Part II

RACE, THE MEDIUM, THE MESSAGE
Decades of content analyses examining portrayals of race and ethnicity on primetime television indicate that this programming offers little in the way of equitable characterizations of racial/ethnic minorities (Mastro 2009). Of course variations in depictions exist across racial/ethnic groups and types of programs (e.g., genres); however, in the main these groups are underrepresented compared with U.S. population statistics and often limited to a restricted set of narrow and/or stereotypical roles. Exposure to these media messages is not without consequence. Effects studies consistently reveal that viewing the content offered on television influences the cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors of audiences, in a manner consistent with the media messages (varying based on individual difference features of the consumers). Accordingly, understanding how different racial/ethnic groups are portrayed on television, and the range of possible individual and societal-level implications that may result from exposure, is socially and theoretically significant. To this end, the current chapter: (a) documents the frequency and nature of depictions of racial and ethnic groups on primetime television, (b) details both the harmful and constructive outcomes known to result from exposure, and (c) suggests areas for further consideration.

**Why Focus on Television?**

Calls for improvements in the representation of racial/ethnic groups on television have been present since the earliest days of TV and have remained a persistent criticism of the medium (Mastro and Greenberg 2000). From boycotts and protests of the *Amos n' Andy* show in the early 1950s to FCC Chair Newton Minow's 1961 condemnation of television programming as culturally vacuous to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' 1977 declaration that racial/ethnic groups appear as stereotypical “window dressing,” television has been criticized for its failure to offer a respectable array of diverse characters. Although some are quick to dismiss the relevance of television in our contemporary media and technology-rich environment, evidence indicates that television continues to be the dominant media outlet for consumers, with U.S. adults viewing approximately five hours per day, not including exposure on computers or other screens (Nielsen 2012).
Thus, early admonitions regarding the role and responsibility of television in U.S. society ring just as true today as they did when offered by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1977:

Television does more than simply entertain or provide news about major events of the day. It confers status on those individuals and groups it selects for placement in the public eye, telling the viewer who and what is important to know about, think about, and have feelings about. Those who are made visible through television become worthy of attention and concern; those whom television ignores remain invisible.

Primetime Portrayals and Effects of Exposure

Despite headlines in the popular press declaring a new era of racial/ethnic diversity on contemporary television (e.g., “Broadcasting the Big Strides in TV Diversity,” Los Angeles Times 2014), current quantitative content analytic evidence tells a somewhat different story. In some regards (and for some groups) today’s TV landscape marks a notable improvement over previous decades; however, in many ways the absence and/or marginalization of several racial/ethnic groups remains an ongoing reality. In the following sections, the history and current state of TV depictions of racial and ethnic groups are documented. It should be noted that the small number of occurrences of many groups means that little (beyond the sheer number) is known about the manner in which they are depicted.

Black Americans

Quantity. Prior to the 1970s, few images of blacks were seen on primetime television (Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao 2013). Analyses of the programming on television in the 1970s indicate that blacks comprised approximately 12 percent of the U.S. population at the time but a mere 6 percent of television characters (Greenberg and Brand 1994; U.S. Census Briefs 2010). The presence of blacks on primetime TV had increased to 8 percent in the 1980s and to 11 percent by the early 1990s (Mastro and Greenberg 2002). By the mid-1990s, blacks had achieved numeric parity on TV (at about 12 percent of the U.S. population and 13 percent of the TV population). Today, this rate has been sustained and even improved, with blacks making up approximately 16 percent of primetime characters and 13 percent of the U.S. population (Children Now 2004; Mastro and Greenberg 2000; Mastro and Tukachinsky 2010; Monk-Turner, Heiserman, Johnson, Cotton, and Jackson 2010). Equity in terms of the rate of representation is an important marker; however, a closer examination of how these representations vary across genres reveals a more complex picture.

Signorielli et al. (2004), in their sample of primetime television programs from 1997 through 2003, found that the numeric equality of blacks on TV masked the fact that they were isolated based on program type and channel. Specifically, black characters were largely presented in situation comedies and on networks with lower overall viewership—UPN and The WB. Harwood and Anderson (2002) noted a similar trend, reporting that although there had been an increase in black characters, half were found in only 7 of the 61 shows sampled. More recent data from Signorielli (2009a) indicate that whereas almost...
half of black characters are found in situation comedies, just 29 percent of white characters appear in sitcoms. Moreover, although over one third of black characters are found in programming primarily centered on minority characters, only 14 percent of other racial/ethnic characters (e.g., Latinos) are found in minority-centered shows. Thus, as Signorielli (2009a) points out, if these programs with “mostly minority characters” were not aired, the number of black characters on television would drop drastically—bringing to light the continued segregation of black characters on primetime.

