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## **The Portrayal of Racial Minorities on Prime Time Television: A Replication of the Mastro and Greenberg Study a Decade Later**

Exploring how racial minorities are portrayed on television is valuable for two primary reasons (Mastro & Greenberg 2000). First, it is socially important to document how minorities are depicted on television as well as how such portrayals have changed over time. Second, as a cultural artifact, television reaches a wide audience. Many maintain that the way racial minorities are represented contributes to stereotypical images, whether positive or negative, that viewers develop (Potter, 1994; Potter & Chang, 1990; Bodenhausen et al., 1995; Devine & Baker, 1991; Persson & Musher-Eizenman, 2003; and Ford, 1997). As Signorielli (2001) observed, television has become the “nation’s primary story-teller” (36).

This study replicates earlier work by Mastro & Greenberg (2000) who explored the representation and depiction of Caucasian, African American/black and Latino characters on prime time television. Mastro & Greenberg (2000) found that, compared to Caucasians and African Americans, Latinos were under-represented on primetime television, where they comprised only 3% of television characters. The Mastro & Greenberg (2000) study is important because they reported that Latino television characters were not as negatively stereotyped as African American television charac-

ters. While they found more African American representation on television, the roles and behaviors portrayed were negative characterizations (see too Weigel et al., 1995; Greenberg & Brand, 1994; Ford, 1997). Specifically, Latino characters were generally respected and the least lazy of any group, while African Americans were the laziest, least respected, and dressed most provocatively (see too Fyfe, 1999). The conversations of African American characters fared better in that they were most relaxed and most spontaneous, while the conversations of Latinos were least articulate, most accented, and least spontaneous. The work of this article replicates the earlier study by Mastro & Greenberg (2000) by exploring the representation, appearance, conversational characteristics and personal characteristics among Caucasian, Latino and African American characters on prime time television a decade later.

Mastro & Greenberg's (2000) work is notable because Latino representation was included in better understanding minority portrayal on prime time television. According to the U.S. Census, Latinos are the nation's largest ethnic or race minority as well as the fastest growing minority group (2008). Today, 15% of the U.S. population is Latino and one of every two people added to the population is Latino (U.S. Census, 2008). The U.S. Census estimates that by 2050, a fourth of the population will be Latino. While the size of the Latino population grows, research attention, notably representation and portrayal on television, lags. Therefore, it is important to track media images and how they have changed over time.

According to Nielsen Media, CBS, NBC, Fox, and ABC remained the top viewed networks on prime time television which were broadcast over the air (2009). CBS came in first place with 5.81 million prime time, with ABC trailing at 5.51 million prime time viewers. Over the period of this study, cable and satellite programs, as well as other niche networks, have competed for viewers; however, the major networks remain in the lead for the television viewing audience in general (Nielsen Media, 2009). Still, other outlets, such as the Spanish language network's Univision, which claims 3.21 million viewers, have changed the landscape of the media and television (Nielsen Media, 2009). Nevertheless, we argue that the images viewers see on major over-the-air channels continue to have the potential to impact how minority and majority group members are perceived in the wider society.

## Background

Early work by Goffman (1974) posited that media images and messages work as a cognitive filter to help individuals make sense of the world. Others (Tan, Ling & Theng, 2002) have argued that television has the “potential to reach the most private realms of the human psyche” (853). If television images contribute to stereotypes, Graves’ (1999) finding that racial minorities were generally negatively stereotyped on television is troublesome (see too Mastro & Robinson, 2000). Such negative stereotypes could shape how viewers think about racial minorities (see Graves, 1999).

Gerbner et al. (2002) argued that television continuously feeds “mainstream” views over a period of time. Proposing a cultivation hypothesis, Gerbner et al. (1994) posited that television images inform public opinions about the social world (see too Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Specifically, cultivation theory proposed that heavy exposure to media, television in particular, shaped how viewers saw the real world. What such viewers deem as appropriate role portrayals, values and ideologies are, over time, increasingly in line with those delivered on screen (Gerbner et al. 2007). Likewise, Robinson et al. (2007) argued that media images, along with lived experience, significantly shaped children’s feelings of others.

Content analyzing animated Disney film images, Robinson et al. (2007) maintained that media images can “form, change, and reinforce stereotypes” (203; Editor’s note: See Alexander M. Bruce, *Studies in Popular Culture* 30.1). Even if one does not accept the proposition that such images shape mental formations, Berg (1990) found that images seen on television validated existing stereotypes of the viewing audience and gave them additional credibility (see too Potter, 1994). Further, Greenberg (1988) suggested that certain images, particularly those that stand out to the viewing audience, may be more important in shaping racial attitudes than the mere number of minorities characters shown.

