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Where We Have Been and Where We Can Go From Here: Looking To the Future In Research On Media, Race And Ethnicity

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Abstract

This special issue illuminates the ways in which media portrayals and practices, together, create barriers to inclusion for diverse groups and normalize existing patterns of relegation on and off the screen. Media representations of race and ethnicity have critical consequences for intergroup relationships and for marginalized group members' self-concept. A synthesis of the research included in this volume demonstrates the significance of these questions across media outlets, their relevancy despite the rise of new technologies, and their application to social contexts outside the U.S.. Finally, this concluding article suggests directions for future research and offers implications for policies that can foster prosocial outcomes.

Keywords: Media representations, ethnic and racial stereotypes, media effects, media policy, media advocacy.

Where We Have Been and Where We Can Go From Here: Looking To The Future In
Research On Media, Race And Ethnicity

The current volume explores the effects that media depictions of race and ethnicity have on self- and group-perceptions as well as on intergroup relations. Although many of the studies presented in this issue focus on entertainment television, other media, such as movies, news and internet-based content are examined. Collectively, these articles demonstrate the media's influence in the realm of race and ethnicity, and offer a roadmap for the future; one that recognizes the potential for media to constructively contribute to group identities and intergroup dynamics in society.

Where we Have Been

It is well documented that ethnic minorities were historically excluded from positions of power in media industries, with their voices almost entirely absent from mainstream media content. Mainstream media catered predominantly to White audiences, representing the ideology and identity needs of this group in ways that further marginalized and alienated ethnic minorities. Specifically, Blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans and Native Americans were often under-represented in the media, and when at all present, they were cast in a narrow set of typically negative roles as buffoons, criminals or hyper-sexual non-professional individuals (e.g., Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011). Criticisms concerning the inadequacy of media representation of ethnic minorities in mainstream media date back to the 1960s and 1970s with the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights (1977) investigation and George Gerbner's cultural indicators project (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1979). In the current issue, a longitudinal examination of trends in primetime television reveals that although media representations of ethnic minority groups constantly evolve, overall, certain minority groups continue to be either grossly underrepresented or

depicted unsympathetically (Tukachinsky, Mastro & Yarchi, in press).

Importantly, race and ethnicity constitute only one of many possible dimensions for stereotyping. Other groups, such as those based on gender, age, social economic status and sexual orientation, also are stigmatized in the media. The intersection of race/ethnicity with these social categories can form subtyped categories that further intensify stereotypes and marginalization (e.g., African American women, senior Native Americans, or gay Latinos). For example, it has been argued that non-Whites are excluded from media discourse concerning LGBT issues and coverage (e.g., Muñoz, 2005) therefore constructing an alienated group within an already under-represented group. Intersections of race/ethnicity with gender promote additional subtyped groups. Hyper-sexualized depictions of women of all racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Smith Choueiti, Prescott, & Pieper, 2012; Tukachinsky et al., in press), perpetuate the seductress stereotype among women, in general, and women of color, in particular. Similarly, age stereotypes are often coupled with media stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans as professional and authoritative figures. These foster the subtype of tech-savvy Asian American young adults propagating the “model minority” stereotype in magazine ads (Paek & Shah, 2003).

As discussed in the current issue (Leavitt, Covarrubias, Perez & Fryberg, in press; Schmader, Block, & Lickel, in press), both the systematic under-representation as well as the abundance of stereotypical representations of racial/ethnic groups in the media have detrimental effects on the depicted groups’ psychological well-being; increasing their feelings of self-consciousness and harming their collective self-esteem. With mainstream media alienating ethnic minority audiences, it is not surprising that members of these groups seek alternative media outlets to manage their identity needs. Harwood and Vincze (in press) identify the importance of minority-language television for Hungarian ethnic minority youth in Romania, particularly when