Such genre disparities are noteworthy considerations as “genre conventions and constraints inevitably result in differing race-based presentations . . . [and] this tendency leaves open the possibility that depending on TV viewing preferences, a viewer may be exposed to one-sided images of Blacks, or simply not see them at all” (Mastro 2009: 326). For example, whereas dramas (as a genre) may present more multifaceted and complete characters, situation comedies are less likely to provide such character development. Thus, the relegation of black characters to a single genre of programming (sitcoms in particular) is problematic for three reasons: (a) they may be depicted as one-note (i.e., stereotypical) characters, (b) they may not be seen by a wide range of viewers, and (c) they may prompt negative perceptions of the group as a whole, if these depictions are stereotypical and/or unfavorable. As such, the question becomes: what do these portrayals look like when they do occur?

Quality. Television depictions of blacks in the 1950s revolved around unfavorable archetypes presented previously in radio serials and films of the early twentieth century, including the loyal mammie (e.g., Beulah from The Beulah Show) and ridiculed buffoon (Greenberg, Mastro, and Brand 2002; Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao 2013). More broadly, roles for blacks centered on amusing, entertaining, and serving their white counterparts on TV. By the end of the 1960s, a subset of programming began to emerge which offered idyllic and overly idealized representations of blacks in the form of shows such as Julia (1968) which presented the perfectly integrated lifestyle of a single mom (a nurse) raising her son. Although idealistic in terms of the realities of the era, such programming was a positive change from many of the more unflattering messages about blacks offered on TV up to that point. The 1970s ushered in a number of sitcoms centered on the experiences of black families across varying backgrounds. Programs like Good Times (1974–9) and What’s Happening (1976–9), among others, with predominantly black casts, helped bring black Americans to the small screen but their depictions were still often stereotypical, commonly depicting blacks as lazy or unemployable (Ford 1997; Greenberg, Mastro, and Brand 2002). Moreover, modified versions of the mammy and buffoon stereotypes persisted. For example, shows like The Jeffersons (1975–85), and later Gimme a Break (1981–4), portrayed “updated” mammie characters who, unlike their heavier, darker-completed counterparts from previous decades (who worked exclusively for affluent white families), these figures were lighter skinned, thinner, and served affluent white or black families. These new sitcoms were also considerably more likely to portray blacks as fun-loving or happy-go-lucky, often leaving their characters largely underdeveloped (Ford 1997). Overall, the content analytic work from the 1970s indicates that blacks were predominately characterized as lazy, poor, and/or jobless (Ward 2004) and in supporting roles (Gerbner and Signorielli 1979).

With the introduction of The Cosby Show in the 1980s, blacks were presented as more successful, professional, and authoritative (Harwood and Anderson 2002; Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005). This trend has continued to today, with the typical black character on primetime being a middle-class male, most commonly found in either law enforcement or some other professional-level occupation (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005).
By focusing attention on attributes such as occupation and appearance, findings from several recent content analyses help provide a more nuanced understanding of the portrayal of blacks on primetime (see Mastro and Greenberg 2000; Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005; Monk-Turner et al. 2010; Signorielli 2009a; Signorielli 2009b). This research reveals blacks to be less well groomed, less respected, and more unprofessional (i.e., disheveled) than their racial/ethnic counterparts on television (Mastro and Greenberg 2000). Unsurprisingly then, black characters (women, specifically) are less likely than other racial/ethnic groups to be cast in professional jobs (Signorielli 2009b). On the other hand, blacks on primetime television are also less aggressive than their on-screen peers. Collectively, these content analyses illustrate the current state of black characters on television as highly isolated in terms of programming and still reliant on some problematic stereotypes (at least in some cases), despite reaching a level of parity with regard to overall quantity of portrayals.