Bodenhausen et al. (1995) found that exposure to media images of successful African Americans may have positive effects on the racial attitudes of whites. Specifically, Vrij et al. (1996) argued that television images may change prejudiced racial attitudes. They found three characteristics were critical for such change to occur. First, television images

needed to stress similarities between majority and minority group members. Further, these images needed to include multiple minority group members, not merely a token minority group member. Finally, the anti-discrimination message should be clear in the images shown (see Vrij et al., 1996). If minority characters were presented in a positive way, according to the five-point Likert scale used in our content analysis, we examined the explicitness of such positive characterizations. Again Vrij et al. (1996) argued that these factors were essential components of media portrayals of minority characters if negative racial stereotyping is to be lessened.

## Method

Prime time television shows (8-10 p.m. EST) were content analyzed during a two-week period beginning in early March 2007. During this period, a one-week sample of all shows and characters shown on ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX was recorded and content analyzed (sports and news programs were excluded from the analysis). Thus, one complete prime time week (Monday to Friday) for each of the four networks was content analyzed. Our unit of analysis was the television character that appeared on these prime time shows, and both major and minor characters were included. The use of a one-week sample followed the pattern established by others who have maintained this type of sample provides a reliable portrait of television portrayals (see Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Pfau, Muller & Garrow, 1995).

Coded variables replicated those used by Mastro & Greenberg (2000), who originally selected variables “to reflect the frequency and prominence of minority portrayals” (p. 693). These variables, they argued, were the attributes that past literature found “as primary components of image formation and stereotyping” (Mastro and Greenberg, 2000:p. 693; see also Berg, 1990). Coded variables included: race, age, network, income level, gender, and role prominence. If characters were major or main characters, those essential to the plot or story line, then their *role* prominence is coded as 1. Other characters were considered minor characters (0). Background characters who appeared on screen but were non-essential (people on the street or characters seen in the background in public areas) were excluded. *Race* is operationalized as Caucasian, African American, Latino/

Hispanic, Asian American and all others. This categorization is in line with new Census race categories as well. *Age* is coded as less than 10, 10-20, 20s, 30s, and 40+. Perceived *income* level is coded as low (<\$20,000 per year), middle (\$20,000-\$70,000), or high (over \$70,000).

Next, we coded four sets of variables, again in line with Mastro and Greenberg (2000), on a five-point scale (bipolar adjective scales) (p. 694). Again, these items were originally selected because they reflected “an attribute or characteristic which has been associated with an ethnic stereotype” (p. 694). Five *physical characteristics* are content analyzed: weight (thin-obese), height (short-tall), hair color (blonde-black), skin color (fair-dark skin), and accent (no accent-heavy accent). A second set of six variables content analyzed *behavioral characteristics*: articulate-inarticulate, quiet-loud, passive-aggressive, lazy-motivated, ridiculed-respected and dumb-smart. Next, we coded a set of six variables to capture *appearance differences*: excessive makeup-no makeup, excessive accessories-no accessories, provocative attire-conservative attire, casual attire-professional attire, disheveled-well-groomed, and dirty-clean.

Finally, we note attributes that pick up *conversational characteristics*, whether the conversation was tense-relaxed and/or premeditated-spontaneous. To ensure reliability in coding, two coders content analyzed each television program. Intercoder reliability was high (89% agreement across all categories). When there was a disagreement with regard to coding, coders came to an agreement as to the best way to categorize the characterization. Clearly, coding television images is subjective as is how viewers see such images on screen.

## Results

Most (74%) of our sample was comprised of Caucasian television actors, 16% of prime-time actors were African American, 5% were Latino, <2% were Asian Americans and <3% were of another racial category. In their work, Mastro & Greenberg (2000) also found that 16% of prime-time television actors were African American; however, in their work only 3% of such actors were Latino. Over a period of ten years, the racial representation of television actors has not changed significantly. White actors continue to be in a distinct majority position, African American repre-

sentation is in line with their percent of the U.S. population and the representation of Latinos continues to be in a distinct minority.

Like Mastro & Greenberg (2000), we did not find a significant difference by race, gender, or income. Mastro & Greenberg (2000) found that female characters, regardless of race, were in a minority position (around 37%) among prime time television actors. Our results show that female actors were better represented in prime time—especially among African American actors. Three fourths of African American actors on prime time, a decade later, were female, while 64% of Latino characters and 56% of white characters were female (see Table 1). The vast majority (74% and 73% respectively) of white and Latino characters fell in the middle income category; however, only 67% of African American characters were located here.