members of the minority group feel underpowered and marginalized as indicated by low social vitality coupled with high intergroup contact. These selective media exposure patterns are strategic in that they can empower members of stigmatized groups, and shield them from some of the negative effects of mainstream media representations. Although Harwood and Vincze's study explores these questions in a specific European context, it addresses psychological mechanisms with a universal potential. The parallels for underrepresented groups in the United States are clear. Indeed, Harwood and Vincze's findings resonate with those of Ortiz and Behm-Morawitz's (in press) concerning U.S. Latinos' use of Spanish language television. Employing different theoretical and conceptual approaches, both studies highlight the importance of different aspects of minority-language media for identity needs management.

Media representations of ethnic minorities can also have implications for majority group viewers. Findings from both experimental research and a secondary data analysis provide insights into how mainstream media influence White's endorsement of stereotypes and promote support for race-relevant policies (Hurley, Jensen, Weaver & Dixon, in press; Ramasubramanian, in press; Tukachinsky et al., in press). However, importantly, the power of media can be directed to promote positive effects as well. As much as negative portrayals can foster unfavorable perceptions of minorities, positive representations can negate stereotypes (Ramasubramanian, in press). Additionally, emotionally elevating media content promotes experience of shared identity and intergroup connectedness rather than division and intergroup distinctiveness (Oliver et al., in press). Furthermore, to combat the negative effects, media literacy programs implemented in educational settings show promise in facilitating young viewers' ability to develop critical skills necessary to resisting harmful media effects (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, in press).

New Frontiers in Media and Race Research

The studies comprising the current issue offer innovative new directions for further investigation into the complex relationship between media and race/ethnicity. Specifically, three questions emerge from this issue: (1) What types of media representations should be favored to facilitate positive intergroup contact? (2) How is the U.S. experience similar to or different from that of other cultures? and (3) How do the theories, research, and policies addressed here, apply to other media contexts?

Media Representations Facilitating Positive Intergroup Relationships

Most research concerning prosocial, intergroup media effects focus on the impact of exposure to positive ethnic representations (e.g., Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011; Power, Murphy & Coover, 1996). This approach rests on the assumption that psychological processes parallel to those underlying socially undesirable media effects can be used to foster positive outcomes as well. For example, just as exposure to negative/unfavorable characterization of race/ethnicity in the media can prompt stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, viewing sympathetic media depictions of ethnic minorities can prime positive attitudes towards the group as a whole (e.g., Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011) and other favorable intergroup outcomes (e.g., Ramasubramanian, 2011). Such positive counter-stereotypical representations can have long term effects by shifting the overall group prototype and reducing uncertainty and intergroup hostility through vicarious intergroup contact (e.g., Ortiz & Harwood, 2007).

Regrettably, it might not always possible to achieve these objectives using counter-stereotypical media representations alone. The complex psychological mechanisms involved in forming and normalizing group perceptions make these cognitions relatively stable and resistant to change. As such, isolated instances of media representations that disconfirm an ethnic/racial stereotype may be discounted as unrepresentative of the group as a whole (a process known as

subtyping; Richards & Hewstone, 2001). If classified as ‘exceptions to the rule’ such positive portrayals will have no effect on overall perceptions of the group (e.g., Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless & Wänke, 1995). Fortunately, *multiple* stereotype-disconfirming exemplars cannot be as easily disregarded or categorized as unrepresentative. Nonetheless, they still might be ineffective in shifting media consumers’ overall perception of the group if these disconfirming exemplars can be combined into a new subgroup (e.g., Black athletes). In this case, although a unique set of characteristics is recognized, the negative stereotypes of the overarching group are maintained (Hewstone., Johnston & Aird, 1992). To prevent such outcomes, then, exemplars need not only to be favorable and disconfirming but also diverse.