**Implications of Exposure.** Communication theory suggests that both long and short-term exposure to mass media, television in particular, meaningfully contribute to public perceptions of diverse groups (Punyanunt-Carter 2008). As Entman (1994) notes, viewing depictions of racial/ethnic minorities on television is capable not only of distorting what information about these groups is known but also why certain groups should be viewed in these ways. Accordingly, the consequences of consuming negative, stereotypical content are argued to have far-reaching implications. Indeed, empirical evidence indicates that exposure to such depictions among white audiences prompts unfavorable views about blacks in society (e.g., Ford 1997; Fujioka 1999; Punyanunt-Carter 2008) as well as unsympathetic positions on diversity-related policy issues such as affirmative action (e.g., Busselle and Crandall 2002; Tan, Fujioka, and Tan 2000). More specifically, this research finds that consuming negative characterizations of blacks in the media leads to more unfavorable beliefs regarding criminality, intelligence, work ethic, socio-economic status, and values (Dixon 2007; Fujioka 1999; Mastro and Kopacz 2006; Peffley, Shields and Williams 1996; Tan, Fujioka, and Tan 2000). Alternatively, under certain conditions exposure to positive messages about blacks in the media can encourage more favorable evaluations and policy positions among white audiences (e.g., Fujioka 1999; Mastro and Kopacz 2006) and improve esteem among black viewers (e.g., Ward 2004).

**Latino Americans**

**Quantity.** Latinos constitute the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the United States, with the U.S. Census Bureau estimating that roughly 16 percent of the population is of Latino origin (U.S. Census Briefs 2010). Despite the large and growing prevalence in the U.S. population, Latino characters are seen only infrequently on television. In fact, Latinos have suffered from persistent underrepresentation on television for nearly six decades (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005; Mastro and Sink 2016). Only during the 1950s were Latinos presented on television at a rate comparable with their proportion of the real-world population, at 3 percent of TV characters and approximately 2.4 percent of the U.S. population. Since that time, the Latino population has grown rapidly, only to see the number of images on TV stagnate and even drop. For example, in the 1980s, Latinos comprised only 1 percent of television characters (Gerbner and Signorielli 1979; Greenberg and Baptista-Fernandez 1980) but represented approximately 8 percent of the nation’s population by the end of that decade (New York Times 1988, September).
The 1990s saw only negligible increases in the sheer number of Latinos on television—at between 1.1 percent and 1.6 percent of the primetime television world but approximately 11 percent of the U.S. population at that time (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005).

The premieres of situation comedies like *Luis* (2003), *The Ortegas* (2003), and *The George Lopez Show* (2002–7) in the early 2000s seemed to suggest the beginning of a shift in programming featuring Latino characters. Although the first two programs were canceled within weeks of their premieres, *The George Lopez Show* saw commercial success (alongside some criticism) and remained on the air for five seasons. With the exception of ABC’s critically acclaimed *Ugly Betty* (2006–10), few other promising Latino-oriented shows were offered on primetime television. In terms of the number of Latinos appearing across the primetime landscape during this decade, research indicates that between 3.8 percent and 6.5 percent of the TV population was Latinos (Children Now 2004; Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005). Although this represents an increase over previous decades, it still falls far below their proportion of the U.S. population at the time, at approximately 13 percent (U.S. Census Briefs 2010).

The most recent analyses of Latinos on primetime television indicate that the number of portrayals is abysmally low when compared to U.S. Census data (at 16 percent), with Latino characters comprising less than 3 percent of the primetime population in the Fall 2013 season (Mastro and Sink 2016). Moreover, Latino men have nearly disappeared in recurring roles on television (Negrón-Muntaner 2014). Indeed, Latinas are more likely than Latino men to be featured in both lead and supporting roles on primetime. This shows little improvement (if any) in the overall quantity of Latinos on television. It should be noted, however, that the 2014 to 2015 television season included two new programs (*Cristela* and *Jane the Virgin*) on major networks (ABC and The CW) that both focused on Latino lead characters with predominately Latino casts.

**Quality.** When Latinos are depicted on primetime television, they appear primarily in secondary and nonrecurring roles (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005). These televised Latino characters have historically been confined to a limited set of stereotypic and negative characterizations (Greenberg and Baptista-Fernandez 2005), including buffoons, criminals or law enforcers, and objects of sexual desire (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005). The buffoon character is designed to provide comic relief. This humor is based largely on ridiculing or otherwise demeaning these characters based on their lazy and unintelligent disposition, thick accent, and inferior status (Mastro and Greenberg 2000). The criminal is typically a young, aggressive male with an unkempt appearance and a dishonest nature (Berg 1990). In stark contrast, the law enforcer is a well-groomed, honest, articulate, and respected authority figure (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005). Finally, Latino characters appearing as objects of sexual desire are marked not only by their sensuality but also by their hot tempers and sexual aggressiveness (Berg 1990). Very few Latino characters are seen in high-status jobs, and out of all other racial/ethnic groups on television, they are most likely to be portrayed in service roles (Children NOW 2000). Anecdotally, it is easy to think of current/recent examples of these stereotypical archetypes, including the sexualized ‘Gloria’ character from ABC’s *Modern Family* (2009–) and the buffoon-like character ‘Fez’ from Fox’s syndicated *That ’70s Show* (1998–2006).