In their work, Mastro & Greenberg (2000) found Latinos were significantly younger than other characters. We did not observe significant age differences by race. In our sample, approximately a third of all characters were in their 30s. On the other hand, Mastro & Greenberg (2000) did not observe a significant difference by race and whether the television character was in a major or minor role. Our results show that the vast majority (91%) of Latino characters were portrayed in major television roles, along with 77% of white characters; however, only 61% of African American characters were observed in this role ( $X^2 = 5.43$ ;  $p = .06$ ).

Next, we explored differences in appearance, conversational style and personal attributes among racial groups. Mastro & Greenberg (2000) found significant differences by race in four of their six appearance characteristics. They found that Latinos wore more accessories and jewelry than whites and that they were the best groomed. Alternatively, African Americans were least well groomed and were more provocative in dress than white characters. A decade later, we found no significant differences by race on any of these six measures. Likewise, Mastro & Greenberg (2000) found significant conversational differences by race. They found that Latinos were most tense and least spontaneous especially compared to blacks. As was true for appearance characteristics, a decade later we found no significant differences by race with regard to these two conversational characteristics (tension and premeditation).

Finally, we content analyzed 11 personal characteristics. Mastro & Greenberg (2000) found significant differences by race for eight of these measures while we found significant differences for six personal characteristics. Mastro & Greenberg (2000) found significant race differences for height, hair, skin color, accent, articulation, respect, aggression, and laziness. We found significant differences for all of these variables save height, aggression, and laziness; however, unlike Mastro & Greenberg (2000), we found significant race differences by intelligence. Mastro & Greenberg (2000) argued that significant race differences by these personal characteristics was an indication of straightforward stereotyping.

Our results show that Latinos continued to be portrayed as having a heavier accent than other racial groups. Most (64%) Latino characters have a heavy accent; however, few (<1%) white or black (3%) characters were portrayed in this way ( $X^2 = 139.56$ ;  $p < .0001$ ). Likewise, the trend continues that Latino characters were portrayed as the least articulate of all television characters. A fourth of all black characters were depicted as most articulate along with 30% of white characters; however, no Latino characters fell in this category ( $X^2 = 25.68$ ;  $p = .003$ ). Not surprisingly, we noted that Latino and African American characters had the darkest hair ( $X^2 = 79.66$ ;  $p < .0001$ ) and African Americans had the darkest skin color with Latinos intermediate and whites the fairest ( $X^2 = 226.99$ ;  $p < .0001$ ). Unlike Mastro and Greenberg (2000), we found significant race difference by intelligence. Half (52%) of all African American actors were depicted as the most intelligent compared to 43% of whites and 27% of Latinos. At the same time, more African Americans (15%) and Latinos (18%) were depicted as least intelligent compared to <4% of whites ( $X^2 = 23.86$ ;  $p = .02$ ). This finding offers limited support for the idea of counter-stereotyping; however, the fact that so many more minority characters were deemed least intelligent compared to whites is of concern.

Mastro and Greenberg (2000) found three relationships that ran counter to traditional stereotypes. They found that Latinos were the least ridiculed (or most respected) characters shown on prime-time—a counter-stereotypical finding. A decade later; however, we found a reversal of fortune as Latino characters were most likely to be ridiculed and least likely to be respected compared to either white or black characters ( $X^2 = 30.41$ ;  $p = .002$ ). Mastro and Greenberg (2000) also found that Latino characters

were least lazy and most motivated and that African American characters were least aggressive especially compared to whites. Our work found no significant differences by laziness or aggression. Thus, our work found no counter-stereotypical findings by race. In fact, with regard to being respected, our work shows that Latinos were negatively portrayed in this respect.

Finally, we content analyzed whether television actors were depicted as moral-immoral and whether or not they were portrayed as more admirable or despicable. Our work shows that significantly more African Americans and Latinos were shown as immoral (9% and 18% respectively) compared to only 2% of white television actors ( $X^2 = 22.12$ ;  $p = .04$ ). Likewise, significantly more African American and Latino characters were portrayed as despicable, rather than admirable, on television (9% and 18% respectively) compared to only 3% of white television actors ( $X^2 = 22.93$ ;  $p = .02$ ). This finding, coupled with the fading of counter-stereotypes observed by Mastro and Greenberg (2000) ten years ago, is troublesome.

### **Discussion**

This work replicated the earlier work of Mastro and Greenberg (2000), who explored the portrayal of racial minorities on prime time television. Significant race differences in appearance and conversational style, observed by Mastro & Greenberg (2000), were not present a decade later. Unlike the earlier work, our results show that the vast majority of Latino (91%) and white (77%) characters were in main roles, while only 61% of African Americans were depicted in such a television role. Thus, the few Latino actors that appeared in prime time were in main roles. While African American characters were three times more likely than Latinos to appear on television, they were more likely to be depicted in minor roles. Still, the sheer representation of minority characters is lacking—especially Latino and other minority characters. Only 5% of all television actors observed were Latino, up only two percentage points from the prior study a decade earlier. The representation of African Americans remained constant over this time period at 16% of all television prime time actors. Thus, while some similarities appeared between characters, regardless of race, salient differences were present as well.

