

# A Social Cognitive Approach to Studying Racial Stereotyping in the Mass Media

*Travis L. Dixon, Assistant Professor, Communication Studies Faculty Associate, Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan*

Although there have been examples of counter-stereotypical programming, such as The Cosby Show, it can reasonably be argued that television still frequently portrays Blacks in a stereotypical manner (Dates & Barlow, 1990; Evuleocha & Ugbah, 1989; Graves, 1993). Dates and Barlow (1990), for example, have reported that Blacks are often portrayed as less competent than Whites and have less “serious” roles than their White counterparts. Critics argue that these stereotypes can have the effect of communicating misinformation about Blacks. This misinformation is then used by Whites to make social judgments about African Americans (Graves, 1993).

Four primary stereotypes of African Americans have pervaded the airwaves of both television and film since their conception. The first is the “mammy” who represents a good wholesome caretaker of Whites, yet a mean and insensitive presence in her own family life. The second is the “coon”, who represents Black ineptness at living successfully in White society. The third is the “Tom”, who is an apologist for slavery. The final is the “Buck”, who represents the violent and uncontrollable Black. According to several scholars, these stereotypes have a long history and are part of a social hierarchy which denigrates Blacks in American society (Bogle, 1990; Seiter, 1986).

## **Documenting the Media Stereotypes**

Although critical and cultural studies researchers have discussed the role of stereotyping from a qualitative perspective (Seiter, 1986), it is important to review the empirical documentation of Black media portrayals in content analyses. Doing this serves two purposes. First, one can gain an understanding of what depictions of African Americans actually exist on television. Second, one can gain an understanding of how often such depictions are found on television. The results of content analyses contain a count or frequency of the number of times a particular image is produced on television. In addition, content analyses rely on sampling procedures that allow the researcher to accurately generalize to the population of television programs that feature African Americans. Below the studies which document the presence of these stereotypes on entertainment programming are examined. Following this, studies which examine the role of news and reality programming in perpetuating stereotypes are reviewed.

## **Black Stereotypes in Entertainment Programming**

There are only a handful of studies I could locate that content analyzed racial stereotypes on entertainment television. Although few in number, these past studies by mass media scholars offer some insight into the nature and frequency of Black depictions on television.

One of the landmark studies was conducted by Lemon (1977) who performed a content analysis on two-person interactions between Blacks and Whites to determine whether one racial group dominates or if the groups interact as equals. In addition, she investigated whether race dominance patterns were related to several program and character variables.

Lemon (1977) found that Blacks had more dominant portrayals in situation comedies than Whites, and that they were unfavorably portrayed in crime dramas. Blacks composed roughly 36% of major and minor interactants in situation comedies and 7% of those in crime dramas. She also reported that Blacks were somewhat less likely to be of high status in crime dramas than Whites. On these programs they were more likely to be portrayed as brutes (i.e. criminals) or as inept coons (i.e. not able to adapt to White society).

Another study was undertaken by Reid (1979) who investigated the behavior of Black and White characters on comedy programs to determine whether there were differences in their portrayal. Reid's (1979) results indicated that Black women were portrayed as more loud and boisterous than White women when interacting with their family members. This type of behavior by the Black women characters is reminiscent of the "mammy" stereotype (i.e. mother disrespectful to other family members).

Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg (1980) undertook a study to document the physical and social characteristics of the portrayal of Blacks on commercial television and to examine the context in which Blacks are portrayed. They found that Blacks are largely segregated on comedy shows where they are stereotyped largely as coon-like caricatures who dress in a "flashy" manner and cannot hold down a steady job.

Another study conducted by Greenberg and Neundorf (1980) indicated that television programs overrepresented Black mothers and underrepresented Black fathers. In addition, Black families had a greater probability of being in conflict with one another- Black family antagonistic interactions accounted for 17% of their interactions but only 11% of White family member interactions. This study suggests that Black family interactions are rife with conflict which is often precipitated by "mammy-like" mother characters.

### **News and Reality Programming**

One could argue that news and reality programming contain even more stinging portrayals of Black stereotypes than entertainment programming. One of the most significant problems with news and other reality programming is that they appear to portray African Americans as criminals and "trouble-makers" on these television shows. A few studies have examined depictions of Blacks on local television news and reality-based programming and suggest that Blacks are typically depicted as aggressive criminals or "brutes" (i.e. dangerous and destructive Blacks) (Entman, 1992; Oliver, 1994;).