It is also possible to enhance intergroup attitudes by priming positive prototypes rather than specific exemplars. Importantly, however, Mastro and Tukachinsky (2011) found that favorable but non-prototypical positive representations of ethnic characters (e.g., Latinos in a work environment) did not influence viewers’ attitudes towards the outgroup. Only stereotype-consistent positive representations (e.g., strong Latino family) improved attitudes towards the group. In other words, the ability of constructive media prototypes to improve intergroup dynamics is dependent upon tapping into recognized features of the group. Thus, although prototype-based positive representations can promote overall positive intergroup attitudes, they also foster and reinforce stereotyping.

An alternative approach to improving intergroup relationships involves priming superordinate social identities and reinforcing overarching social categories. For instance, at least in theory, media events such as the presidential inauguration or the Olympic Games may increase the saliency of alternative components of social identities, thereby promoting more inclusive interracial worldviews. This, however, might come at a cost. When bridging racial

categories, such media messages make other social categories (e.g., nationality, political affiliation) more salient and can shift the unfavorable intergroup dynamic from one context to another.

In sum, altering media consumers' stereotypes is challenging. It is not always effective and might even lead to unintended negative consequences. Oliver and colleagues (in press) present an innovative approach to overcoming the shortcomings of counter-stereotypical and superordinate group primes by facilitating a sense of intergroup connectedness without promoting new dimensions of divisiveness. Interestingly, this approach does not involve any specific racial representations. Future research can take this notion further, examining the ways in which complex, multi-layered identities can shift with media exposure. Additionally, comparative studies can examine the relative effectiveness of each type of media content on interracial attitudes. Specifically, experiments can provide direct comparison between the impact of exposure to counter-stereotypical primes, inspirational media content and superordinate group primes. Results of such studies can help identify socially desirable media representations and outline the limitations of prosocial media effects.

Differences Between the U.S. and Other Cultures

More research is needed to draw parallels between intergroup experiences in the U.S. and other societies. Harwood and Vincze's (in press) work on Hungarian youth offers an important step in this direction by highlighting the generalizability of theories and findings across cultures. Tukachinsky et al.'s (in press) study also speaks to this issue, revealing similar patterns in the relationship between trends in media representations of Latinos and African Americans and White's attitudes towards these groups as a result of exposure to these portrayals. This finding is notable given the differences in the socio-historical context of White-Latino versus White-Black

relations in U.S.. It is, therefore, logical to assume that many of the lessons from the U.S. context can generalize to other intergroup relationships around the globe. Yet, it remains essential to better understand the extent to which the unique origins and histories of intergroup relationships produce differences in media-related intergroup processes.

Although it is likely that self-categorization and social identity needs govern media selection and media effects in all intergroup situations, other aspects of the intergroup context are worthy of consideration. For instance, compared with enslavement and military conquest (as in the case of African Americans and Hungarians in Romania) immigration (e.g., Latinos and Asians in the U.S., Muslims in Europe) is likely to introduce different perceived cultural and resource-related threats, involve less “majority-group guilt” and place greater pressure on the ethnic group members to assimilate. Thus, research can explore systematic differences in the ways that media operate in the broader historical and sociological context of intergroup contexts.

Media Effects Beyond Television

Although the current issue focused much attention on entertainment television research, the important role of other traditional and new media are addressed in a handful of the articles presented in this volume. This distribution reflects the scope of the bulk of research in the area of ethnic stereotypes in the media. Importantly, the same biases and stereotypes have been found across a wide array of media outlets ranging from sports broadcast announcing (e.g., Eastman & Billings, 2001) to print advertising (Thomas & Treiber, 2000).

New media brought the promise of change to the landscape of media representations of various ethnic groups. The internet allows individuals to respond to what they read and watch, interact with other consumers, and generate original media content. Thus, the internet has the potential to serve as a platform for voicing alternative views and representations of marginalized

groups, in a way that is unparalleled in traditional media. For example, when a Dutch parliamentarian released a film that derogated Islam, Muslim individuals and particularly women posted online videos in defense of their faith and culture (Vis, Zoonen & Mihelj, 2011). In other words, the internet allowed minority group members to create their own content and make it accessible to mass audiences, bypassing the gatekeepers in the traditional, centralized media.