In a more recent content analysis of Latinos on primetime television, Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005) concluded that some of these stereotypes appear to be fading from the television landscape, as their sample of Latino characters had comparable incomes, intelligence, and cleanliness to their white and black counterparts. However, compared to other characters, they held the most conversations about crime and violence.
Additionally, Mastro and Sink (2016) found that Latino characters were overrepresented as accented and inarticulate. Despite being a phenotypically diverse group, Latinos are presented as homogenized on primetime television and distinct ethnic backgrounds are rarely made apparent. These findings suggest that restrictive and unfavorable messages may still be perpetuated in television portrayals of Latinos.

Implications of Exposure. Effects studies have consistently demonstrated that exposure to unfavorable depictions of Latinos on television can have a harmful influence on both Latino and non-Latino audiences. Among non-Latinos, long and short-term exposure to negative portrayals of Latinos have been linked with stereotypic evaluations of Latinos in society, negative feelings and judgments toward Latinos, dispositional attributions, and decreased support for race-related policy issues among certain white audience members (Mastro 2003; Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, and Kopacz 2008; Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, and Ortiz 2007; Mastro and Kopacz 2006; Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi 2015). Moreover, increased television consumption strengthens the influence of television’s messages on judgments of Latinos in society, especially for those who have limited contact with Latinos in everyday life (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, and Ortiz 2007). Among Latino viewers, exposure to such content is associated with perceptions of discrimination against Latinos in U.S. society, negative affective, shame, and anger (Ortiz and Behm-Morawitz 2015; Schmader, Block, and Lickel 2015).

Importantly, television’s influence in this context is not limited to harmful outcomes. Exposure to positive media representations of Latinos can have prosocial effects, including promoting egalitarian beliefs and favorable intergroup attitudes. Even a single exposure to positive and likable Latino characters has been found to improve white audience members’ attitudes about Latinos, at least temporarily (Mastro and Tukachinsky 2011).

Asian Americans

Although Asian Americans comprise approximately 4.8 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Briefs 2010), so few Asians are presented on primetime television that little beyond the sheer number of appearances is known about these characters (see Mastro and Greenberg 2000). Prior to the 1970s, images of Asians on television were infrequent, at best (Mastro and Greenberg 2000; Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao 2013). From the late 1960s into the 1980s the number of Asian Americans on television modestly increased, owing in part to the popularity of a handful of programs set in Hawaii (the state with the largest proportion of Asian Americans in the total population). With only a few exceptions, however, these characters were primarily in minor or background roles. From the 1990s through the early 2000s, Asian Americans constituted between 1 percent and 3 percent of the characters on primetime TV (Children Now 2001; Children Now 2004; Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005; Mastro and Greenberg 2000), compared with 4 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census 2000).

With such a limited number of Asians on television, one must look outside the realm of primetime to get a general sense of the depictions associated with this group. Much like Latinos, Asians are typically presented as a single, homogenous group, with distinctive ethnic and cultural differences ignored (Mok 1998). When seen, they are often represented in a manner consistent with the “model minority” stereotype, linking Asian Americans with a number of desirable qualities such as intelligence, strong family values, and strong worth ethic (Taylor and Stern 1997). Yet despite this high status, Mok (1998) notes that Asians are most often assigned minor or background (i.e., token) roles...
in entertainment programs, such as waiters, cooks, servants, laundry workers, peasants, or gardeners. Little more is known about the manner in which Asians are depicted on television or the implications of exposure to this content.

Native Americans

Native Americans are perhaps the most chronically invisible group on primetime television. A recent analysis of 12 separate primetime seasons spanning the years 1987 to 2009 identified only three regularly occurring Native American characters, two of whom were accounted for by the same character whose show (*Northern Exposure*) appeared in two of the seasons included for analysis (Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi 2015). This means that only two unique Native American characters appeared across their sample of 2,336 regular characters.