Entman (1992) performed a content analysis on 55 days of local television news in Chicago in which he investigated the differences in portrayals of Blacks and Whites in crime stories. He found that Blacks accused of crime were much more likely than Whites to be shown in the grip of a restraining police officer and were more likely than Whites to have mug shots of them shown.

Oliver (1994) investigated the extent to which Blacks were represented as criminals on reality-based programs including Cops, Top Cops, America's Most Wanted, FBI, The Untold Story, and American Detective. Oliver found a small but statistically significant overrepresentation of Blacks as criminals compared to crime reports. Furthermore, Whites were overrepresented and Blacks were underrepresented as police officers on reality based programs compared to labor statistics.

## **Summary of Documentation**

The content analyses reviewed in this section suggest that historically, depictions of African Americans have relied to some degree on negative stereotypes, particularly the “mammy” and the “coon” on entertainment programming, and perhaps more disturbing, the “brute” (i.e. criminal) on news and reality programming. In order to understand what effect exposure to these stereotypes might have on people, it is important to examine the psychological mechanisms that may shape people's perceptions. Stereotype theories of social cognition provide a paradigm for investigating these mechanisms.

## **Social Cognition and Stereotyping**

The social cognition approach conceives of stereotypes as belief systems characterizing various social groups (e.g., Hamilton, Stroessner, & Driscoll, 1994). This perspective views stereotypes as cognitive structures or categories similar to other social schemas (Hamilton & Trolie, 1986). These cognitive structures affect the encoding and processing of information, particularly information pertaining to outgroup members.

The implication of the social cognition perspective is that the only way to stop stereotyping is to prevent the cognitive mechanism from operating or undermine its influence (e.g., Devine, 1989; Hamilton, Stroessner, & Driscoll, 1994). This is a difficult task, especially when there is evidence to suggest stereotype activation is automatic (Devine, 1989). Hamilton and Trolie (1986) suggest that it is essential to attend to the cognitive processes involved in the stereotyping process in order to discourage the use of stereotypes.

## **Social Cognition, the Stereotyping Processes and the Role of Television**

According to scholars working in the area of social cognition, the information that we gain from the mass media results in the production of stereotypes that help us simplify our environment. The media may act as a sociocultural agent or source of stereotypical information about African Americans (Hamilton, Stroessner, & Driscoll, 1994). We might view the media as a source of social learning that essentially teaches and reinforces certain ideas about Blacks. This learning function may be similar to the way that the media reinforces notions of violence (Wilson, Kunkel, Linz, Potter, Donnerstein, Smith, Blumenthal, & Gray, 1997; Hamilton & Trolie, 1986). Hamilton and Trolie (1986) argue that a learning process exists, whereby beliefs about Blacks develop from media exposure.

The cognitive processing of African Americans as a group in stereotypical ways may be related to consistently seeing them in stereotypical roles on television over a long period of time. If Blacks on television are portrayed as prone to conflict and as inept “coons”, then the social cognition approach would suggest that our mental categories involving Blacks might develop from these depictions.

## **Social Cognition, Television, and Intergroup Encounters**

The development of these cognitive categories from the media may have important implications for the way that outgroup members encode and retrieve information about African Americans. If Whites encounter Blacks on television who are depicted as “mammies” and “brutes,” then they will come to think of Blacks outside of the television environment in these stereotypical terms. Linville and Fisher (1986) suggest that Whites who obtain their

information about Blacks primarily from the media will be more likely to overestimate the number of Blacks who are entertainers and athletes, and to underestimate the proportion who are in other occupations, such as white collar jobs. As Blacks become associated with a stereotypical characteristic by way of the media, Whites come to anticipate the presence of that characteristic in their social interactions with African Americans.

Although it has been argued in this section that the media contributes to the creation and maintenance of stereotypes through processes that are explicated within the social cognition approach, it is also possible that the media can change stereotypes. This possibility is examined below.

### **Altering Intergroup Encounters by Portraying Media Counter-Stereotypes**

The most intuitive hypothesis that one may have for eradicating stereotypes is to provide examples to the ingroup of outgroup members who strongly disconfirm the stereotype. For example, if one is trying to discourage a White person from thinking that Blacks are athletic types rather than scholars, one might try to expose them to examples of great African American scholars who lack athletic ability. However, the goodness of fit principle, articulated by social cognition scholars, suggests that strongly disconfirming examples might lead to the inadvertent maintenance of the stereotypical category (Rothbart & John, 1985). The goodness of fit principles suggests that viewing strongly disconfirming members of a category sustains the category because these people will be classified or assigned to a new category. For example, an affluent Black might be re-categorized by ingroup members as "middle class" instead of simply Black.