Mastro & Greenberg (2000) found counter-stereotypical images for three of the 11 personal characteristics they content analyzed. They

found that their Latino characters were the least lazy and the least ridiculed (or most respected) among prime time television characters. Further, blacks were least aggressive, especially compared to white characters. Vrij et al. (1996) argued that such positive characteristics of minority characters were essential to diminish negative stereotyping by race. Unfortunately, we did not find such counter-stereotypes in our work. We found no significant differences by race with regard to being lazy or the display of aggression. Notably, we observed that more Latinos were ridiculed than was true for either whites or blacks (18%, <1%, and 0% respectively). Both African American and white characters were most likely to be respected and least likely to be ridiculed. Thus, if there was a counter-stereotype in our data, it was that black characters were frequently (45%) portrayed with the most respect along with white characters (36%). However, we posit that it is troubling that significantly more Latino (18%) and African American (9%) characters were portrayed as immoral compared to white (2%) characters. This coupled with the fact that significantly more Latino (18%) and black (9%) characters were viewed as despicable television characters, rather than admired ones, compared to white (3%) characters does nothing to counter negative racial stereotypes.

Like Mastro & Greenberg (2000) we found significant differences by race with regard to hair, skin color, accent and articulation. Notably, no Latino characters were portrayed as most articulate; however, approximately a fourth of black characters and 30% of white characters were shown in this way. Unlike Mastro and Greenberg (2000), we found that black and Latino characters were significantly more likely to be shown as being less intelligent compared to whites. Only 3% of all white characters were perceived as least intelligent compared to 15% of blacks and 18% of Latino characters. At the same time, the majority of African American television characters were portrayed as most intelligent (52% of all African American characters) compared to 43% of whites and only 27% of Latinos. One could argue that these images send mixed messages rather than the clear positive stereotype that Vrij et al. (1996) maintain is necessary to dismantle negative racial stereotyping.

The counter-stereotypical racial images Mastro and Greenberg (2000) observed were lacking in our sample. If positive characterizations are essential to lessening negative racial stereotyping, then prime time tele-

vision is not providing such portrayals of minority characters. Rather, viewers still see Latinos as having heavy accents, with little articulation skills, and as generally not well respected—especially compared to either African Americans or whites. It seems that Latino representations have lost the most ground over this ten-year period. Viewers of prime-time television see few images to dent any negative stereotypes they may harbor about racial minorities; however, positive images of white characters continue. White prime-time television characters are solidly middle income, fair with regard to skin and hair color, devoid of a heavy accent, articulate, respected, viewed as moral and admirable characters.

Media images contribute to both positive and negative social stereotypes. Race differences in appearance and conversational style have significantly diminished over time; however, the representation of minorities on prime time has not changed over time. What message do viewers take away from media exposure when so few characters are Latinos? Do they notice that many of the African American characters on prime time appear in minor roles? Counter stereotypes observed by Mastro & Greenberg (2000) were not as marked ten years later. Now, of the few Latinos one sees on prime time, significantly more are ridiculed compared to other characters. On a positive note, African American characters were depicted, along with whites, as respected and intelligent characters. This is negated, though, by more minority characters, both Latino and African American, being portrayed as more immoral and despicable compared to whites.

Why, academics and viewers alike might ask, do significant differences remain in the depiction of prime time characters by race? Why hasn't the media done more in producing counter stereotypes of racial minorities to help diminish race stereotyping and social prejudices? Even if one does not accept that the media can reduce such social beliefs, why do the negative minority stereotypes continue? If Goffman (1974) correctly posited that such images are cognitive filters and shape popular meaning, what responsibility must the media accept in the creation and perpetuation of negative racial stereotyping? We argue that the depiction of minority characters on prime time has changed little over recent time. Counter stereotypical images have faded for Latinos and mixed media messages exist for African American characters. Given that media images are viewed

not only by a national but by a growing international audience, we argue that the media must wrestle with these constructed images.

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**Table 1. All Characters by Race**

	<b>Caucasian</b> (157)	<b>Latino</b> (11)	<b>African American</b> (33)
<b>Income</b>			
% middle	74%	73%	67%
<b>Age</b>			
% in 30s	34%	36%	33%
<b>Role</b>			
% major	77%	91%	61%
<b>Gender</b>			
% female	56%	64%	73%

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