However, despite this potential, the most widely accessed internet content appears to follow the same patterns prevalent in the traditional media. For instance, online sports coverage displays racial biases consistent with those seen in television sports (Harrison, Tayman, Janson & Connolly, 2010). Moreover, online user-generated content such as Youtube clips, have been found to portray many of the same ethnic stereotypes prevalent in traditional media (e.g., Weaver, Zelenkauskaitė & Samson, 2012). Moreover, analysis of viewers' online comments suggests that these discussions mostly reinforce rather than refute ethnic stereotypes in online viral videos (Kopacz & Lawton, 2013). It seems, therefore, that by and large, patterns of media content and effects discussed in the current issue can and do extend to other media.

A Developmental Perspective on Media Effects on Racial Attitudes.

The present issue presents research involving a variety of age groups, including school-age children (e.g., Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, in press), adults (e.g., Ortiz & Behm-Morawitz, in press) and college students (e.g., Oliver et al., in press). However, more research is needed to examine the effects of media on younger children who are still in the formative stages of ethnic identity development and only beginning to associate specific social groups with distinct attributes. Following the launch of the interracial relationships curriculum on *Sesame Street* in the 1980s, the effect of such educational programming on young children received greater research attention (e.g., Browne Graves, 1999). Additional research should explicate the

ways in which media literacy programs in the realm of racial/ethnic stereotypes can be tailored to meet the needs of different age groups. Understanding how perceptions of race and ethnicity evolve through childhood (as well as the development of other related cognitive skills and abilities), should be linked with specific characteristics of such interventions.

Furthermore, although the importance of ethnic representations in children's media has been established in past research, more research is needed to explicate the complex interplay of various socialization agents including entertainment and educational media, (pre) school curriculum, family, and friends. For example, whereas Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (in press) focus on interventions directly targeting school-age children, attempts have been made to educate parents about strategies they can employ in facilitating a meaningful conversation with their children about media content (cf. Chakroff & Nathanson, 2008). Such media literacy programs enable parents to become involved in their children's meaning-making process. Doing so can, perhaps, result in more sustained effects through repeated interactions with parents and continuous reinforcement that is otherwise lacking in classroom media literacy programs. Considering media, peers, families and school not as independent but interrelated factors shaping children's racial/ethnic perceptions, will provide a more complete and nuanced understanding of the many ways in which media and media literacy facilitate and attenuate intergroup processes.

Where We Can Go From Here

Improving mainstream media representations of ethnic minorities is critical to both promote more favorable intergroup relationships and to adequately satisfy the identity needs of marginalized social groups. The current section explores the role of the demographics of media consumers and media content producers in shaping media content and social policies.

Ethnic minority audiences. As assiduously detailed by Castañeda, Fuentes-Bautista and

Baruch (in press), the quality of ethnic representations in mainstream media in the U.S. is largely a product of market and profit considerations. In the early days of television, media producers believed that they risked alienating larger audiences if they presented ethnic minorities in ways that were perceived to be too sympathetic (MacDonald, 1992). This concern was not entirely surprising, given the interracial dynamics of society during the time. For example, in 1952, the governor of Georgia condemned network television shows featuring Whites and Blacks playing and dancing together. Even in 1970, the Commission for Educational Television in Mississippi banned *Sesame Street* for its representation of social diversity and integration.

In the 1980s, media industries shifted from widecasting (i.e., attempting to appeal to wide audiences) to narrowcasting (i.e., segmenting to narrow niches of audiences with greater buying power) (Gray, 2004). Moving from quantity-oriented programming to niche-based programming, media industries made an effort to attract new demographics – particularly as the buying power of ethnic minority groups increased, making them more desirable targets for advertisers. Such segmentation of audiences motivated television networks to appeal to more diverse groups, African American viewers in particular, with specifically targeted, all-Black primetime shows (e.g., *Family Matters*, *Living Single*) (Dates & Storman, 2000). These changes in mainstream programming gave rise to a broader range of more positive television representations of African Americans overall (as is evident from Tukachinsky et al., in press).