According to Rothbart and John (1985), in order for the disconfirming outgroup member to be effective in discouraging the use of the stereotype, the observer must relate the outgroup member to the superordinate category that represents the disconfirming member's group (such as Blacks or African Americans). In other words, the disconfirming group member must be seen as a true representative of the outgroup, instead of an exception to the outgroup. The disconfirmer must be associated by an observer with his or her outgroup in order to effectively deter the use of the stereotype. Furthermore, the degree to which a disconfirming group member will be associated with a category is a function of the fit between the category and the outgroup member (Rothbart & John, 1985).

Based on the goodness of fit principle, in order to disconfirm the stereotype, an individual cannot be a strong disconfirmer. Otherwise this person's behavior would not be generalized to other outgroup members. The solution is to provide observers with examples of moderately disconfirming members of an outgroup (Rothbart & John, 1985). These "moderate disconfirmer" should continue to be both associated with the larger category and at the same time should provide information about the outgroup that is inconsistent with the stereotype.

The goodness of fit principle suggests that counter-stereotypical Black portrayals in the media that feature strongly disconfirming outgroup members might do little to discourage Whites' use of stereotypes about African Americans. For example The Cosby Show's middle-class characters might not be associated with the general category of Blacks and, therefore, the disconfirming information contained in the program is not effective at eradicating stereotypes about African Americans. On the other hand, shows that feature moderately disconfirming characters such as Roc, which features a garbage man with good

character, might do more to discourage the use of stereotypes by observers because the characters would be associated with the general category of Blacks.

### **Incorporating the Social Cognition Perspective into a Communication Research Program**

While the social cognition approach helps us understand the mental processes associated with stereotyping, the communication perspective focuses our attention on the role of mass media messages in contributing to stereotyping. Given the conclusions outlined above, there are three major areas that should be explored in a program of research that incorporates both the social cognition and communication approach. The first is a content analysis that investigates whether or not there have been any changes in the frequency and intensity of African American stereotypes on entertainment television since the advent of the 1990's. The second is an investigation of how the media may be involved in stereotype creation through associative processes such as illusory correlation. The third is an investigation of how the media may be used to change stereotypes.

#### **Black Media Images in the 1990's**

Given that the content analyses of entertainment programming featuring African Americans is severely dated, it is possible that Black media imagery may have undergone change since the advent of the 1990's. In order to investigate this possibility, a new content analysis of African American portrayals seems warranted. Such a study should attempt to replicate some of the earlier findings of communication scholars who suggested that Blacks are largely segregated on situation comedies where they are depicted as "mammies" and "coons" who are likely to engage other family members in conflict. It is possible that more positive images have emerged. However, the frequency of these portrayals needs to be documented.

#### **Media and Stereotype Creation**

After this content analysis is complete, research should then be conducted to understand the influence of the psychological mechanisms related to the media's role in the creation and maintenance of racial stereotypes. Scholars using the social cognition approach argue that the media may operate as a sociocultural agent that provides information that leads to the creation of stereotypes (Hamilton & Troler, 1986). In addition, they have suggested that illusory correlation (i.e. the association of a group with a characteristic when little or no relationship exists) may be part of the process that leads to stereotype creation and maintenance. However, no study to the author's knowledge has examined this associative process when the media is the primary agent of information about both the group and the stereotypic characteristic. A program of research that examines how messages propagated in the media contribute to such an association would be beneficial. Some of the questions that would need to be answered include: 1) What message characteristics found in the media about an outgroup and some trait produce an illusory correlation effect? 2) Does salience of the television message make a difference? 3) What characteristics of the mass media message affect learning and recall of information about outgroup members?

#### **Using the Media to Change Stereotypes**

The investigation of stereotype change through the media is yet another important prong of this research program. The contact hypothesis assumes that the information gained from

an interaction with an outgroup member will result in stereotype disconfirmation. Television might be a stand-in for interpersonal contact in the sense that viewing television results in the transference of information (Graves, 1993). Television's role as a medium of contact with outgroup members is extremely important considering that many Whites lack other forms of contact with Blacks.