Because of the near/complete absence of Native Americans on television, the manner in which they have been characterized has not been documented in quantitative content analysis. What little is known about their depictions on TV suggests that they are also presented as a homogenous group. That is, despite the fact that there are over 500 federally recognized Native American tribes, the media nearly entirely ignores this cultural and linguistic diversity (Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht 1997). Featured perhaps most prominently in the “Western” genre, popular in film and television during the early to mid-1900s, Native Americans were seen predominately as historical figures and characterized as barbarians, vicious, cruel, lazy, unintelligent, intoxicated, and in “traditional” garments and headdresses (Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht 1997).

Empirical studies on non-Native audiences have not linked television viewing with stereotyping of Native Americans, but this may simply reflect the scarcity of any Native American exemplars on television (see Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht 1997). For Native American audiences, exposure to images of American Indian mascots (e.g., the Washington Redskins, Cleveland Indians) and other common media characterizations of Native Americans (e.g., Disney’s *Pocahontas*) has been found to have a harmful effect on evaluations of personal esteem and community worth (Fryberg et al. 2008). Certainly, to fully understand the implications of exposure to TV depictions of Native Americans on both Native and non-Native audiences, the impact of “invisibility” will need to be considered (Leavitt, Covarrubias, Fryberg, and Perez 2015).

Arab/Middle Eastern

Very little is known about representations of Arab/Middle Eastern or Arab American/Middle Eastern American characters on primetime television. An analysis of the 2003–4 TV season reveals that Arab/Middle Eastern characters comprise 0.5 percent of the total characters on primetime and 0.3 percent of the characters appearing in the opening credits of the show (Children Now 2004). Nearly half of these roles (46 percent) are as criminals.

Indian/Pakistani

Although the most recent analysis documenting depictions of Indians/Pakistanis or Indian Americans/Pakistani Americans is a decade old, this research indicates that Indians/Pakistanis make up 0.4 percent of the total primetime population and 0.3 percent of characters appearing in the opening credits (Children Now 2004). Anecdotally, the
number of South Asians appearing as regular or recurring characters on primetime television today seems to be on the rise; specifically Indians and Indian Americans. Perusing the 2014–15 primetime lineup reveals a number of Indian/Indian American characters in lead and recurring roles including Mindy Kaling (character Mindy Lahiri), star of The Mindy Project, Kunal Nayyar (character Rajesh Koothrappali) on The Big Bang Theory, and Aziz Ansari (character Tom Haverford) on Parks and Recreation, among others. What is notable about these roles is that they are not defined by the character’s ethnicity. However, absent systematic analysis of depictions of Indians on television, such assessments are purely speculative.

**Concluding Thoughts**

As the evidence from content analyses and effects studies addressed here clearly indicates, the quality and quantity of media representations of race/ethnicity on television have significant social implications for all audience members. These media depictions create a shared version of what race/ethnicity represents in society and have the potential (under certain circumstances) to encourage an array of race/ethnicity-based outcomes related to both self and other. Notably, this means that the media’s influence is not limited to harmful effects. Instead, it underscores the importance of a wide range of auspicious representations of diverse groups. Of course, media are not the sole contributors to racial/ethnic cognitions and interethnic behaviors; however, the meaningful role that media play in shaping and maintaining the public’s racial/ethnic cognitions cannot be denied. Accordingly, a number of questions require more thorough attention. For example, additional research is needed to help flesh out the mechanisms through which television use contributes to the formation of stereotypes of diverse groups. Additionally, future research must consider more ecologically valid media exposure patterns to better understand possible effects. That is to say, how does both single and long-term exposure to a collection of competing messages (both positive and negative) influence audiences? Although viewers are likely to have preferred content to which they are likely to attend (e.g., certain genres, etc.), there is little doubt that TV audiences are exposed to a variety of (possibly distinct) characterizations of race/ethnicity. As such, understanding what messages win out and why is essential. Given the potential for television exposure to prompt both favorable and unfavorable psychological and societal effects, the consequences of use and the mechanisms underlying these outcomes should remain on the agenda of current media research and theorizing.

**References**


Further Reading


Holtzman, L. and Sharpe, L. (2014) Media Messages: What Film, Television, and Popular Music Teach Us about Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. (Includes a comprehensive examination of the development of film, TV, and pop music as genres, and summarizes relevant effects studies pertaining to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.)