Recently, the media industry has begun to realize the full potential of the Latino market. Nielsen (2012) notes that Latinos constitute the fastest growing media market in the U.S. and already surpass Whites in terms of real-time TV viewing (i.e., not bypassing commercial breaks using DVR). Thus, together with their growing buying power, Latinos should be an increasingly appealing market for advertisers. However, since these audiences may turn to Spanish speaking

media (according to Nielsen, 2012, 56% reported speaking only or mostly Spanish), there is little economic incentive for media producers to improve Latinos' representations in mainstream English-language media. Instead, efforts appear to be concentrated on marketing to Latinos via ethnic media rather than making mainstream content more welcoming.

In all, then, a market-driven approach results in a slow and insufficient change in the quality and quantity of media representations of minorities. When left solely to market forces, small, low vitality groups with little buying power (e.g., Native Americans) remain neglected by the media (Tukachinsky et al., in press). Some ethnic minorities can satisfy their identity needs through ethnic media (e.g., Vincze & Harwood, in press), however their migration to alternative media only reduces the incentive to improve their representation in mainstream media that contributes to the majority group's racial attitudes (e.g., Ramasubramanian, in press).

Contrary to the U.S. approach that leaves the forces of the free market to shape the quality of ethnic/racial media content, several countries have made attempts to regulate television networks' representations of marginalized social groups. In Canada, efforts have been made to mandate a certain number of hours of programming that can "help maintain and enrich heritage culture and language, strengthen their communities and otherwise further the aims of the multicultural policy" (Department of Secretary of State Ottawa, 1971 in Mahtani, 2001). In Israel, a regulatory body equivalent to the FCC in the U.S. examined minority groups' representations on broadcast television (e.g., The Second Authority for Television and Radio, 2006) and used these data in reviewing broadcast license renewal applications.

Yet, in both instances, critics deemed such efforts to be insufficient, and content analyses continued to reveal that media representation of ethnic and national minorities remained inadequate (e.g., Media Watch, 1994; The Second Authority for Television and Radio, 2006).

Moreover, whereas regulation of public broadcasting to meet the greater needs of society are considered acceptable in some countries, in the U.S. such initiatives are argued to be at odds with the First Amendment. Although television networks are expected to serve the public good, television programs are a form of protected speech. Even when it comes to more controversial issues that have potential ramifications for public health (e.g., violent video games and television violence) government attempts to regulate media content have been ruled unconstitutional (Albert, 1978; Saunders, 1994). It is, therefore, seemingly infeasible to impose regulations concerning the nature of ethnic media representations in the U.S.

Ethnic minority media content creators. Apart from commercial considerations, media content can also be influenced by the organizational culture of the industry, including diversity in the workplace, production routines and professional values. Thus, media content reflects the perspective of its producers, namely, White males who are consistently overrepresented in executive positions in mainstream media industries (ASNE, 2013; Dates & Storman, 2000).

Castañeda et al. (in press) explore the ways in which media representations are situated within broader political and societal contexts. Their work in the domain of the digital divide emphasizes the importance of integrating marginalized communities not only in use but also in production and distribution of media content. Increasing the access of members of marginalized social groups to power positions in the media industries provides an opportunity for the unique views of diverse groups to be incorporated into mainstream media. However, ascending to these key positions does not always produce such change. White-based norms might be internalized, resulting in the promotion of the same messages that were endorsed by dominant-group media producers (Dates & Storman, 2000). For example, data from 1989 suggest that Black media producers are not necessarily more likely to create media messages featuring Black characters

(Gray, 2004). However, more recent research indicates that diversity behind the camera can have a substantial impact on diversity on the screen. Analysis of popular films from 2007-2012 revealed that Black speaking characters were five times more common in productions of Black movie directors compared to movies with no-Black directors (Smith, Choueiti & Pieper, 2013).