In order to test the hypothesis that moderately disconfirming outgroup members will have a larger impact on stereotype change, an experiment could be performed whereby White participants will be exposed to either a strongly disconfirming, moderately disconfirming, or confirming TV segment containing Blacks, and then they will be allowed to make trait judgments about a Black target. It would be expected that moderately disconfirming members would provide the most stereotype change because they would continue to be associated with the category of Blacks yet they would not represent the prototypical stereotype.

### Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, content analyses have revealed that Blacks are often segregated to situation comedy programs where they are mostly portrayed as "mammies" and "coons" who are likely to initiate conflict with other family members. African Americans are also portrayed as "brute" criminals on news and reality programming.

This paper argues that theories of social cognition focus on the underlying psychological mechanisms related to the media's role in stereotyping. Specifically, social cognition is important because it explains the role of mental processes used in stereotype creation, maintenance, and dissolution. Finally, it was concluded that our knowledge on this topic can best be advanced by combining the research approaches of social cognition and communication in a new research program. Specifically, researchers should undertake a new content analysis of African American television portrayals, examine the role of the illusory correlation in a media context, and explore the role of the media in discouraging the activation of stereotypes.

### References

- Baptista-Fernandez, P., & Greenberg, B.S. (1980). The context, characteristics and communication of blacks on television. In B.S. Greenberg (Ed.), Life on television, (pp. 13-21). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Bogle, D. (1990). Toms, coons, mulattos, mammies, and bucks. New York: Continuum.
- Dates, J., & Barlow W. (1990). Split image: African Americans in the mass media. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.
- Devine, P.G. (1989). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56, 5-18.
- Entman, R. (1992). Blacks in the news: Television, modern racism, and cultural change. Journalism Quarterly, 69, 341-361.
- Evuleocha, S.U. & Ugbah, S.D. (1989). Stereotypes, counter-stereotypes, and black television images in the 1990s. The Western Journal of Black Studies, 13(4), 197-205.

Graves, S. N. (1993). Television, the portrayal of African-Americans, and the development of children's attitudes. In G.L. Berry & J.K. Asamen (Eds.), Children & television: Images in a changing sociocultural world, (pp. 179-190). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Greenberg, B.S. & Neuendorf, K.A. (1980). Black family interactions on television. In B.S. Greenberg (Ed.), Life on television, (pp. 173-181). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Hamilton, D.L., Stroessner, S.J., & Driscoll, D.M. (1994). Social cognition and the study of stereotyping. In P.G. Devine, D.L. Hamilton, & T.M. Ostrom (Eds.), Social cognition: Impact on social psychology (pp. 292-323). San Diego, CA: Academic Press, Inc.

Hamilton, D.L., & Trolie, T.K. (1986). Stereotypes and stereotyping: An overview of the cognitive approach. In J. Dovidio & S. Gaertner (Eds.), Prejudice, discrimination, and racism (pp. 127-163). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Lemon, J. (1977). Women and Blacks on prime-time television. Journal of Communication, 27(4), 70-79.

Linville, P.W., & Fischer, G.W. (1986). Stereotyping and perceived distributions of social characteristics: An application to ingroup-outgroup perception. In J. Dovidio & S. Gaertner (Eds.), Prejudice, discrimination, and racism (pp. 165-208). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Oliver, M.B. (1994). Portrayals of crime, race, and aggression in "reality-based" police shows: A content analysis. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 38(2), 179-192.

Reid, P. (1979). Racial stereotyping on television: A comparison of the behavior of both black and white television characters. Journal of Applied Psychology, 64, 464 - 471.

Rothbart, M., & John, O.P. (1985). Social categorization and behavioral episodes: A cognitive analysis of the effects of intergroup contact. Journal of Social Issues, 41(3), 81-104.

Seiter, E. (1986). Stereotypes and the media: A re-evaluation. Journal of Communication, 36(2), 14-26.

Wilson, B.J., Kunkel, D., Linz, D., Potter, J., Donnerstein, E., Smith, S.L., Blumenthal, E., & Gray, T. (1997). Violence in television programming overall: University of California, Santa Barbara study. In Mediascope, Inc. (Eds.) National Television Violence Study: Scientific Papers 1994-1995, (pp. I-1 - I-171). Studio City, CA: Mediascope, Inc.