs. Ellis-Connor questions regarding her son, a pattern begins to be shown within Larkin's questions. Some of the questions consist of Larkin asking for a "street name" that Jamal might have and if Jamal has any other criminal records or juvenile records. Each one of Officer Larkin's questions are laced in micro-aggressive assumptions about Jamal due to the one fact that he is a Black male. One of the many concepts discussed in *Understanding the Psychology of Diversity* by Bruce E. Blaine and Kimberly J. McClure Brenchley, is the concept known as "cultural stereotype". Officer Larkin creating such assumptions about Jamal can stem from this cultural stereotype concept as it is described to be "the set of traits and characteristics that people associate with a particular social group" (Blaine and Brenchley, 2021, pg.93). In another scene in *American Son*, Jamal's parents are shown to be having an argument about their son and the way he began to express himself more. Jamal's father, Mr. Connor, being white struggles to understand the way his son is exploring himself. Jamal's mother tells Jamal's father that Jamal is going through an "awakening" about his own skin color. Mr. Connor continues to question the meaning of what exactly Mrs. Ellis-Connor means by this awakening to which she responds by listing the names "Philando Castile, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice", those who were wrongfully murdered at the hands of the police. A similar concept discussed in *Understanding the Psychology of Diversity*, is "racism in the criminal justice system" (Blaine and Brenchley, 2021, pg. 105-108). This section within the textbook manages to discuss the wrong-doings and unfair treatment Black people have faced under authoritative figures such as court or police stoppings.

The creation of stereotypes has been introduced to further separate and create different assumptions about others. The first scene mentioned about the interaction between Mrs. Ellis-

A DIVISION: *AMERICAN SON* FILM ANALYSIS

Connor and Officer Larkin is a good explanation showcasing cultural stereotypes (Blaine and Brenchley, 2021, pg.93). Within their interaction, Officer Larkin creates assumptions about Jamal knowing that Jamal is a Black male. These cultural stereotypes that Larkin is associating with Jamal is that because he is a Black male, he must also have a “street name”, a stereotype that is seen amongst the Black community claiming that Black males are in gangs. Larkin continues to ask Mrs. Ellis-Connor Jamal having any criminal or juvenile records despite Mrs. Ellis-Connor explaining beforehand that her son is a prestigious student. This relates to the cultural stereotype that Black students are “lazy” and “incompetent” leading them to act out and cause trouble in school and society. In the second scene mentioned, the argument between Mrs. Ellis-Connor and Mr. Connor is a great example of the difference between the way two different races may view a situation. It also shows one of the many examples of racism within the criminal justice system explained on pages 105-108 in *Understanding the Psychology of Diversity* by Blaine and Brenchley (2021). The textbook presents multiple examples such as Black people being "far more likely than White drivers to be stopped and ticketed for seatbelt violations" and Black Americans being “imprisoned at a rate over six times higher than Whites..” (Blaine and Brenchley, 2021, pg. 105). The argument between the married couple is a good illustration of racism within the criminal justice system as Mrs. Ellis-Connor explains to her husband on how prevalent it is for Black males to be harmed by the criminal justice system. The act of murdering and harming Black individuals is the reality that Jamal is beginning to recognize as a Black male.

The film *American Son* (2019) shows the harsh and raw reality that many Black people may go through at least once in their life. This film discusses the different perspectives and division presented on the way Black people are treated in the criminal justice system and society as they are subjected to both racism and cultural stereotypes.

A DIVISION: *AMERICAN SON* FILM ANALYSIS

References

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