Although Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, and Shonda Rhimes are highly visible examples of successful African American media producers who openly advocate for advances in media content pertaining to diverse groups and greater access in front of and behind the camera, they constitute a relatively infrequent exception to the rule. Improving ethnic minorities' access to positions of power within the media industry is important in and of itself. However, it should not be viewed as a guaranteed way to improve ethnic representations in the media.

Media literacy as an alternative. If regulation of media representation is not feasible and improving minority groups' access to media production is difficult and inefficient, how then can media representations of ethnic minorities be improved? Examination of attempts to mandate or restrict other media content in the past shows that most commonly, public concerns and pressure from advocacy groups lead to self-imposed industry regulation (e.g., implementation of TV parental guidelines rating system). Perhaps, public outcry and political pressure can be used to change media representations of ethnic and racial groups.

One useful model comes from the domain of health communication. Recently, concerns have been raised about the nature of popular media depictions of health-related issues (e.g., organ donation; Morgan, Harrison, Chewning, Davis & DiCorcia, 2007). Whereas script writers commonly incorporate health issues in their plots as a narrative device to create dramatic tension, these, often times inaccurate, portrayals inevitably 'educate' viewers about health issues, fostering misperceptions and shaping people's attitudes about critical issues (e.g., Morgan,

Movius, & Cody, 2009). A number of advocacy groups, such as Hollywood, Health & Society, encourage media creators to incorporate accurate and responsible health information in their scripts. These groups provide media producers and writers with information about health issues commonly depicted in media, connect them with health professionals for further consultation, and even give out awards to recognize programs that promote educational health messages. As a result of such efforts, many primetime television shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* have made measurable contributions to viewers' understanding of health issues (e.g., Rideout, 2008). A similar approach could be incorporated in the realm of media and race. First, it is crucial to make quality ethnic media representations a priority for the general public, policy makers, and media practitioners by increasing awareness of the consequences of irresponsible media representations of intergroup issues. Then, providing support (in the form of consultation and evaluation of scripts) alongside raising the profile of existing incentives/awards (e.g., NAACP Image Awards, ALMA Awards) could be used to encourage media representations with prosocial potential.

The first challenge is, therefore, placing media representations of race/ethnicity on the public agenda. One way of doing so can involve national-level media literacy programs. Currently, media literacy does not constitute an integral part of the educational curriculum in K-12 or college. Schools choose to incorporate such programs on an individual basis and there is little consistency across these programs' learning objectives and content (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, in press). Furthermore, with few exceptions (Ramasubramanian, 2007), media literacy programs tend to focus on questions of violence, sexual content and gender stereotypes, and devote relatively little attention to awareness of and critical thinking about ethnic/racial stereotypical media representations. The program reported in the current issue (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, in press) offers an important first step in this direction.

Expanding the outreach of such media literacy programs to parents and community outside schools is another critical step towards making media and race/ethnicity a central issue on the social agenda.

Conclusions

The work in this volume demonstrates the importance of racial and ethnic representations in mainstream media both for majority and racial/ethnic minority group members. At the same time, content analysis data show that although media representations have evolved in the past few decades, there is still an acute need to promote accurate and egalitarian representations of ethnic minorities. It is argued here that the key to improving media images of ethnic minorities, as well as to minimizing the potentially antisocial effects of recurrent media stereotypes, is through education and increased social awareness. Helping both ethnic majority and minority media consumers appreciate the need for change through educating children, parents, and communities about the consequences of media representations can not only produce critical consumers that are more resistant to harmful media effects, but also facilitate the public discourse needed to promote changes in industry standards.

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